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UNCOVERING OPHELIA: THE RECLAMATION OF WOMEN'S MADNESS THROUGH  
FEMINIST DISABILITY STUDIES

by

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B.A. Columbus State University, 2019

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
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## ABSTRACT

In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” Edgar Allan Poe proclaims that “the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world,” and this sentiment remains curiously persistent within the literary world. Artists have looked towards their beautiful muses for centuries as a source of inspiration and introspection, and the faces that these muses wear were often swooning, longing, or even dead. Nineteenth-century British aesthetics solidified a gendered ideology that remains prevalent to this day; in particular, one subculture of Victorian aesthetics that emerged during this period was the Cult of Ophelia: a collection of writers and artists who revitalized Shakespeare’s heroine for mass consumption, immortalizing her as the zenith of tragedy, beauty, and madness. This thesis examines the origins, conventions, and evolution of the Ophelia trope through the art and literature of the nineteenth century and beyond, paying particular attention to the work of Pre-Raphaelite muse Elizabeth Siddal and twenty-first-century writer Sylvia Plath. By reading Siddal’s work in conjunction with Plath’s, this thesis positions both women as writers that operate within a literary tradition that reclaims their “madness” from the dominant societies that fetishized their mental illness.

*For my mom, because she never said “no” when I asked for a book.*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION .....	1
Literature Review.....	2
CHAPTER ONE: HER BODY OF WORK: SHAKESPEARE’S OPHELIA, ELIZABETH SIDDAL, AND READING AGENCY INTO PRE-RAPHAELITE WORKS .....	12
Shakespeare’s Ophelia .....	14
Lizzie Siddal, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Women of the Movement .....	18
CHAPTER TWO: RENDERING THE ‘FANTASIA’ OF WOMEN’S MENTAL ILLNESS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.....	34
Reading <i>The Bell Jar</i> through Feminist Disability Studies .....	45
CONCLUSION: OPHELIA’S AFTERLIFE: TOWARDS A NEW RENDERING OF WOMEN’S MENTAL ILLNESS.....	56
REFERENCES .....	65

## INTRODUCTION

“The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world- and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover”

– Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846)

The idea that “the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world” remains curiously persistent in the literary canon, yet the conversation tends to emphasize the physical bodies of these women rather than their identities (Poe 165). Artists have looked towards their beautiful muses for centuries as a source of inspiration and introspection, and the faces that these muses wear are often wan, swooning, gazing, longing, or even dead. Nineteenth-century British aesthetics solidified a gendered ideology that remains prevalent to this day; in particular, one subculture of Victorian aesthetics that emerged during this period was the Cult of Ophelia: a collection of writers and artists who revitalized Shakespeare’s heroine for mass consumption, immortalizing her as the zenith of tragedy, beauty, and madness.

Shakespeare’s Ophelia is used as a literary and artistic motif that has become so immersed within the Anglo-American tradition that her identity is no longer tied to Prince Hamlet’s affections, and this thesis argues that the Victorian period was the inception of this trend. The Ophelia trope is a manifestation of over two-hundred years of misogynistic appropriation of female characters with mental illness to appeal to the misogynistic gaze, but women writers have combatted this ideology for centuries. This thesis addresses the following questions: how did the Ophelia trope emerge as a byproduct of Victorian gender ideology? How did the aestheticization of women’s madness contribute to the proliferation of British gender



ideology? And how do the women writers and artists of the Victorian period and 1950s United States combat these ideologies, reclaiming and reimagining them as their own mental illness through their creative work? To do so, I use feminist disability studies as a theoretical discourse that redistributes the interpretive emphasis from the woman's eroticized and fetishized madness as appropriated by (often, though not exclusively) male writers and artists, and instead focuses on the works created by women with mental illness to reclaim both their physical bodies and their bodies of work. In this thesis, I argue that the works created by women writers and artists with mental illness bring attention to the hypocrisy of aestheticized woman's madness, and that their work acts as a rhetorical repossession of their own bodies and artistic identities, speaking to a larger literary tradition that interprets work created by woman writers as acts of emotional rehabilitation.

