

2018

## 'No Home Here': Female Space and the Modernist Aesthetic in Nella Larsen's Quicksand and Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar

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'NO HOME HERE': FEMALE SPACE AND THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC IN  
NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND* AND SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in The Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term 2018

Thesis Chair: Dr. Carmen Faye Mathes

## ABSTRACT

In her 1929 essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf famously asserts that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). This concept places an immediate importance on the role of the Modernist female subject as an artist and as an architect, constructing the places and spaces that she exists within. With Woolf’s argument as its point of departure, this thesis investigates the theme of female space in two Modernist texts: Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). The respective protagonists of *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*, Helga Crane and Esther Greenwood, each undertake journeys to obtain spaces that are purely their own. However, this thesis positions each space that Helga and Esther occupy as both male-constructed and male-dominated in order to address the inherent gendering of space and its impact on the development of feminine identities. This thesis focuses specifically on the roles of the mother, the muse, and the female mentor, tracking the spaces in which Helga and Esther begin to adhere to these roles. Expanding on Lauren Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism, this thesis will use the term “cruel femininity” to support its intervening claim that the respective relationships that Helga and Esther each have with their own feminine identities begin to turn cruel as they internalize the male-dominated spatial structures surrounding them. Overall, this thesis argues that there is no space in existence where Helga and Esther can realize their full potential as human beings, as long as the spatial structures within their communities continue to be controlled by hegemonic, patriarchal beliefs.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Carmen Mathes, whose genuine belief in this project has meant so much to me. This thesis was truly shaped by the feedback that she worked so hard to provide. In addition, her “Theories and Techniques of Literary Study” course offered me the theoretical foundation required to complete this project and my undergraduate degree as a whole. From this first lit theory class to the creation of this independent thesis, Dr. Mathes has taught me what it means to be a scholar of literature.

Thank you to Dr. Patricia Angley and Dr. Lisa Logan for their support as committee members throughout this process. In addition, much of my argument was influenced by the readings in Dr. Christian Beck’s “Place and Space in Literature” class, and I must extend my appreciation for the knowledge that I gained as a student in this course.

I would like to thank Dr. Mark Hall for his contribution to this project and to my life as a whole; he has truly changed the way that I view language and its impact on the world. His encouragement pushes me to become better not just in my writing or in my tutoring, but in every aspect of my life. Thank you also to the community of writers surrounding me in the University Writing Center - my coworkers and the new writers that I meet each day. I am constantly inspired by the way in which our writing center creates such space for growth.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their unwavering support throughout this project and every other project that I have worked on. They have made many sacrifices to help me succeed in college; for this, I am grateful.

## INTRODUCTION

### VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE MODERNIST AESTHETIC

Women of today are overthrowing the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence concretely; but their success in living their human condition does not come easily.

—Simone de Beauvoir

In her 1929 essay “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf famously asserts that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). Woolf’s concept of a room of one’s own – a quiet, private place for female creativity and expression – transforms throughout the essay into a symbol of success, a utopic dream that all women writers should long to achieve, and a prerequisite for gender equality in the literary world. Woolf’s notion places an immediate importance on the role of the Modernist female subject as an artist and as an architect, directly constructing the places and spaces within which she exists. While stressing the necessity of a room of one’s own, Woolf critiques the conventional, predetermined roles that women are forced to occupy in a patriarchal society. In such spaces, as Simone de Beauvoir examines in *The Second Sex* (1949), women fit neatly into small, mythical categories, fulfilling the various roles of women as essential objects, ornamental bell jars, and artistic muses. The only way to achieve success in the literary world, according to Woolf, is to shed the conventional roles and spaces associated with femininity and to actively search for a room of one’s own.

While Woolf argues that all women must have a room of their own in order to write, she spends less time exploring the actual search, one often filled with the struggles that arise from inequities of race or class, to obtain such space in a patriarchal society. With Woolf as its point of departure, this thesis examines the journey to secure a room of one’s own in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). Both Modernist novels begin and end

with the setting of a room of one's own, and each protagonist undergoes an individual journey for female space and identity throughout the work. Helga Crane, the protagonist of *Quicksand*, searches for a way to understand her identity as a young biracial woman in 1920s America, as she moves from Naxos to Harlem to Copenhagen and finally to an unnamed "tiny Alabama town" in continual search for a space that is purely her own (Larsen 146). Similarly, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood searches for a space unrestricted by gendered expectations, beginning her journey as an intern at a literary magazine in New York City and ending it as a patient at Wymark, a mental institution in the Boston suburbs. Both women are active within their respective literary communities, and writing plays a significant role in the shaping of their identities; Helga serves as a schoolteacher and scholar, and Esther dreams of becoming a novelist. In analyzing Helga and Esther's respective journeys to secure rooms of their own, this thesis utilizes the term "space" to denote both a physical and a mental dwelling place. Specifically, the term "space" will be used to describe both the gendered characteristics of a physical room, a fixed setting, and the mental spaces of Helga and Esther, as they slowly begin to internalize the male-dominated spatial structures surrounding them. While many scholars have examined the theme of female space in *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar* separately, there is no scholarship theorizing the similarities between these two Modernist texts.

Before embarking on an analysis of female space and identity in *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*, this thesis must begin with an acknowledgment of the power and privilege ingrained within the notions of spatiality that it explores. As Woolf constructs an idyllic concept of female space that champions the privileged modern woman, she also directly addresses the reader by suggesting that "it is all very well for you, who have got yourselves to college and enjoy sitting rooms" and the luxury which contemporary space provides (56). Clouded with privilege, it is all

too easy to forget the direct, physical impact that a safe, secure space can have on the construction of identity. It is a mark of privilege to be able to construct an argument about the notion of space in its abstract, theoretical form, while so many individuals around the world do not have places to call home. This thesis, through its fundamental argument for female space, attempts to address this concern by examining the inherent gendering of space and its impact on the development of feminine identities. With an understanding of this critical notion, this thesis strives to analyze the direct influence of male-constructed and male-dominated spatial structures on the respective protagonists of *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*.

While examining the various similarities between the journeys of Helga and Esther, this thesis must also acknowledge the differences that shape their search for female space. As a biracial woman navigating American society in the 1920s, Helga's experience is inherently different from Esther's journey as a white, privileged woman living in the 1950s. In theorizing the different experiences of Helga and Esther, this thesis does not utilize the term "female Modernist aesthetic" as a way to denote a fixed, essential experience that ties all women together, but rather as a method of inquiry for understanding the everchanging impact of patriarchal, hegemonic values on the Modernist female subject. Expanding on this notion, bell hooks argues that the Modernist aesthetic is much "more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming" (65). The hegemonic restrictions of society heavily inform the different ways in which Helga and Esther inhabit space as Modernist subjects. From the beginning, Helga's journey is immediately more political than Esther's, as she searches not only for a space that is purely her own, but for the acknowledgment of her existence as a biracial woman within the larger society. In "Postmodern Blackness" (1990), bell hooks explores this notion of identity politics, arguing for

“new ways to talk about racism and other politics of domination ... that incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed black people” (2511). hooks categorizes the black Modernist aesthetic as a sense of “continual displacement, profound alienation, and despair” (2512). The “experience of ‘difference’ and ‘Otherness’” that hooks describes as central to the black Modernist aesthetic serves as a foundation for understanding Helga’s journey for female space and identity (2509).

By analyzing the gendered spaces in each text, this thesis examines the intersection between the Modernist female subject and the masculine ideals which reinforce the predetermined rooms and roles that she exists within. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in “The Female Imagination and the Modernist Aesthetic” (1986), argue that the male Modernist aesthetic contains a strong sense of grief, as men “mourn the irrevocable death of the hero slaughtered by or because of the willfulness of revolting women” (4). Extending this notion even further, Gilbert and Gubar argue that “the female imagination was in fact a central problem for Modernist men,” leading to the construction of a gender binary between “male and female modernisms” (2, 9). It is this particular fear of the modern, emancipated woman that leads to the suppression of female space and identity in *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*. This thesis utilizes the term “masculine Modernist ideals” not only to denote a conventional set of masculine values – such as “primal male force, instinctual vitality, aggression, and bodily strength” – but also as a method for understanding the societal blame placed on twentieth-century women for “the feminization of American culture” (Forster 298). These toxic notions of masculinity significantly impact the societal expectations of the ideal modern woman, constructing a female Modernist aesthetic rooted largely in existential anxiety and alienation.