### Literature Review

The theoretical intersection between feminist criticism and disability studies is relatively new, yet the implementation of this intersection leads to a rich reimagining of texts. Both leading scholars in the field, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson and Kim Q. Hall assert that the discourse reimagines both disability and gender by as Garland-Thomson puts it, “unsettl[ing] tired stereotypes” and “challeng[ing] our dominant assumptions about living with gender” (1557). The broad scope of this theoretical approach allows for critics to dissect and even dismantle obsolete assumptions of gender and disability; however, for the purpose of this thesis I will be examining these approaches with mental illness at the forefront. Most of the literature interpreted within the feminist disability studies discourse discusses texts with characters who have physical disabilities, and while these discussions are necessary within the discourse of disability criticism, the scholarly discussions of women's literature would benefit from additional interpretations

with mental disabilities in mind. As complex engagements with, and rebellions against, the gendered discourses shaped by the Victorian period become more nuanced through feminist disability studies, works by women writers can be reinterpreted as complex repossessions of artistic objectification.

Bodies with disabilities are assumed to be “subordinate” to able-bodied individuals, but feminist disability studies attempt to restructure this framework not by rejecting notions of normality but by analyzing why bodies and social structures pathologize and operate in other ways that normalize particular bodies over others (Garland-Thomson 1558). People who are categorized as “disabled” are labeled as such because of an abnormality, whether visible or invisible, that prevents them from operating within the same social structure as those without these identifiable abnormalities. Overall, feminist disability studies is a theoretical discourse that “reveal[s] both the cultural work and the limits of language” within texts; but linguistic limitations are not the only factors to consider (1559). Critics must also recognize what cultural assumptions and connotations are associated with feminine madness. In her article “Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman” Elizabeth J. Donaldson examines the use of madness as a metaphor for rebellion, a trope that has become commonplace in literary interpretation after the publication of Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic* in 1978. Madness as metaphor, according to Donaldson, has earned a “sustained cultural currency” that inherently appropriates disabled bodies to cater to an obsolete second-wave feminist interpretation (91). These persistent interpretations emphasize the patriarchal and sexual oppression of women and conclude that hysteria and madness are “the only sane response to an insane world,” but Donaldson’s argumentative core depends on the distinction between “madness” and “mental illness” (92–93). For the context of Donaldson’s argument and this thesis, madness will be defined as the

emotional response of individuals in which their cultural conditioning has prevented them from receiving; mental illness, on the other hand, is a “manifestation” of this cultural conditioning (93). The “madness as rebellion” interpretation unintentionally eliminates discussions of mental illness and the “lived experience of many people who are disabled by mental illness” (94). By distinguishing madness and mental illness in this way, this thesis pivots from interpretations that rely on an idealized “madness as metaphor” to the more inclusive and empowering discourse of feminist disability studies.

The previous scholarly conversation surrounding literary representations of madwomen primarily focus on the romanticized madness that was popularized in the Victorian period by the works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their contemporaries. Texts such as Gilbert and Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady*, and Kathy Psomiades’s *Beauty’s Bodies* all conclude that the fetishization of physically disabled and mentally ill women was a result of the rigid conceptions of gender identity embedded within European culture, but the Victorian proclivity for Ophelia is a commentary on the generation’s perception of ideal womanhood. Through the eyes of the Victorians, Ophelia encapsulated characteristics of ideal womanhood: young, dedicated to the man she loved, and on the brink of death. It was Ophelia’s delicate disposition and beautiful death that appealed to artists and writers in the Aesthetic movement, and, later, Decadence, who often resisted the normative gender binarism of separate spheres ideology.

Victorian Decadence, as Liz Constable points out, “deploy[s] contamination as the means of confounding the orderly successions of generations of identity and difference...They don’t exactly break with the past, nor do they follow in the tracks of the aesthetic father figure: instead, they interfere with, feed on, parasitize and parody past paradigms” (26). The male artists that

rendered Ophelia therefore, on occasion, used their work to reject the assumptions of Victorian propriety through their use of provocative female imagery, and although the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were predecessors to the Decadent Movement, their artistic and literary conventions do renounce past artistic traditions in favor of an avant-garde aesthetic. The Pre-Raphaelite depictions of Ophelia tended to emphasize the figure's frail physicality, which contributed to her sensuality. Ophelia imagery, whether in life or death, all portray her with long loose hair, in or near water, and her facial expressions may appear wide-eyed in life or hooded in death; it is rare to render Ophelia with her eyes closed. This is most likely to contribute to what critic Magda romanska has called the "Western necro-aesthetic" that glamorized the deaths of young women (486). Romanska argues that the popularity of Ophelia death imagery is a result of her "self-enclosed and inaccessible" psyche (486). In other words, viewers are encouraged to fetishize her dead body because her thoughts are never disclosed to any audience. Ophelia's emotional "exclusion...helped to displace her voice as an ethical subject onto the sensual image of her dead body," thereby allowing outsiders to project their own narratives upon her lifeless body (486). By restricting Ophelia's voice and bodily agency, Shakespeare disables her identity to enable the actions of the men that manipulate her, so that even in death they may exploit her aesthetic value.