Many feminist scholars have studied the relationship between gendered space and the female Modernist aesthetic. In *Feminism & Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (1993), Gillian Rose argues that geography as an academic discipline encompasses a variety of “unstated assumptions about what men and women do, and that the discipline concentrates on the spaces, places, and landscapes that it sees as men’s” (2). While Rose critiques the gendering of geographical space within patriarchal societies, she also criticizes the literary discourse of spatiality as a whole, arguing that the study of such space continues to be male-dominated. In *Space, Place, and Gender* (1994), feminist geographer Doreen Massey argues that “spaces and places are not only in themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood” (179). Expanding on Rose’s criticism of geography, Massey heavily critiques the gendered structure of literary modernism, calling for a reconsideration of “Modernity and modernism . . . both in terms of the gendering of their spatialities and in terms of the gendered spaces in which they were formed” (182). Similarly, literary scholar Theda Wrede (2015) stresses that the representation of space in academia “is never neutral, but always discursively constructed, ideologically marked, and shaped by the dominant power structures and forms of knowledge” (11). The inherent gendering and sexualization of private and public space shapes the female Modernist aesthetic and its corresponding “sense of placelessness and bewilderment” (Tally 64).

Within patriarchal societies, the existential anxiety ingrained within the female Modernist aesthetic stems largely from the notion of “the male gaze” (Mulvey 19). Laura Mulvey’s concept of “the male gaze” denotes the visual relationship that exists between men and women, positioning “woman as image” and “man as the bearer of the look” (19). Many Modernists have traced the correlation between female space and the male gaze, as it reflects, in shattered images,

the individual identities of Helga and Esther. In her essay on the concept of the gaze in *Quicksand*, Pamela E. Barnett positions Helga as an exotic object of male affection in “a painting, a sculpture, or a moving exhibition,” leaving the reader to assume the role of the outside spectator, gazing in with desire (582). Barnett stresses the fragmentary nature of the gaze, as readers “are manipulated into focusing on the act of spectatorship itself” and on the blurred boundaries between truth and fiction, reality and performance (586). Similarly, Rafael Walker (2016) analyzes the objectification of Helga in relation to the rooms that she occupies, arguing that she often blends in with “the many orientalized objects that she is supposed to possess” (169). Walker aligns the commodification of Helga with the reader’s gaze, suggesting that readers, with each and every turn of the page, contribute to the exoticization of her identity (166-9). The reader’s “objectifying gaze” also bears a significant impact on the construction of Esther’s identity in *The Bell Jar* (Walker 169). Plath scholar E. Miller Budick, in “The Feminist Discourse of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*” (1987), studies the impact of the male gaze on the creation of the “female environments” surrounding Esther, signifying that the female-dominated space of Esther’s literary internship continues to allow “the male language to infect and dominate female expression” (875). Nicholas Donofrio reaffirms that the setting of the literary internship only serves to “reinforce a dispiritingly traditional set of ideas” regarding female creativity, leaving only a small, pre-determined space for Esther to inhabit at the magazine (221). This thesis strives to examine the small spaces, the decorated rooms, and the mythical roles that Helga and Esther are forced to occupy as a result of the gaze.

The concept of the male gaze generates the sense of existential anxiety and displacement associated with the female condition, constructing a female Modernist aesthetic categorized by “fear, anxiety, insult, injury, or a sense of not being welcome, not being real” (Kwan 145).

Drawing from Georg Lukács's notion of "transcendental homelessness," the loss of a complete and whole self, this thesis examines the disorientation and detachment associated with the notion of female space. Within a patriarchal society, male-constructed and male-dominated institutions, such as the library that Woolf fails to be admitted into, positions the concept of a room of one's own as an idyllic notion, a far-off fantasy. Consequently, the notion of female space immediately transforms into a "general unreality" (Larsen 154). Christina Stevenson argues that Woolf's concept of a room of one's own becomes "entangled with a symbolic fantasy space," representing a dream which women can only hope to one day achieve (117). Similarly, in "Unsolved Problems': Essayism, Counterfactuals, and the Futures of 'A Room of One's Own'" (2013), Randi Saloman arranges the notion of female space as a "fantasy world" or as a "fairyland" – a concept that is unrealistic and often unattainable for many modern women (63). *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar* both trace the "general unreality" of female space through the respective journeys of Helga and Esther, as they each strive to obtain secure rooms of their own (Larsen 154).

While many scholars have examined Woolf's notion of a room of one's own as a fantasy or a utopia, no work has been done to theorize the "cruel optimism" that Helga and Esther both exhibit through their attachment to female space (Berlant 1). Lauren Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" expresses the negative relationship that exists when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Specifically, this thesis demonstrates a cruelly optimistic relationship between the search for female identity and the lack of female space in society. Chapter One positions each and every setting in *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar* as both male-constructed and male-dominated in order to capture the disappointment that the "general unreality" of the world brings Helga and Esther, as they remain cruelly attached to a notion of

space that does not exist (Larsen 154). In “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do with It?” (1986), Martin and Mohanty state, “there is no shedding the literal fear and figurative law of the father, and no reaching a final realm of freedom. There is no new place, no new home” (201). Thus, within the spatial structures of a patriarchal society, the notion of female space cannot exist. This thesis argues that the continual search for a room of one’s own, for an “individual utopia,” is in itself a form of imprisonment, trapping the two women in complex webs of disappointment (Alexander 275). As Helga and Esther both begin and end their respective journeys in rooms of their own, they remain sad and sickly, disappointed by the state of women in society. Continually disappointed by the patriarchal societies in which they live, Helga and Esther begin to hate aspects of their own femininities, internalizing cruel and negative attitudes. The term “disappointment” in this thesis draws from Hegel’s work on the contrasting notions of self-realization and self-alienation; the term, in this sense, is used to denote the catastrophic distress associated with the immediate understanding that one will never fully achieve one’s full potential, one’s “higher humanity” in the world, as a result of the hegemonic structures ingrained within society (qtd. in Schacht 133). Expanding on Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism, this thesis utilizes the term “cruel femininity” to support its intervening claim that the respective relationships that Helga and Esther each have with their own feminine identities begins to turn cruel. Utilizing the concept of cruel femininity, Chapter Three concludes with an examination of the evident downfalls of Helga and Esther, two heroines navigating a patriarchal society, who are always longing, waiting, for more.

In theorizing the complete loss of female hope through the notion of cruel femininity, this thesis examines the female Modernist aesthetic as presented in *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*. A mark of Modernist writers, Robert T. Tally Jr. argues, is that they are often “moved at once by a

will to change – to transform both themselves and their world – and by a terror of disorientation and disintegration, of life falling apart” (34). It is the particular sense of female “displacement, perhaps more than a homely rootedness in place, [which] underscores the critical importance of spatial relations in our attempts to interpret, and change, the world” (Tally 13). While this thesis focuses on the cruelly optimistic attachment that Helga and Esther each have towards the concept of a room of one’s own, the inherent gendering of space and its immediate displacement of the modern woman is a pressing topic that deserves to be further discussed in future scholarship. This thesis strives to reaffirm Woolf’s argument that “one has only to read, to look, to listen, to remember” in order to make change, however small or subtle, in the larger society (15).

## CHAPTER ONE

### SPACES OF SUFFERING: INTERNALIZING MASCULINE MODERNIST IDEALS

There's a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons –  
That oppresses, like the Heft  
Of Cathedral Tunes –

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us –  
We can find no scar,  
But internal difference –  
Where the Meanings, are –

—Emily Dickinson

The respective protagonists of *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*, Helga Crane and Esther Greenwood, search for spaces that are purely their own, as they strive to answer the question, “where are we to go from here” when there exists no particular place to go (Schacht 129). This chapter, by positioning each and every small space that Helga and Esther occupy as both male-created and male-dominated, theorizes the existential anxiety, the cyclical disappointment, and the overarching alienation ingrained within the female Modernist aesthetic. Detached, displaced, and continually at odds with the masculine spatial structures of the world around them, women just might be “the first Modernists” of all time, “the avante garde of the avante garde” (Gilbert and Gubar 1). This sense of disorientation and detachment allows a glimpse into the waste land, the liminal space, which is the Modernist female condition. This chapter utilizes Georg Lukács’s notion of “transcendental homelessness,” the loss of a complete and whole self, to analyze the alienation that pervades Helga and Esther’s respective journeys to discover a room of their own, a small space to call home. In addition, utilizing spatial theory, this chapter situates the physical places that Helga and Esther occupy as sites for the construction of their mental dwelling spaces; thus, this chapter argues that the architectures of their minds begin to reflect masculine

Modernist ideals. As Helga and Esther search for female space, they are also searching for their full potential and “higher humanity” in the world, only to be continuously disappointed by the lack of such space (Schacht 133). In positioning both the physical and mental spaces that Helga and Esther occupy as male-dominated, this chapter begins to unravel the web of disappointment that begins to cruelly affect the relationship that each woman has with her own femininity.

Through an examination of male-dominated spatial structures, this chapter theorizes the similarities between the journeys of Helga and Esther, as they each strive to obtain a room of their own in the larger society. However, before undertaking this analysis, it is essential to acknowledge the overarching differences in the two women’s journeys to secure such space. The hegemonic structure of American society in the 1920s dictates Helga’s search for space as a biracial woman. As Helga navigates the restrictive world around her, her journey differs inherently from Esther’s journey as a white, privileged woman. Despite being “so poor that she can’t afford a magazine,” Esther’s experience brings with it certain societal privileges that Helga’s race and class do not afford her (Plath 2). Helga’s pursuit is not solely a journey for female space; it is also a journey for the acknowledgment of her identity as a biracial woman by the larger society. In distinguishing between the journeys of Helga and Esther, this thesis recognizes that there is no “true” or “essential” experience that is fundamental to the female condition. With an understanding of this critical notion, this particular chapter analyzes the male-dominated spatial structures that influence both protagonists in drastic, albeit different, ways.

Larsen’s *Quicksand* places an immediate emphasis on the notions of place and space, urgently connecting these two thematic elements with the development of the female Modernist aesthetic: “Helga Crane sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in soft gloom” (35). This opening line sets the scene for the turmoil and “gloom” that often

accompanies the individual journey to secure a room of one's own; this journey is thoroughly examined in the novel's subsequent pages, as Helga searches for her own identity and its corresponding female space in the world (Larsen 35). While the large, comfortable room that Helga inhabits in Naxos at the beginning of the novel might seem to represent a purely feminine space, a genuine room of one's own, it soon becomes clear that the room itself is an overarching reflection of Modernist male-dominated spatial structures. The room, through a certain slant of light, might seem to be an accurate and all-encompassing representation of Helga's identity because of its "rare and intensely personal taste" (Larsen 35). Removed from the "rapping of other teachers" and the outside school politics of Naxos, the room becomes a "small oasis in a desert of darkness" (Larsen 36). It serves as a physical place where Helga can find "intentional isolation" from the inequality within Naxos and within the larger society. However, this isolation offers only a false sanctuary from the biases of the "huge educational community of which she was an insignificant part" (Larsen 36). Although Helga's room is physically filled with her own books and her own furniture, it belongs, in reality, to the male-dominated administrative sphere of Naxos.

The physical setting of Naxos serves as mere reflection of masculine Modernist ideals. The initial vibrancy of Helga's room, its "blue Chinese carpet" and "many-colored nasturtiums" and "oriental silk" chairs, parallels the conformity ingrained within the Naxos community (Larsen 36). Despite Helga's persistent attempts at avoiding "the unmistakable Naxos mold," the overarching values of Naxos continue to bleed slowly into the room through her "schoolteacher paraphernalia of drab books and papers" (Larsen 38, 42). The setting of the room, scattered with schoolbooks and remnants of the outside world, influences the architecture of Helga's mind; she is suddenly filled with "hot anger and seething resentment" as she recounts the "distasteful

encounters and stupid perversities” of the day’s work (Larsen 37-8). Thus, the setting of the room, “flooded with Southern sun in the day, but shadowy ... with the drawn curtains and single light” at night, represents a space of liminality, of complete contradiction (Larsen 36). The room is within and without existence; it is filled with Helga’s belongings, yet it does not belong to her. The ownership of the room by the male-dominated school administration reinforces the belief that the space cannot fully reflect Helga’s identity and, consequently, is not representative of a true room of one’s own. While Helga occupies the room, even her thoughts do not fully belong to her; they are informed by the overarching spatial structures of the school.

The sense of total disorientation, what Georg Lukács refers to as “transcendental homelessness,” pervades Helga’s search for a room of one’s own, sending her on a whirlwind journey to find something or somewhere that does not exist (qtd. in Tally 63). Lukács argues that a Modernist response to the navigation of a liminal, in-between state is to “create a cosmos in order to make [one’s] own existence intelligible and meaningful” (qtd. in Tally 47). The creation of a cosmos, a space in which to exist and to challenge existence, is not as easy, or even as possible, for certain individuals to achieve as it might be for others, and Larsen expands upon this notion throughout the novel. The transcendental homelessness which pervades the female condition, in addition to any state of existence outside of the hegemonic, patriarchal norm, causes Helga to search outside of herself for a sense of identity. Helga, through her journey to secure a space that is purely her own, attempts to create a cosmos, a place, a home, where her full potential can be realized. Each destination that Helga reaches, however, only seems to reflect the construction of masculine spatial structures within society. On the ten-hour train ride to Chicago, her home city, Helga is denied access to “occupy a berth” by the male conductor until she can provide “twice the price” of a regular ticket (Larsen 59). When she finally arrives at her

uncle's home in Chicago, an "old stone house" in a large, wealthy neighborhood, she is turned away by her Uncle Peter and his new wife (Larsen 60). Even the description of the Young Women's Christian Association reflects the patriarchal structures ingrained within society, as the organization strives to match women – who are often educated and overqualified – with "domestic" work around the city (Larsen 64). The patriarchal, hegemonic values that are entrenched within society influence the construction of spatial structures; due to this, a society which shuns Helga shapes her overall existence in the world. As a result, Helga is unable to ever fully realize her full potential in the world, leaving her restless, unfulfilled, and alone.

The notion of transcendental homelessness can perhaps be best examined through Helga's experience living in two very distinct cities: Harlem and Copenhagen. The spatial structures of these two cities and the living arrangements that these structures inform only serve to emphasize the liminal space that Helga occupies. When she first arrives in Harlem, Helga immediately appreciates all the "lovely things" that fill Anne's house, which is crowded with "lustrous Easter rugs, ancient copper, Japanese prints, some fine etchings, a profusion of precious bric-a-brac, and endless shelves filled with books" (Larsen 76-7). The overall "aesthetic sense" of Anne's house seems to match Helga's own personal taste, reflecting the life that she may have experienced had she grown up in Harlem with her family (Larsen 87). Helga slowly falls in love with the city and its "continually gorgeous panorama" (Larsen 77). However, as soon as she begins to feel comfortable with the space around her, she begins to view her new home through a different slant of light, recognizing the "insipid drinks, dull conversation, [and] stupid men" that fill the city's streets (Larsen 83). Helga displays her newfound "disidentification with the black bourgeoisie of Harlem," and begins to search elsewhere for her true identity and its corresponding female space in society (Scheper 681). Helga, still hoping for

a place to call her own, dreams of moving to Copenhagen and romanticizes an ideal, secure life spent with her European aunt and uncle:

At home in the cool dimness of the big chintz-hung living room, clad only in a fluttering thing of green chiffon, she gave herself up to daydreams of a happy future in Copenhagen, where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice ... She began to make plans and to dream delightful dreams of change, of life somewhere else. Somewhere where at last she would be perfectly satisfied. (Larsen 87-8)

The spatial structures in place within Harlem's bourgeoisie society restrict Helga's pursuit of her full potential, denying her the freedom to recognize and to develop her own identity. For Helga, the romanticized notion of Copenhagen promises "something broader, deeper," bringing with it a false sense of hope that this new city will be the place where she can finally construct her own sense of self (Larsen 86). Once Helga arrives in Copenhagen, its spatial structures initially seem different from any of the cities that she inhabited in America. On the boat ride from New York to Copenhagen, an old man remembers her "as the little dark girl who had crossed with her mother years ago," and he strives to make her feel welcome and at ease while traveling (Larsen 93).

Helga's first interaction with Copenhagen, where the old man openly acknowledges her existence on the boat, completely contradicts her prior experiences in America, and she finally begins to feel "free" (Larsen 86). However, despite the charm of Copenhagen, Helga continues to abide by an underlying expectation "to conform to rigid notions of deportment and dress that signal specific class status" (Scheper 684). As foreshadowed by the man on the boat, Helga is expected to fill the role of the exotic American niece; her uncle and aunt parade her around the city like an object on display, hoping to match her with a suitable man. While in the city, she unhappily adheres to the male-dominated social standards of her uncle, but she seems to realize

that none of the places she has occupied thus far or will occupy in the future will ever allow her the freedom to discover her own sense of self within society, to steer herself onto “the road to the regaining of independence” (Larsen 105). The contradiction between the two spaces – New York and Copenhagen – engulfs her, and she is unable to ever pull herself completely out of this liminal gap.

Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, in a very similar manner to *Quicksand*, immediately places Esther Greenwood in a room of her own, which, to an outsider looking in, might seem as though it has the power to encapsulate the full depth of her identity as a woman and as a writer. The particular room resides in a woman-only hotel in the middle of New York City and is the size of Esther’s “dormitory at college” (Plath 4). Esther’s residence in the small hotel room relies on her completion of a literary internship with a large fashion magazine, an internship which is “the envy of thousands of other college girls all over America” (Plath 2). The room that Esther occupies, with its “blank, white ceiling” and “dull, sunless heat,” exists solely within the spatial structures of the literary internship itself, and, thus, the room and the internship each reflect societal perceptions towards the concept of femininity – perceptions which are both male-created and male-dominated (Plath 22, 30). Frivolous items that reflect this stereotypical notion of femininity crowd her room, like a small “makeup kit, fitted out for a person with brown eyes and brown hair” and “a white plastic sunglasses case with colored shells and sequins” (Plath 3). Instead of being compensated for their hard work at the magazine, the interns receive bonuses “like ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon” (Plath 3). Nicholas Donofrio, in “Esther Greenwood’s Internship: White-Collar Work and Literary Careerism in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*” (2015), positions the gifts and bonus items as

an “insidiously antifeminist form of economic exploitation,” which reaffirms the argument that the spatial structures supporting the fashion magazine continue to be male-oriented (221).