Ophelia's sensual femininity serves as an aesthetic resistance to Victorian social decorum, but it cannot be denied that the Cult of Ophelia, in their attempts to reject conformity, appropriated social conventions to limit the autonomy of their female subjects. Perceptions of gender and social conformity in the Victorian period relied on the separation of social spheres which advocated that the sensibilities of men and women were biologically and inherently different. The complexities of sex and gender could be visualized by emphasizing physical spaces and recognizing the Victorian perception of "masculine" and "feminine" spaces within

the home. The nineteenth-century artistic tradition assumed visual cues that informed viewers of a broader didactic message. Aesthetically, images of beautiful women reinforced notions of gender and social performativity because of the didactic role art plays in any culture, and Victorian art and literature is littered with swooning ladies eager to play their part for the artist, and the reader's, introspection. This introspection, according to Psomiades, only gave the Ophelia trope more popularity. She writes:

The ability to represent these aspects of aestheticism through images of femininity is what makes it possible for aestheticist artists to think them and perform them at all. As the basis of an ideology of art founded on the possibility of simultaneously knowing and not knowing that art serves no function and is nonetheless bought and sold, affords a place for privacy and is nonetheless implicated in the public realm, feminine icons are both the content of aestheticist art and its necessary support. (*Beauty's Body* 25)

The feminine icons Psomiades refers to are the very images that place women in positions that both empower and disempower them. These "aesthetic paradoxes" provide the basis of the Ophelia trope: an aesthetic and literary motif constructed on the European and Anglo-American cultural predisposition to fetishize woman's mental illness and suicide, and the poetry of Elizabeth Siddal also resides within this paradox (25).

In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* and gave a name to the "Problem" that she claimed in the book's opening line, "lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women" (1); that is the adherence to an ideological structure that repressed the intellectual autonomy of women. Following World War II, women were pushed from the home front and back into the safety of their domestic spheres where they adhered to a

gender ideology reminiscent to the Victorian period. Although the tension between social expectations and personal fulfilment was acknowledged within the mainstream conversation—as shown by the success of Jacqueline Smith’s novel *Valley of the Dolls* and the hit song “Mother’s Little Helper” by the Rolling Stones—Friedan’s book, according to Joanne Meyerowitz, served as a flashpoint for the modern feminist movement (1456). According to Friedan, this “strange stirring” within housewives in post-war America was a result of the inherent patriarchal oppression that dissuaded, and even denied, women the ability to seek professional careers outside of the domestic sphere (1). Friedan states that by teaching women to “pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy woman who wanted to be poets,” mid-century American gender ideology considers women who do not conform to the status quo as mentally maladjusted and shameful (2). These gender ideologies gave birth to a mass culture that “embraced the same central contradiction—the tension between domestic ideals and individual achievement” to endorse a gender ideology that, like the Victorians, othered and disabled those who could not conform (1458). Like in the Victorian period, literary representations of women’s mental illness throughout the mid-twentieth century emphasized an inability to reconcile the domestic and personal identity. This dissonance between the feminine ideal and the desire for emotional fulfilment outside of the domestic sphere may then be interpreted as an indicator of assumed mental illness within mid-century women writers.

Women’s mental illness from the Victorian period throughout the post-war era evolved from the “female malady” of hysteria to the clinical label of schizophrenia. The movement away from hysteria began in the late nineteenth century, after the work of Emil Kraepelin and Eugen Bleuler identified the “split between thoughts and emotions” that led to feelings of dissatisfaction within those diagnosed (203–204). Although discourses about women’s mental illness in the

Victorian period relied on the incorrect notion that madness was a “female malady,” the twentieth century recognized schizophrenia as a disorder that statistically impacted male and female populations similarly; however, the treatment of this condition has “strong symbolic associations with feminization and the female role (204–205). Electroshock therapy and the lobotomy were common “treatments” of schizophrenia and were believed to rehabilitate the patient’s maladaptive moods by either restructuring the brain’s nerves with electric convulsions or severing the nerves altogether (205). In each instance, though, the treatment options for mental illness were imposed by an individual that served as an agent of the patient’s well-being—be it a guardian or a doctor—the decision for treatment was usually out of the patient’s hands.