The physical setting of the literary internship, with its conventional perceptions towards femininity, eventually becomes a toxic environment for Esther, a place that, ironically, serves as a blockade to the development of her sense of self. Esther’s internship mirrors Helga’s journey in *Quicksand* by transforming into a space of liminality, of contradiction, and of double standards. Besides representing the usual gap between college life and the finality of a future career, the internship also reflects the patriarchal values which shape the various structures of society. For example, the editors of the fashion magazine seem to pride themselves on being a women-run company with a predominantly female audience; however, the male gaze pervades the magazine with each and every turn of the page, seen through the beauty myths, the heteronormative advertisements, and the stereotypical gender roles displayed throughout its text. The internship should have focused on teaching young, hopeful writers the skills required to become successful in a literary career, but, instead, the interns divide their time between parties and “luncheons” and “fur shows” (Plath 25, 31). Rather than preparing the interns for a future career, the internship strives to transform the “bright-eyed interns into model wives” (Donofrio 221). Esther confirms this notion, suggesting that the other women in the hotel are simply “hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other” (Plath 4). The particularly masculine influence on the construction of the literary internship reinforces the societal expectation for women to fit into small, preexisting categories: the woman as wife, mother, muse, and more. Donofrio argues that the internship’s limited flexibility supports “a dispiritingly traditional set of ideas” regarding female creativity, leaving only a small, pre-determined role for

Esther to inhabit at the magazine, rather than the space to freely develop a room of her own (221).

After Esther's internship ends and after she fails to secure a spot in a writing course at Harvard, she returns to her childhood home to spend "a summer in the suburbs" for the first time in her entire life (Plath 114). Despite the familiarity of the "small, white clapboard house" in the neighborhood in which she grew up, her home seems to mark the place where she feels the most restless, the most alone (Plath 114). From Esther's small room on the second floor, "anybody passing along the sidewalk could glance up at the ... windows and see just what was going on" inside (Plath 115). Reversing this notion, Esther is also able to watch her neighbor, Dodo Conway, out of the window. Dodo represents "the whole sprawling paraphernalia of suburban childhood" that Esther shuns at all costs, and Dodo constantly reminds Esther of the conventional life that is waiting just outside the door, should she fail in her literary endeavors (Plath 116). The lack of privacy in Esther's childhood room separates it from becoming a true room of her own; while in the house, she feels that she is not able to grow as an individual or to realize her full potential because the men and women in her small town scrutinize her every action. Much like Helga in *Quicksand*, a sense of transcendental homelessness hangs above Esther's head. This concept recalls the question of "where are we to go from here" when there is truly no place to go, positioning the lack of female space in the larger society as the root of the transcendental homelessness, the existential anxiety, which weighs Esther down each day (Schacht 129).

This particular feeling of homelessness and anxiety evidently leads Esther to search for a sense of self elsewhere, and she hopes to finally secure a room of her own in one of the various mental institutions that she occupies throughout the novel – Walton, Caplan, Wymark, and

Belsize. As she moves through the different locations, however, it becomes apparent to her that the particular female space for which she searches does not exist. Even the private, quiet rooms that the various institutions offer adhere to male-created and male-dominated spatial structures. The setting of Dr. Gordon's waiting room immediately establishes his male authority: "The walls were beige, and the carpets were beige, and the upholstered chairs and sofas were beige. There were no mirrors or pictures, only certificates from different medical schools, with Doctor Gordon's name in Latin, hung about the walls" (Plath 127). At Walton, his own private hospital, Doctor Gordon has the power to make decisions over the bodies of his female patients, forcing Esther to undergo "shock treatments" as a form of therapy (Plath 135). Her negative experiences with Doctor Gordon permanently alter her perspective towards every institution that she afterward occupies. When she moves into a new room at Caplan and meets Doctor Nolan, her first female psychiatrist, she can only focus on the many resemblances that the room bears to "the room in Doctor Gordon's hospital" (Plath 186). Instead of Doctor Nolan visiting her, "a whole lot of strange men come instead" (Plath 186). The journey to find a room of her own in the larger society continually disappoints Esther. Smith, expanding upon this notion, argues that in each and every space "where Esther's recovery takes place, she continues to be haunted by the more traditional, domestic ideologies" associated with the construct of femininity (18). As she studies the male-created spatial structures surrounding her in each location that she visits, Esther internalizes the oppressive cycle of disappointment that she so strongly feels, and the relationship that she has with her own developing femininity slowly begins to turn cruel.

The physical settings that Helga and Esther each occupy significantly influence the shaping of their mental dwelling spaces. As Helga and Esther strive to "fit their bodies into textual, geographic, and cultural spaces beyond their control," they absorb the gendered

expectations ingrained within the male-dominated spatial structures surrounding them (Scheper 688). Therefore, the very construction of their respective architectures of the mind begin to mirror the gendered expectations of the spaces around them, which pushes Helga and Esther further and further away from realizing their full potential as woman and as writers. The patriarchal society that each character resides within affects their thoughts, beliefs, and identities, as the two women attempt to establish “an identity in spaces of in-betweenness” (Scheper 688). The liminal, in-between space that Helga and Esther navigate, both physically and mentally, represents the concept of transcendental homelessness which pervades the female Modernist aesthetic; specifically, the liminal space manifests itself mentally as a form of existential anxiety, and Helga and Esther exhibit this fundamental anxiety through “a sense of not being at home in the world” (qtd. in Tally 47). This existential anxiety represents the internalization of masculine spatial structures, as the two women slowly realize that there is no place in the world that is purely their own. Helga and Esther each exhibit the internalization of preexisting spatial structures in different ways, but the overwhelming anxiety, the sense of total homelessness, pervades both of their journeys to secure a room of one’s own.

The setting of the literary internship has a negative effect on Esther’s mental state, as she constructs an architecture of the mind that mirrors the male-dominated spatial structures within her workplace. Ironically, the one thing that Esther learns as a result of her internship happens to be only a reflection of masculine Modernist ideals; she internalizes the notion that she must choose between “a husband and a happy home and children” or becoming “a famous poet” and “a brilliant professor” (Plath 77). She learns this binary through the spaces that are constructed around her, specifically by observing the women in the small women-only hotel perform their own femininities. Due to this, Esther views the concept of femininity as a role that she must

perform in order to succeed in the literary community, and she believes that “the only way to be accepted by others is to conform to what society thinks a woman in the 1950s should be” (Smith 10). Esther feels that, while on a journey to discover a space of her own, she must attend the frivolous parties and the luncheons in order to become successful as a woman and as a writer. Her life, influenced by the masculine spatial structures surrounding her, branches “out before her like a green fig tree” (Plath 77). While acknowledging the possible futures ahead of her, Esther feels paralyzed by the binary system that she has internalized, saying:

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (Plath 77)

Esther believes, inherently, that she must choose to become in her lifetime either a Jay Cee or a Dodo Conway, but that she cannot possibly become both. The binary system that she constructs in her mind mirrors the masculine Modernist ideals surrounding her in the women-only hotel, in the office of the internship, and in the various mental institutions that she occupies. The notions of masculinity that she internalizes from the spaces around her are harmful, in turn, to her own femininity. Esther understands that the choice between becoming a housewife or “a brilliant professor” is not her decision to make, because, if it were, she would not have to choose only one role to occupy in society (Plath 77). The binary system that Esther creates in her own mind, which reflects the patriarchal values of the society around her, cruelly affects the relationship that she has with her developing femininity; this particular lack of agency, this existential anxiety, leads to her eventual downfall, which this thesis examines in Chapter Three.