The act of medically diagnosing a patient enacts a representation of power dynamics between masculine and feminine ideals. Maria Rovito proclaims that the “act of diagnosing aim[s] to cure and repair an individual,” but it’s ideological origin “works to control and imprison the disabled individual” (319). The role of doctor is fundamentally masculine, and the patient is feminine, therefore situating the clinical diagnosis of “madness” on a female patient strip her of bodily autonomy (319). To combat this form of oppression, Rovito introduces her conception of “the madwoman theory” as a literary discourse situated within feminist and disability studies (319). According to Rovito, the “madwoman theory argues for a privileging of disabled women’s voices over those of psychiatrist and psychoanalytical discourses, which obscure and cloud disabled women’s narratives by placing a clinical label on them” (319). In general, feminist disability studies are an attempt to interpret literature that contains notions of a women’s experience within the context of an ingrained patriarchy—notions such as victimization, exploitation, ostracization, and most importantly madness. Works that are a part of

what Gilbert and Gubar consider the women's literary canon explore these representations of women's mental illness with authenticity, and critical interpretations of these texts may "obscure and cloud disabled women's narratives by placing clinical labels on them," further situating women's madness within an even more oppressive bell jar of patriarchal oppression (319).

Postwar popular culture in the United States reflected a gender ideology that, like Victorian gender ideologies, restricted women to romanticized roles of domestic life. These ideologies became so ingrained within the social culture that those who did not adhere to the status quo were othered and ostracized by a society that considered them disabled because of their behavioral abnormalities. Although gender ideologies in twentieth century America did not prevent women from holding jobs outside of the domestic sphere, these jobs were a financial necessity that would not dictate the woman's identity. Plath's poetry speaks to those women who desired professional identities instead of domestic ones, and her poetic identity reflects a persona that struggled to accept any of the predetermined social roles—daughter, wife, or mother—that her culture valued. The specific poems by Plath that are discussed in this thesis all confront themes related to the speaker's difficulty performing the roles expected of her because of her aspirations beyond the boundaries of her culture's gender ideology. By challenging these ideologies, Plath expresses a poetic persona that contends with creative identity, social expectations, and personal autonomy, ultimately operating within a similar literary tradition as Elizabeth Siddal.

In the chapters that follow, I will examine the social conventions of both Victorian and post-war American culture to determine how women's mental illness was portrayed within art and literature. By taking the distinct similarities and differences of each culture into account, I will then interpret the creative works of women writers with mental illness to map the aesthetic



evolution of the Ophelia trope within the Anglo-American canon. Chapter one, titled “Her Body of Work: Shakespeare’s Ophelia, Elizabeth Siddal, and Reading Agency into the Pre-Raphaelite Muses,” examines the impact that Pre-Raphaelite muse Elizabeth Siddal had on Victorian aesthetics. This chapter interprets Siddal’s poetry alongside her biography and relationship to her husband, Dante Rossetti, to ultimately argue that the Pre-Raphaelite renderings of Shakespeare’s Ophelia and women’s madness earned a cultural currency that, along with Siddal’s visage, eroticized women’s mental illness for viewer’s consumption. By rendering a poetic persona that also confronted mental illness within Pre-Raphaelite rhetorical conventions, Siddal’s poetry acts as an ironic parody of the Brotherhood’s ubiquitous feminine type.

Chapter two, titled “Rendering the ‘Fantasia’ of Women’s Mental Illness in the Twentieth Century,” interprets American post-war culture as a continuation of Victorian gender ideologies and a continuation of the romanticization of women’s mental illness for capitalist consumption. This chapter focuses on the work of Sylvia Plath, who is regarded as one of the literary world’s most notorious feminist writers, and interprets her final poetry collection *Ariel* and novel *The Bell Jar* as indicators of the woman writer’s own struggle between social expectations and creative identity. Plath’s work was censored by her husband and radicalized by second-wave feminists to fabricate conflicting mythologies of the author’s life after her suicide, ultimately usurping the writer’s agency in favor of competing fantasies. Plath’s work demonstrates a shift in the cultural perception of madness by rendering a disenchanting and violent representation of women’s mental illness for an audience that often denied her agency over her own experiences as a twentieth-century wife, mother, and writer. By reading Plath’s poetry in conjunction with Elizabeth Siddal’s, we can determine how the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood’s Ophelia achieved a new life in post-war American culture.

This thesis concludes by looking forward to works created in the 2010s, which reimagine the Ophelia trope and women's mental illness as a contemporary plight with callbacks to Victorian visual traditions. Young adult literature is one genre that reinterprets Shakespeare's heroine as a complex character with modern dilemmas and aspirations. Novels such as Lisa Klein's *Hamlet* retelling, *Ophelia* from 2006, and Jay Asher's contemporary drama *Thirteen Reasons Why* from 2007, interact with aspects of the Ophelia trope discussed in chapters one and two, while simultaneously reimagining her for contemporary readers who empathize with her plight, thereby stimulating more inclusive conversations to reduce the social stigma surrounding mental illness.

CHAPTER ONE: HER BODY OF WORK: SHAKESPEARE'S OPHELIA, ELIZABETH  
SIDDAL, AND READING AGENCY INTO PRE-RAPHAELITE WORKS

I care not for my Lady's soul,  
Though I worship before her smile:  
I care not where be my Lady's goal  
When her beauty shall lose its wile.

—Elizabeth Siddal “The Lust of the Eyes” (Lines 1-4)

In October of 1869, seven years after her laudanum overdose, Victorian artist and poet Elizabeth Siddal was exhumed from her final resting place by orders of her husband, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti placed a manuscript of poems that he had composed in the final years of his wife's life, and in a desperate attempt to rekindle his literary fame, retrieved the worm-eaten pages—that rested beside Siddal's Bible—for publication. The news of Siddal's exhumation traveled, and eventually fact intermingled with fiction and the muse's reputation conflated with legend. Rumors spread that her beauty was preserved even in death, and that her notorious copper hair continued to grow to fill the coffin (Hassett 443). This process of events fueled the popularity of Rossetti's impending publication and gave the fading artist new life, while Siddal's corpse was unceremoniously returned to the earth. Elizabeth Siddal's transformation from seamstress to Pre-Raphaelite icon culminated in a life of chronic illness, drug addiction, and depression, until finally the tragedy of a stillborn child proved too much. Despite this undeniable tragedy of Siddal's circumstances, there remains no evidence to prove whether her overdose was intentional or accidental. She left behind no note, and although her depressive tendencies were known by many, she showed no outward suicidal signs on the night of her death. Siddal's death

proved a scandal for D.G. Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and although his brother William vouched that Dante was preoccupied at the Working Men's College on the night of Lizzie's death, there were rumors that he spent the evening with one of his *other* muses, Fanny Cornforth (Prose 131).

Elizabeth Siddal served as the likeness for numerous renderings of Dante's Beatrice, the Virgin Mary, and perhaps most notably Shakespeare's Ophelia, but most Victorian and Pre-Raphaelite scholarship excludes her body of work from criticism and anthologies. Because of these omissions, Siddal's visage gained more notoriety than her words. In some instances, scholars may conflate the model with the figures she portrayed, and in conjunction with the Victorian fascination with aestheticized madness, Elizabeth Siddal proved ripe for visual exploitation by artists and audiences alike. Her devotion to Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic combined with a history of mental illness allowed for her life to imitate art, and through the eyes of many of her contemporaries, Lizzie Siddal *became* Ophelia; her presumed suicide was—according to nineteenth-century audiences—a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The overwhelming popularity of Millais's *Ophelia* in the Royal Academy show in 1852, the painting which Siddal famously caught pneumonia while posing for after submerging her body into a tub of water, signified a budding fascination towards rendering women's madness in the visual culture. The romanticization of Ophelia's particular mental illness, or "love melancholy" as the Victorians diagnosed it, became characteristic of a growing subculture of nineteenth-century artists called the Opheliacs (Showalter 90). The Opheliacs romanticized the physical beauty of Ophelia's body, in both life and death, because of the tragic circumstances that surrounded her suicide. Visual cues like water, flowers, and expressions of melancholy suddenly "set the Victorian style for insanity," and institutionalized women were even costumed

to play the role of “an Ophelia” for outside observers (90–91). While Elizabeth Siddal and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood may have contributed to the overwhelming popularity of Ophelia iconography in nineteenth century England, as I argue in chapter two, their influence can also be felt over a century later in visual and literary renderings of women’s mental illness. In the sections that follow, I explore what constitutes the Ophelia trope in Victorian representations, and how Elizabeth Siddal’s body of work operates in relation to that. trope using feminist disability studies.