Helga, similarly, internalizes the male-dominated spatial structures of the world around her, from Naxos to Harlem to Copenhagen and, finally, to a small town in Alabama. As a result of the lack of female space in Naxos, Harlem, and Copenhagen, she begins to question her own existence as a woman in a patriarchal society. “Was there, without her knowing it, some peculiar lack in her? ... Why couldn’t she be happy, content somewhere?” (Larsen 111). She begins, much like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, to blame herself and her own femininity for the anxiety, frustration, and unhappiness that she feels while on the journey to secure a space of her own. As she navigates through the various settings in the novel, she feels strongly that there is some intrinsic characterization that holds her back from realizing her full potential, some “ruthless force, a quality within herself, which ... kept her from getting things she had wanted” (Larsen 44). Consequently, this internalization of patriarchal values leads Helga to seek haven elsewhere, and she turns to religion with hopes of finally finding a space of her own. She hopes that religion can offer her this space, the “intangible thing for which, indefinitely, always she had craved” (Larsen 141). Helga views religion, specifically, as a release from “the complexities of the lives she had known” as a biracial woman navigating the hegemonic structure of society (Larsen 142). Much like the security of Helga’s room in Naxos at the beginning of the novel, religion transforms into a shield that protects her “from the cruel light of an unbearable reality” (Larsen 153). The internalization of masculine spatial structures creates an architecture of the mind that pushes Helga to stop searching for female space; she decides to settle down, to marry a preacher, and to move to a small town in Alabama. However, as Helga listens to her husband “praying for her soul,” she realizes that even the religion she practices is filled with the gendered expectations of men; the entirety of the small town in Alabama becomes a “vicious, ... hypocritical land” (Larsen 157). Helga’s final realization that the concept of female space does not and cannot exist

leads to her eventual downfall, which will be further examined, alongside Esther's breakdown, in Chapter Three.

The internalization of preexisting masculine spatial structures serves as the catalyst for the eventual downfalls of Helga and Esther, as they each struggle to understand the "general unreality" of the male-dominated world around them (Larsen 154). Larsen's concept of the "general unreality" of the world positions Helga, and the various women within society, as mere objects, commodities, struggling to find purpose in a world that is unable to ever become "real" to them. The societies that Helga and Esther each exist within are fundamentally "unreal" in their spatial structures; the societies are both male-constructed and male-dominated, leaving only liminal, in-between spaces for the two women to occupy. Within this liminal space, Helga and Esther are bound to preexisting and predetermined roles associated with the concept of femininity, which inhibits them from ever fully reaching or even recognizing their full potential. The feminine roles that Helga and Esther are forced to occupy, which will be discussed in the next chapter, only serve to reinforce the alienation, the existential anxiety, and the overall unhappiness which pervades the female Modernist aesthetic. It is this particular sense of alienation, from the self and from the larger society, which reinforces the argument that there is "no home here" in the world for Helga and Esther, no space where they can realize their full potential as human beings, as long as the spatial structures within their communities continue to be constructed and dominated by hegemonic, patriarchal beliefs (Larsen 59).

## CHAPTER TWO

### ‘A LOOKING-GLASS LIKENESS TO LIFE’: THE GAZE AND GENDER ROLES

But since the coming of patriarchy, life in man’s eyes has taken on a dual aspect: it is consciousness, will, transcendence, it is intellect; and it is matter, passivity, immanence, it is flesh.

—Simone de Beauvoir

While navigating the harsh realities of the male-dominated spaces surrounding them in *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*, Helga Crane and Esther Greenwood begin to adhere to the predetermined roles associated with the construct of femininity. Expanding on the previous chapter’s argument that each and every space that Helga and Esther encounter is male-constructed, this chapter analyzes the mythical roles that the two women are placed into as a result of the male gaze that pervades such space. Woolf’s argument that women are “not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex,” serves as the foundation for which this investigation takes place, and this chapter, consequently, begins with a thorough analysis of the male gaze and its impact on the roles that women occupy within patriarchal societies (82). This chapter draws primarily from the work of Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, utilizing the myth of the mysterious woman as a theoretical frame. The myth of the mysterious woman – the overall understanding that a woman is mysterious in essence – transforms Helga and Esther into hazy objects of male affection with the sole purpose of decorating the patriarchal walls of society, as if arranged in a painting or a portrait. In analyzing the mythical roles that women occupy, Beauvoir argues that “in concrete reality, women manifest themselves in many different ways; but each of the myths built around woman tries to summarize her as a whole” (266). Overall, this chapter examines the mythical roles of the muse,

the mother, and the mentor that the male gaze perpetuates, positioning Helga and Esther as something larger, hazier, and more mysterious – complex portraits for men to puzzle over.

The male-gaze, inherent in male-constructed and male-dominated spatial structures, transforms women into hazy objects of masculine affection, mere commodities to be consumed. In *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989), feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey coins the term “the male gaze” in order to denote the visual relationship that exists between men and women in “a world ordered by sexual imbalance” (19). Specifically, the theoretical framework of the male gaze positions “woman as image” and “man as the bearer of the look” (Mulvey 19). Mulvey argues that the male gaze constructs a particular narrative in which “the man ... emerges as the representative of power,” while “the woman performs within the narrative,” serving only as an object reflecting masculine ideals (19). Simone de Beauvoir examines this particular process of commodification, arguing that, as a direct result of the male gaze, “woman is exclusively defined in relation to man” (162). The male gaze and the various myths that it perpetuates only serves to isolate women from their own developing femininities. Helga and Esther begin to internalize harmful ideologies associated with the male gaze, and they slowly begin to view themselves and their own femininity through a scathing, patriarchal lens. The male gaze and its strong focus on the woman as flesh negatively impacts the various representations of femininity in *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*. The particular gaze, present in each and every setting that Helga and Esther encounter, informs the various roles of femininity to which they adhere. The roles that are conventionally ascribed to be “feminine” within society are both created and controlled, in turn, by the objectifying lens of the male gaze. In order to theorize the various roles that Helga and Esther each occupy, it is essential to first discuss the role that is prescribed, as a consequence of the male gaze, to all women navigating patriarchal spatial structures: the woman as object.

In positioning women as objects of male affection that are “seen only in relation to the other sex,” the male gaze seeks to diminish the individual identities of women, reflecting their various femininities through “the black and rosy spectacles of man” (Woolf 82). The objectifying lens of the male gaze, thus, strives to create and control a woman’s relationship with her own femininity, leading to a sense of self cruelly affected by patriarchal, hegemonic values. Woolf argues that, while internalizing the harmful notions of femininity associated with the construct of the male gaze, women transform into “looking-glasses” that serve only to reflect and enlarge the egos of their male counterparts (35). During this particular process of objectification, women become mirrors with the sole purpose of reflecting masculine Modernist ideals, of reflecting “the figure of man at twice its natural size” (Woolf 35). The role of the woman as a mirrored object represents “a double and deceptive image: she is everything [man] craves and everything he does not attain” within society (Beauvoir 213). In analyzing the role of the modern woman as an object that makes men seem larger and more important, Woolf depicts the overarching impact of the gaze on the development of one’s sense of self. In describing women as “the source of all man’s reflection on his existence,” women are placed into, or perhaps pressured into, predetermined, mythical roles conventionally associated with femininity (Beauvoir 213). The following argument examines how the construct of the male gaze further objectifies Helga and Esther by positioning them in the preexisting feminine roles of the muse, the mother, and the mentor.

In *The Bell Jar*, Plath immediately positions Esther and the other female interns within the literary magazine as decorative objects; they become ornamental bell jars scattered among additional feminine commodities. By compensating the interns with “ballet tickets and passes to fashion shows and hair stylings at a famous expensive salon,” the literary internship reveals its

superficial values, arranging the interns themselves as commodities, as mere objects with little to no value within the larger company (Plath 3). This particular process of commodification strives to reduce the individual identities of the interns as diverse women, writers, and artists, in order to construct a more uniform, controlled depiction of the woman as an essential object – a feminine role that the staff can then manipulate and sell through the very pages of their magazine. The commodification of Esther can be further examined through the various interactions that she has with the men around her, specifically with Marco. Esther’s encounter with Marco, a boy that she meets at a party in New York, reiterates the objectification ingrained within the female condition. As she meets Marco, Esther explains that she could immediately tell that he was “a woman-hater” because he treated her like she was just another one of his commodities, another “playing card in a pack of identical cards” (Plath 106). When Marco assaults Esther, there is a strong focus placed on the material goods surrounding the violent scene: the diamond, the dress, and the “imitation jet bead evening bag” (Plath 110). During the assault, Marco’s gaze remains fixed on the commodities that he feels belong to him, including the women at the party. Marco inherently believes that Esther’s role as a woman is to serve as an object of male affection, a decoration for his lavish parties. Seen through the lens of the male gaze, Esther becomes an object that is “exclusively defined in relation to man” (Beauvoir 162).