### Shakespeare’s Ophelia

Ophelia’s physical presence throughout *Hamlet* is limited, yet her exploitation by the men surrounding her can be felt throughout the drama. Her status as a noble born maiden and Hamlet’s intended wife allows her to be an effective tool of manipulation against the prince, and the ambiguous origin Ophelia’s madness and demise have left ample room for audience speculation. Within the context of Victorian culture, Shakespeare’s Ophelia was fetishized to provoke a sensual response in viewers; however, the sexual repression of Ophelia’s youth and the subsequent the hyper sexualization that emerged through madness demonstrate characteristics of the Victorian “fallen woman.” The fallen woman is, according to Gretchen Braun, a Victorian literary figure whose “maidenly demise is preferable to sexual fall, and should physical chastity be compromised before marriage, an outcast state...is inevitable. A lonely and earthly death often follows” (342).

Shakespeare’s Ophelia follows the narrative trajectory of the Victorian fallen woman as a once-maiden corrupted by a presumed sexual relationship with Hamlet, but the resulting suicide by madness embodies her loss of *psychic* agency as opposed to bodily agency. The psyche and the body are conflated within a feminist disability studies interpretation, and the manifestation of

Ophelia's madness within Shakespeare's text can be a side-effect of a distinct separation between both body and mind. Ophelia's physical exploitation by the court indicates that her physical body is no longer her own, and therefore her subconscious may attempt to regain autonomy by acting out in a way that does not align with her previous actions—for instance, her hyper-sexualization in act four. The fallen woman follows a similar trajectory, or “downward spiral,” but the “earthly death” may only occur after the woman recognizes her own offenses (Braun 344). Ophelia's suicide from madness could then be interpreted by a Victorian audience as an ultimately pitiable act; the disconnect between her body and mind prevent Ophelia from reconciling her presumed sexual wrongdoings with ideological beliefs. By recognizing where Ophelia and the fallen woman coincide, we can determine how the Ophelia trope's divergence complicates the ethical framework within Victorian sexuality and artistic representation.

The gendered ideologies that support this ethical framework are present in the first scene featuring Ophelia in Shakespeare's text. In which, the protective older brother Laertes urges Ophelia to distance herself from the romantic advances of Hamlet because his affections are “trifling” (1.3.5) and only emit the “perfume and suppliance of a minute” (1.3.9). Laertes continues by referring to his sister's virginity as a “chaste treasure,” commodifying Ophelia's body and insinuating that her most valuable contribution to her family's reputation resides in the maintenance of her physical purity (1.3.30). The irony of this exchange is not lost on Ophelia, however, and she rebuffs Laertes's advice by recognizing the hypocrisy of inherent gender ideologies: “good, my brother, / Do not as some ungracious pastors do/ Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven/ Whiles, a puffed and reckless libertine, / Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,/ and recks not his own rede” (1.3.45–49). Ophelia's response indicates that she recognizes the contradictory standards regarding sexuality for men and women, and although she

can see through these contradictions, her social structure does not allow them to change.

Ophelia's deviance from the cultural norm, therefore, allows her image to be appropriated by Victorian artists as an indication of current cultural discourses pertaining to women's madness.

In her article "The Feminization of Madness in Visual Representation," Jane E. Kromm concludes that the major visual motifs that contribute the sexualization of "mad" Ophelia are her unfastened hair and her final moment on stage relinquishing flowers to those around her (513). Ophelia's affinity for flora allows her character to retain her femininity even in madness, but the act of distributing her flowers to the court represent the "deflowering" of her own body, allowing the audience to speculate about the source of her madness. The only time in which the audience can witness Ophelia's madness occurs in act four, following the murder of her father by Hamlet. While tossing flowers in remembrance of her slain father, Ophelia sings the tune:

"By Gis and by Saint Charity,  
Alack and fie for shame,  
Young men will do't if they come to't:  
By Cock they are to blame.  
Quoth she, 'Before you tumbled me  
you promised me to wed.'  
He answers:  
'So would I ha' done by yonder sun  
An thou hadst not come to my bed.' (Shakespeare  
4.5.58–66)

These lines, when sung by the inhibited Ophelia, elicit a provocative undertone that could be read as a manifestation of her years of sexual repression. Ophelia's mental distress is triggered

by a previous encounter with Hamlet, during which her betrothed demands that she enter a life of celibacy, to “get thee to a nunnery” (3.1.136); however, coupled with additional interactions in which Hamlet makes sexual advances towards her, Ophelia voices her frustration that “By Cock they [her manipulators] are to blame” (4.5.61). Although in Shakespeare’s text a sexual relationship between Hamlet and Ophelia is never explicit, Shakespeare’s reference to her loss of virginity is evident to the audience.

Within the context of dramatic portrayals of Ophelia, Kromm argues that the reasoning behind Ophelia’s hyper sexualization because of mental illness is a result of ingrained “stereotypes of madness,” categorized as either male or female (509). According to Kromm:

Among traditional early modern stereotypes of madness, two in particular, one male and one female, externalize mental disorder into a shocking spectacle of constant physical agitation; these distinguish the madman as aggressive, potentially combative figure and the madwoman as a sexually provocative, primarily self-abusing one. The customary dishevelment and seminudity of these two figures, conceived as effects of the ceaseless movement thought to characterize their condition, give the madman a gloss of uncivilized animality but set up the female figure as a site for sexual display. (507–508)

This rendering provides little scope for interpretive nuance but can inform readers of the social implications of Ophelia’s intentional sexualization. Ophelia’s hyper sexuality is used as a foil against Hamlet’s “aggressive” and “combative” (507) pseudo-madness, ultimately demonstrating one of the most enduring dilemmas of Shakespeare’s drama: is Hamlet truly mad? There is never a question as to whether Ophelia’s mental illness is feigned or genuine because, narratively, she has nothing to gain from a performance; Hamlet has abandoned her, her father was murdered, and she remains at the mercy of the court in her brother’s absence. Ophelia’s madness,



interpreted as a manifestation of a lifetime of repression, oppression, and manipulation, serves as a narrative device that immortalizes her as one of literature's most pitiable characters.

#### Lizzie Siddal, the Pre-Raphaelites, and the Women of the Movement

Ophelia's death is never shown in Shakespeare's play, but the scene is described in vivid detail to Laertes by Gertrude. The Queen's description reads:

There is a willow grass askant the brook  
That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream.  
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make  
Or crowflowers, nettles, daisies and long purples,  
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name  
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.  
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds  
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke,  
When falling down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide  
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,  
Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds  
As one incapable of her own distress,  
Or like a creature native and endued  
Unto that element. But long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
To muddy death. (4.7.164–81)

Interestingly, the description of the landscape merges with the description of Ophelia's body causing the two separate entities—the landscape and her body—to become one entity. At this moment in Shakespeare's text, Ophelia becomes a part of the landscape; she is no longer defined by her identity before madness and death. Artists tend to render Ophelia, both dead and alive, within the scene of her death, and because of the overwhelming number of illustrations of this scene, she cannot be separated from it. Ophelia's identity as a character may become conflated with the landscape she perishes in, conjuring images of flowers, water, and stillness. Millais' depiction of Ophelia from is perhaps the most recognizable image of the character, and the muse that served as a model for Ophelia's likeness, Elizabeth Siddal, is typically only a footnote within the larger conversation of the works she inspired. In this piece, Ophelia is depicted in the center of the frame with her gown and hair spread around her "mermaid-like," and the overwhelming detail present in the natural setting—the flowers and stream—envelop Ophelia as she becomes one with the land that overtook her (4.7.174).

While most of the existing conversation discussing Millais's rendition of Ophelia tends to emphasize Siddal's own tragic biography, little has been done to interpret the model's poetry as an extension and reimagining of the Brotherhood's aesthetic productions. An artist and poet in her own right, Siddal faced years of chronic illness, drug addiction, and mental illness, eventually dying from a laudanum overdose at thirty-two years old. Siddal crafted multiple poems that referenced motifs of the Ophelia trope such as a pre-mature or self-inflicted death, flowers, water, and madness. All published posthumously, Siddal's works adhere to the poetic forms used by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, but the images and themes portrayed reveal the objectification and silencing of artistic muses. In her article "Reviving Pre-Raphaelite Women," Emily J. Orlando argues that Siddal's creative work "is as much about reclaiming [her] own

representation as it is about exposing and dismantling the ideology of the aesthetic for which they served as symbols” (617). Despite, or rather in response to, the ubiquity of representations within the Pre-Raphaelite movement of wan, submissive, sometimes even dead women as beautiful and appealing, the women artists and writers associated with the Pre-Raphaelites used their work to address the ironies of their Pre-Raphaelite brothers by brush and pen. The women involved in the Pre-Raphaelite movement were some of the earliest instances of women writers and artists reimagining the Ophelia trope for compassionate aesthetic representation of woman’s mental illness. By interpreting their work, specifically Lizzie Siddal’s, through the lens of feminist disability studies, we can uncover an early instance of women writers who use the Ophelia trope and reimagine it as empowerment.