*Quicksand* also depicts Helga’s identity through the objectifying lens of the male gaze, and she too transforms into an object of male affection. While navigating the male-dominated academic sphere of Naxos, Helga’s identity exists solely within that space; she is first introduced as a commodity residing among the other articles in her room. The initial description of Helga parallels the description of the vibrant furniture surrounding her, and an “observer would have thought her well fitted to the framing of light and shade” in the room (Larsen 36). The gaze

which pervades the novel places an immediate importance on Helga's physical attributes, focusing on her "narrow, sloping shoulders," her "well-turned arms and legs," her "sensitive and sensuous lips," and her "curly blue-black hair" (Larsen 36). This description of Helga, with its strong emphasis on her appearance, objectifies her individual identity by placing a much higher importance on the construct of beauty and its corresponding feminine values. Helga's entire existence transforms into a mere reflection of masculine Modernist ideals, and, as she sits "deep sunk in the big high-backed chair" within her room, she begins to exhibit the predetermined role of the woman as an essential object, an ornamental bell jar. Within the Naxos community, she serves as a "decoration" with the sole purpose of brightening the "sad lives" of the other academics around her (Larsen 49). In positioning Helga as a commodity with the purpose of decorating the male-oriented sphere of Naxos, the lens of the male gaze exoticizes her very existence as a biracial woman with society. Helga's existence becomes a mysterious, exotic object of male desire, and she is unable to separate her own identity from the predetermined roles for women that exist within the academic community of Naxos.

Within the larger, hegemonic society, the exoticization of Helga's identity as a biracial woman transforms her into a female muse, impacting the lives of the various men that she encounters on her journey to secure a space of her own. The role of the female muse stems directly from the overarching myth that the woman is mysterious in essence. This harmful ideology perpetuates the myth that the role of a woman, while simultaneously decorating each and every room that she encounters as an ornamental bell jar, is to inspire and excite the men around her, as the female muse is "necessary to man's joy" (Beauvoir 203). In *Quicksand*, Helga occupies the role of the mysterious female muse through her encounter with a white male artist in Copenhagen. While living in Copenhagen, Helga's diverse physical attributes distinguish her

from her white relatives; due to this, she is seen only through an objectifying gaze which places her physical appearance above all else. The concept of the gaze, particularly the white male gaze, follows Helga's every move, reducing her individual existence into a mere stereotype of the exotic American woman. When the artist, Axel Olson, meets Helga for the first time at her family's party, he "looked intently at her for what seemed an incredibly rude length of time from under his heavy drooping lids" (Larsen 101). Larsen, by focusing on the artist's "heavy drooping lids," emphasizes the significance of the male gaze in shaping the particular roles that Helga occupies (101). Pamela E. Barnett, in her 1995 essay on portraiture in *Quicksand*, argues that the very concept of a painted portrait "locates a human being as an object of the gaze and assumes the passivity of the rendered subject" (588). Thus, when Axel Olson paints Helga through the lens of his own gaze, she becomes a subject with the sole purpose of decorating the walls of the larger society. The process of portraiture present in *Quicksand*, which stems from the construct of the male gaze, places Helga into the role of the female muse, an exotic object from which the white male artist can then draw inspiration from. Axel, representing the male-centered process of creation, tells Helga that he "cannot hold out against the deliberate lure" of her beauty and everything that she represents (Larsen 116). Despite creating a portrait that looks nothing like Helga, but rather "some disgusting sensual creature with her features," Axel inherently believes that he has captured her exact essence through the picture, presenting a depiction of "the true Helga Crane" (Larsen 119). The portrait, however, serves only as a reflection of his own masculine Modernist ideals. It is also important to note that this particular process of portraiture occurs without Helga's consent, as everything "had all been decided and arranged without her" by her white relatives and the white painter (Larsen 120). Helga's lack of consent reaffirms the

argument that the construct of the male gaze, present in male-dominated spatial structures, places women into the predefined roles to which they must then adhere.

Similarly, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther begins to embody a form of female muse. While navigating the male-oriented environments of the various mental institutions that she occupies, Esther transforms into a metaphorical muse to the many male doctors and male students who frequent her room. When Esther arrives in each institution, she becomes a mere specimen for the male doctors to inspect, an object that is both mysterious and unfamiliar. In describing the overarching myth of the mysterious woman, Beauvoir argues that “whatever accentuates difference in the Other makes them more desirable, since it is the Other as such that man wants to possess” (209). In a similar way to the exoticization of Helga’s biracial identity in *Quicksand*, the male doctors surrounding Esther transform her mental illness into a mysterious essence that serves only to make her more complex and, thus, more “desirable” (Beauvoir 209). While living in the various mental institutions, Esther begins to feel like “some exciting new zoo animal” that the male doctors come to gawk at, observing and taking notes on her behavior (Plath 173). Specifically, Esther feels like an object for sale “in the window of an enormous department store,” a mere commodity with the purpose of unraveling the mystery of the female condition to the male doctors (Plath 141). Beauvoir’s argument that “the very complexity of woman enchants man” can be thoroughly examined through Esther’s experience in the mental institutions, as the hazy, unknown entity of her mental illness only draws the male doctors closer (203). The male doctors, in addition to the various troops of “young boys and girls in white coats” studying to become doctors, are eager to visit Esther in order to see “what a girl who was crazy enough to kill herself looked like” (Plath 173). The doctors, rather than acknowledging the full extent of Esther’s individual identity, view her mental illness as the sole representation of her existence.

The objectifying lens of the male gaze diminishes Esther's identity by positioning her not as a person or even as a patient, but as an object with the sole purpose of inspiring the male doctors around her. While on a journey to secure a space that is purely her own, Esther transforms from a patient into a female muse; as a result of the gaze ingrained within the male-dominated mental institutions, she becomes a doll to the desires of the male doctors around her, a mysterious specimen to carefully inspect.

In addition to the mythical role of the female muse, the role of the woman as mother, wife, and homemaker continues to pervade the pages of *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*. Helga and Esther both struggle to accept the predetermined role of the woman as an essential household object. Both women are expected by the larger society to marry a man, to have children, and to cultivate a home; the societal expectation that women should become ideal household commodities traps the two women, and they both seem to dread the very idea of a domestic life. The domestic spaces that women often inhabit – nurseries, sitting rooms, kitchens – continue to be male-dominated, filled with the gendered expectations of men who return home from work to “refresh and invigorate” (Woolf 86). Within the male-controlled domestic sphere, wives, mothers, and daughters serve merely as “looking-glasses” that reflect the variety of the men around them (Woolf 35). Esther and Helga both seem to acknowledge the difficulties that arise with marriage and childbirth within the modern American home. Beauvoir, expanding on this notion, offers commentary on the construct of marriage:

But woman does more than flatter man's social vanity; she allows him a more intimate pride; he delights in his domination over her. ... The husband 'forms' his wife not only erotically but also spiritually and intellectually; he educates her, impresses her, puts his imprint on her. ... The woman is *par excellence* the 'clay in his hands' that passively lets

itself be worked and shaped, resistant while yielding, permitting masculine activity to go on. (Beauvoir 193)

Helga and Esther, understanding the hierarchy that emerges within the construct of marriage, both strive to shed the conventional values associated with the domestic sphere. Esther, in imagining a life with Buddy Willard, believes that marriage to him would mean “getting up at seven and cooking him eggs and bacon and toast and coffee and dawdling about in [her] nightgown” (Plath 84). She suggests that the construct of marriage in its entirety “seemed a dreary and wasted life for a girl with fifteen years of straight A’s” (Plath 84). Similarly, in *Quicksand*, Helga has a very distinct viewpoint on marriage: “Marriage – that means children to me. And why add more suffering to the world?” (Larsen 132). However, despite their arguments against the construct of marriage, both Helga and Esther, ironically, end up occupying a domestic role. Esther has “a baby to play with” and Helga has five children with her husband (Plath 3).

While navigating the male-oriented society around them, Helga and Esther each begin to internalize masculine Modernist ideals, viewing themselves and the world around them through a patriarchal lens. The internalization of feminine values that are both male-constructed and male-controlled impacts the relationship that each woman has with the predetermined role of the female mentor. The role of the female mentor manifests itself similarly in both *Quicksand* and *The Bell Jar*, as each woman interacts with a female mentor and, consequently, becomes one herself. When Helga leaves Naxos and finds that she has nowhere else to go, no place that she can call home, she is taken under the guidance of Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a prominent lecturer on “the race problem” (Larsen 68). Mrs. Hayes-Rore serves as a female mentor to Helga, assisting in her relocation to Harlem by allowing her to live with her niece, Anne Grey. While serving as a

female mentor, Mrs. Hayes-Rore plays a significant role in the development of Helga's feminine identity, as she was "a woman . . . who by a few words was to have a part in the shaping of [Helga's] life" (Larsen 69). Mrs. Hayes-Rore, who "had little time or thought for the careful donning of the five-years-behind-the-mode garments which covered her," attempts to give Helga advice that goes beyond the conventions of femininity (Larsen 68). The mentorship that Helga receives from Mrs. Hayes-Rore permanently alters the way that she perceives society; she begins, at once, to view herself as someone capable of changing the structures of the world around her. When Helga marries a preacher and moves to his small Alabama town, she attempts to transform herself into a mentor to the various women residing there. She feels strongly about passing on the knowledge that she has gained to the women of the town:

She meant to subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings to soft inoffensive beauty, and to help the other women to do likewise. Too, she would help them with their clothes, tactfully point out that sunbonnets, no matter how gay, and aprons, no matter how frilly, were not quite the proper things for Sunday church wear. . . . She was anxious to be a true helpmate, for in her heart was a feeling of obligation, of humble gratitude. (Larsen 146)

As Helga occupies the role of the female mentor, however, she serves only as a reinforcement of traditional feminine values, focusing solely on the "beauty" of the women (Larsen 146). She believes that, in order to serve as a female mentor to the women in the town, she must offer them advice on the development of their own femininities – like how to wear "more appropriate clothing" and how to improve "their homes according to her ideas of beauty" (Larsen 147). Ironically, the women of the small Alabama town shun Helga for being too feminine, for being

too modern. Helga's perpetuation of the stereotypical gender roles associated with femininity showcases her internalization of harmful male-dominated ideologies.

Similarly, the setting of Esther's internship constructs a binary system that distinguishes between femininity and success, forcing Esther to choose which specific gender roles to adhere to within the larger society. Within the binary system that Esther internalizes, the construct of beauty juxtaposes the intelligence, commitment, and hard work required to be successful in the literary world. This binary system can be directly examined through Esther's relationship with her mentor and boss, Jay Cee, who is described as being "ugly as sin" but "very wise" (Plath 5, 32). Esther, in describing her relationship with Jay Cee, clearly differentiates between women who prescribe to conventional roles of femininity, specifically "the fashion magazine gushers with fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry," and women like Jay Cee, with "brains" and "plug-ugly looks" (Plath 6). Jay Cee's role as a female mentor significantly impacts the development of Esther's own femininity, as she, perhaps unconsciously, teaches Esther the various myths of women ingrained within a patriarchal society; specifically, she passes down to Esther the societal distinction between beauty and intelligence. In discussing Esther's future after the end of the literary internship, Jay Cee tells her:

You can learn a lot in this month on the magazine, you know, if you just roll up your shirtsleeves. The girl who was here before you didn't bother with any of the fashion-show stuff. She went straight from this office on to *Time*. (Plath 32)

Esther listens to her mentor, and she begins to believe that she must shed the conventions of femininity, the metaphorical "fake eyelashes and giddy jewelry," in order to be taken seriously, and, ultimately, in order to be successful as a woman in the literary world (Plath 6). In her 2003 essay on the female body in *The Bell Jar*, Nóra Séllei theorizes the binary system that Esther

internalizes, suggesting that she must choose to become either like her mother and Dodo Conway, who serve as “embodiments of the feminine mystique” and the overarching domestic sphere, or Jay Cee, “the successful editor, who appears only in terms of her work” (128). In constructing a distinct divide between a woman’s outward appearance and her intellect, the larger patriarchal society continues to create and control concepts of femininity. Esther, through the process of internalizing masculine Modernist ideals, begins to wish that she “had a mother like Jay Cee” because “then [she would] know what to do” and how to succeed in a male-dominated workplace (Plath 39).

As Esther learns from the various female mentors surrounding her, she begins to negatively view their impact on the shaping of her identity. In reflecting on the relationships that she has with the female mentors in her life, Esther states:

My head ached. 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 220)

As Esther serves as a metaphorical student to these various mentors, she becomes aware of their particular “influence” on her identity (Plath 220). However, even as Esther transforms into a female mentor herself, she nevertheless begins to teach her own child the societal conventions associated with the construct of femininity. She passes down to her child the feminine commodities that she received as compensation during her internship, saying: “I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby to play with” (Plath 3). In teaching her child “feminine” societal conventions, Esther also passes down, perhaps indirectly, the false notion that women must choose only one predetermined role to

occupy within society. The negative impact that the internalization of masculine ideals has on the development of Esther's femininity will be further discussed in Chapter Three.

In "A Room of One's Own," Woolf argues that the only way to achieve success in the literary world is to shed the conventional spaces associated with femininity and to actively search for a room of one's own. Within each of the male-dominated places that Helga and Esther occupy, however, there exists a corresponding feminine role. This particular process of objectification serves as a tool for men to further create and control varying concepts of femininity. Consequently, as women begin to internalize the harmful processes of objectification and commodification, the relationships that they have with their own feminine identities slowly begin to turn cruel. The next chapter expands upon this argument, utilizing Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism, in order to theorize the difficult journey to secure female space in a world where such space does not exist.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CRUEL FEMININITY AND SPACE AS A UTOPIA

Yet it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top.

—Virginia Woolf

This final chapter, by expanding on the physical spaces and feminine roles discussed in the previous two chapters, theorizes Helga and Esther's respective downfalls as visual representations of the cruel attachment that each woman has with the construct of her own femininity. Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) serves as the theoretical framework for this chapter's investigation into the desire that Helga and Esther each exhibit for female space, for a room of one's own. Berlant coins the term "cruel optimism" in order to describe the negative relationship that exists when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). By first positioning Woolf's concept of female space as a utopic, idyllic notion that breeds continual distress and disappointment, this chapter situates the female attachment to a room of one's own as a form of cruel optimism. Expanding on Berlant's theory of cruel optimism, this chapter will use the term "cruel femininity" to support its intervening claim that the respective relationship that Helga and Esther each have with their own feminine identities begins to turn cruel as they internalize the male-dominated spatial structures surrounding them. The term itself, "cruel femininity," denotes the negative relationship between the two women and the development of their own femininities, resulting from the toxic cycle of disappointment that they face as women navigating the small, predetermined spaces that exist within patriarchal societies.

Woolf's notion that a woman writer must have money and a room of her own in order to produce meaningful projects in the larger society is an inherently optimistic ideology; it is,

perhaps, fundamentally unrealistic in its approach to generate gender equality in the literary world. Woolf's argument constructs an image of the ideal modern woman, navigating her own physical space and creating art on her own terms. Woolf's representation of the modern woman as an artist and as an architect, constructing the spaces around her, sets an unattainable goal that generations of women then strive to achieve. The argument that women must have rooms of their own in order to sufficiently create offers only a limited and privileged glimpse into the Modernist female condition, championing the importance of physical place. Helga and Esther each demonstrate this concept, as they begin to view their individual worth as women and as writers through the small spaces and metaphorical roles that they cannot help but exist within. Woolf's concept of a private room serves not just as a physical place for female creativity and expression, but as a "momentary withdrawal" from the patriarchal structures of the world waiting just outside the door (Alexander 275). However, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, each and every space located within a patriarchal society continues to be both male-constructed and male-dominated; Woolf acknowledges this notion through her specific characterization of a woman's school, suggesting that "to raise bare walls out of the bare earth was the utmost [the administration] could do" (23). Despite the physical act of constructing an educational building for women, the spatial structures of the school serve only as reflections, as mirrors, of masculine thought; the building lacks "the urbanity, the geniality, the dignity, which are the offspring of luxury and privacy and space" (23). Within patriarchal societies, the concept of a room that is both designed by and controlled by women is nonexistent, positioning the desire for female space as a cruelly optimistic attachment.

Expanding on the notion of female space as a form of utopia, Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* examines the overarching impact that utopic thoughts and fantasies have on the ordinariness of

everyday life (2). Berlant studies the particular attachment that individuals develop to “conventional good-life fantasies” - fantasies that serve as “idealizing theories ... about how they and the world ‘add up to something’” larger than themselves (2). Berlant specifies, however, that attachments can only be categorized as cruelly optimistic if they include an overarching “inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (2). It is this particularly cruel attachment to “the good life,” as Berlant deems it, that manifests itself in the search for female space and, consequently, in the struggle to achieve gender equality as a whole (2). As Helga and Esther search for a space that is purely their own, for Berlant’s symbolic “good life,” they are continually disappointed by the patriarchal structures of the society in which they live; as a result, they begin to hate aspects of their own feminine identities, internalizing cruel and negative attitudes. The respective downfalls of Esther and Helga reflect this particular notion of cruel femininity, as the cruelly optimistic attachment that each woman has with the construct of female space negatively impacts the end of their journeys.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther’s return to Boston to “spend a summer in the suburbs” reveals the construction of a cruel, negative attitude towards her developing sense of self (Plath 114). When Esther leaves her literary internship in New York and returns to her hometown, she is immediately met with an overwhelming sense of disappointment, as she learns that the one last thing that she had hoped for – an acceptance letter into a writing course at Harvard – has slipped just out of her reach. Esther places a large significance on the Harvard writing course, optimistically attaching her own worth as a writer to acceptance into the program; Esther imagines the setting of the course as a space of her own, a place where she could develop her own skills as a writer. Esther constructs an idyllic fantasy in which the Harvard writing course

emancipates her from the male-dominated spatial structures surrounding her, serving as an opportunity for her to realize her full humanity, to free herself through education, through art. Esther's rejection from the writing program leads to her eventual downfall and to her overarching exhibition of cruel femininity, as she watches her one last hope "totter and dissolve, and a body in a white blouse and green skirt plummet into the gap" (Plath 114). As Esther internalizes this rejection as a mark of her own inability, she begins to view her own developing femininity as a lack, as something that needs to be overcompensated for, as something to blame. As Esther blames herself for the rejection, she immediately feels that "it was very important not to be recognized" within her community, and, "as the houses grew more familiar, [she] slunk still lower" on the seat (Plath 114). It is this particular sense of blame which leads to Esther's demonstration of cruel femininity, as she no longer longs for a space that is purely her own, but for a lack of such space, for an absence of identity. Woolf, in theorizing this notion through a historical feminist lens, argues that women writers have often "sought ineffectively to veil themselves" from the patriarchal structures surrounding them, as "anonymity runs in their blood ... [and] the desire to be veiled still possesses them" (50). This chapter's intervening claim of cruel femininity encompasses the instinct to hide one's sense of self, to alter one's femininity, based on the masculine structures of the larger society; the term itself denotes the complete loss of female hope, marking the end of a journey.

The harmful notions that Esther internalizes regarding her own feminine identity leads to her eventual hospitalization. Esther, feeling "overstuffed and dull and disappointed" with the state of womanhood, has stopped fantasizing about a space that is purely her own (Plath 87). No longer hoping to obtain a secure female space, Esther views the male-dominated world around her as a metaphorical bell jar, which will always be "hung, suspended, a few feet above [her]"

head” (Plath 215). While occupying the various rooms in each of the mental institutions that she resides within, Esther says:

I knew I should be grateful to Mrs. Guinea, only I couldn't feel a thing. If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the-world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. (Plath 185)

Esther has stopped looking for a space of her own in the larger patriarchal society, attaching herself, rather, to the absence of such space. In losing any and all sense of hope, Esther is filled with “the desire for death, the desire to return to womb-like unconsciousness” (Budick 883). Joan's suicide, a fellow patient at Wymark, further exasperates the cruel attitude that Esther exhibits towards her own developing femininity. A day before Esther is scheduled to be released from Wymark, she hears the news about Joan's death; this reinforces the complete loss of hope that Esther feels towards the female condition. Esther explains that “to the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is a bad dream” (Plath 185). The notion of the world as a “bad dream” parallels Larsen's description of the general unreality of female space (Plath 185). Esther's identity metaphorically resides as a mirrored object in the larger patriarchal bell jar; as she begins to view her life as a “bad dream” which perpetually limits her potential, she exhibits the concept of cruel femininity (Plath 185).

Similarly, Helga's unyielding desire for a room of her own, for a utopic female space, catalyzes her downfall as a biracial woman navigating a hegemonic society. Helga attaches herself to an idyllic notion of female space and to its corresponding sense of freedom, envisioning a safe place where she would not have to fight each day to have her existence openly

acknowledged and accepted within the larger society. However, as Helga internalizes the male-dominated spatial structures surrounding her and realizes, at once, that the concept of female space cannot exist in a patriarchal society, the excess of desire that she feels, the “desire [that] had burned in her flesh with uncontrollable violence,” begins to cruelly affect the relationship that she has with her own developing feminine identity (Larsen 137). Alone in her own hotel room in Harlem, Helga grapples with Dr. Anderson’s rejection of her; despite occupying a room of her own, gendered perceptions and expectations continue to infiltrate the room. As Helga begins to view her own femininity through the construct of Dr. Anderson’s male gaze, she feels a sense of “mortification, [a] feeling of ridicule and self-loathing,” believing that “she had deluded herself” in some strange way (Larsen 137). She begins to envision her own existence as a reflection of masculine ideals, viewing her worth as a woman in society through certain “humiliating thoughts and painful visions of herself” (Larsen 137). Perpetually disappointed by the male-constructed spaces around her, Helga detaches herself from the development of her own femininity, becoming “isolated from all other human beings, separated even from her own anterior existence” (Larsen 137). When the negative feelings that Helga has towards her own femininity begin to overwhelm her entirely, she angrily explains that she “can’t stay in this room any longer ... [she] must get out or [she’ll] choke” (Larsen 138). It is this particular sense of desperation and detachment that leads into the discussion of her final downfall.

The cruel femininity that Helga exhibits can be traced through her final downfall, beginning with her decision to give herself over to religion, to “the white man’s God” (Larsen 157). When she first leaves the hotel room, “walking rapidly, aimlessly” around town, she “could decide on no definite destination,” as there exists no predetermined place for her to go (Larsen 138). It is not until she encounters a small Baptist church filled with “frenzied women,” women

who actively “gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered to the praying of the [male] preacher,” that she begins to realize that the disorientated, disappointed nature of her own existence is a symptom which pervades the larger Modernist female condition (Larsen 141). In the small structure of the church, held captive by the pouring rain outside, a “woman had begun to cry audibly, and soon, somewhere else, another” (Larsen 141). In the midst of the cult-like community of women occupying the church, Helga ruminates on the “cruel, unrelieved suffering” that she faces as a biracial woman and that the many women around her also endure, arguing that “life wasn’t a miracle, a wonder . . . it was, for Negroes at least, only a great disappointment” (Larsen 157). The final realization of this disappointment leads Helga to give herself and her own feminine identity up to the hands of the male preacher, demonstrating a cruelly optimistic attachment to “the good life,” to the human that she, in another realm, could have been (Berlant 2).

Helga’s decision to move to a small Alabama town is the beginning of a new journey, a journey that is no longer her own. Despite her initial rejection of the conventional roles of femininity and her refusals to marry two different men – James Vayle and Axel Olson – Helga eventually yields to the feminine roles placed upon her. Initially, when James Vayle asks Helga if she would ever want to get married, she replies by saying:

Marriage – that means children to me. And why add more suffering to the world? Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America? . . . Think of the awfulness of being responsible for the giving of life to creatures doomed to endure such wounds to the flesh, such wounds to the spirit, as Negroes have to endure. (Larsen 132)

When she arrives in the small Alabama town, however, she immediately marries the male preacher and becomes a relatively important female figure within the town; she seems to marry

the preacher not because of “his goodness, his righteousness, his holiness,” but rather because of the stability and sense of place that the physical marriage brings with it (Larsen 149). She sacrifices her own freedom in order to live within a stable home, becoming “a mistress in one’s own house” for the sake of living in such a space (Larsen 149). However, within the environment of her newfound home, Helga suffers with severe health complications from pregnancy and childbirth, becoming a mother to three children “all born within the short span of twenty months” (Larsen 151). Helga, as a mother and as a housewife, begins to embody the conventions of femininity that she had, at one point, fought against. As she rests in bed, sickened by the state of society, she ruminates on “the oppression, the degradation that her life had become” in the small town, all because “of her own doing”; as a result, the relationship that she has with her own existence as a biracial woman turns cruel, and she begins to hate aspects of her own feminine identity by blaming herself for her current physical and mental state (Larsen 161).

In addition to blaming herself for the state of her own unhappy life in Alabama, Helga also largely blames herself for the future “wounds to the spirit” that her children will be forced to endure while navigating a hegemonic society (Larsen 132). As Helga looks around “in helpless dismay and sick disgust at the disorder around her,” at the life that she has created for herself and her children in Alabama, she despises her own femininity and its corresponding roles of mother, wife, and homemaker. Mirroring Esther’s own wish to return to “a womb-like unconsciousness” in *The Bell Jar*, Helga also begins to wish for an absence of such space (Budick 883). She states that “she would have to die” if she couldn’t learn to endure the “suffocation and shrinking” of her newfound daily life in Alabama (Larsen 160). The thought of her children growing “to manhood, to womanhood, in this vicious, this hypocritical land” serves as Helga’s final recognition of the perpetual disappointment ingrained within the female Modernist aesthetic

(Larsen 160). Any hope that Helga may have held on to for the far-off future immediately diminishes when, “hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, ... she began to have her fifth child” (Larsen 162).

Both women exhibit the notion of cruel femininity through their complete loss of hope, internalizing the ideologies associated with the male-constructed and male-dominated spaces surrounding them; the realization that they will never reach their higher humanity in the world as a result of such space serves as the final step in their downfalls. Through its analysis of cruel femininity, this thesis has argued that women should not have to retreat to a predetermined female space in order to avoid the misogyny of the academic and literary world; the notion of a safe, secure space for female creativity and expression should apply not just to a fixed setting, to a particular room, but to the larger spatial structures supporting the cities, states, and countries in which Helga and Esther navigate. This thesis, limited in its scope, encourages future scholars to consider the relationship between gendered space and the female Modernist aesthetic. More work must be done to trace the impact that gendered space has on affective concerns, specifically the rise in female disappointment. In theorizing the particular blame that women often place upon themselves, Woolf argues that, despite all cruelty, women must continue to write “without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching” in order to begin to change the spatial structures of the surrounding world (68).

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