In her article “Elizabeth Siddal’s Poetry: A Problem and Some Suggestions,” Constance W. Hassett argues against the perception that Elizabeth Siddal’s poetry is, as William Michael Rossetti posits, “scrappily jotted down” and of “slender talent” (William Rossetti qtd. in Hassett 445). Hassett’s primary objective notes:

Siddal was prompted to write—as all writers are—by other writings. This assumption calls for interesting and yet untold stories about her poems, stories of their intertextuality, of the structuration of their meanings, of their representations of gender, and their literary value. Given the historical denigration of Siddal’s poetry, to undertake a critical study without offering aesthetic assurances makes little sense and so I would like to affirm at the outset that Siddal is a good poet.

(446)

Hassett’s foundational claim, that Siddal was a “good poet,” is further evidence of the necessity of looking at her work critically as a testament to her experiences as a muse and woman poet

with mental illness. Siddal's status with the Brotherhood hindered her reputation and prompted critics to categorize her work as musings instead of works worthy of cultural and literary analysis.

The Brotherhood's reputation was also marred by controversy. In his 1871 editorial "The Fleshly School of Poetry," Victorian novelist and critic Robert Buchanan accused the Brotherhood, specifically Dante Rossetti, of debasing the dignified tradition of British aesthetics. In this exaggerated and explosive critique, Buchanan proclaims that Dante Rossetti and his collective "extol fleshiness as the distinct and supreme end of poetic and pictorial art; to aver that poetic expression is greater than poetic thought, and by interference that the body is greater than the soul, and sound superior to sense" (335). Buchanan's essay assails the Brotherhood's lack of propriety and proclaims that their "fleshly" and sensual portrayals of love, lust, and emotion are "deficient in sincerity" (341). Buchanan's primary objection, then, resides in Rossetti and the Brotherhood's predilection for the sensual portrayals of their muses in both art and poetry; but the Brotherhood's deviance from British propriety runs much deeper than the provocative depictions of their muses. To Rossetti and the Brotherhood this movement of art and literature sought to embrace sensuality and desire while harkening back to the medieval and Renaissance narratives that preceded.

The Pre-Raphaelites favored the ballad and ekphrastic poetic form with pastoral imagery reminiscent of the medieval and Renaissance tradition, and their appropriation of Ophelia speaks to their expectations of ideal Victorian womanhood. The Brotherhood consistently published poems that detailed the beauty of young damsels and their passive roles in relationships, and Ophelia is a fitting character for this specific typography. Ophelia, who was used as a pawn by every man who surrounded her, placed her worth within the acts she performed to serve these

men, like Siddal's plight as a Pre-Raphaelite muse. Published in 1882, Walter Hamilton's book *The Aesthetic Movement in England* chronicles the origin, rise, and apex of the Aesthetic (meaning here the specific artistic practices and concerns that laid the groundwork for the Aesthetic Movement as opposed to the more general sense of cultural and artistic "aesthetics") culture created by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Hamilton's defense of Aestheticism and Rossetti's "fleshly" oeuvre is encapsulated in his declaration that "tastes differ," and that "there can be no mathematical definition, or science of beauty in nature, art, poetry or music, insomuch as beauty is not altogether a property of objects or sounds but is relative to the tastes and faculties brought to bear upon them" (vii). The beauty of the Aesthetic Movement, according to Hamilton, is the movement's ability to reject the confining restrictions of British propriety. The Brotherhood's crusade against British thematic and creative propriety manifests in their dozens of religious portraits, one of which by Dante Rossetti depicts Siddal as the Virgin Mary curled on her bed with unfastened hair, red lips, and a draping chemise ("Ecce Ancilla Domini", 1850). This painting by Rossetti demonstrates multiple artistic techniques rendered by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the eventual Aesthetic movement as well; for example, the Virgin Mary appears pale and frail, and her body is curled in a submissive position. This submissive presentation of femininity by Rossetti is what Kathy Psomiades considers the "foundations of Aesthetic ideology itself in the logic of these iconic images of femininity" (31). In other words, there is a distinct beauty that is wholly feminine and desirable in the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, and sensual women are at the heart. The Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements both appropriate the autonomy of their muses and manipulate their bodies and their identities to adhere to their own unique perception of "fleshly" beauty. Women's bodies, therefore, become vehicles to which the Brotherhood may disperse their avant-garde aesthetic movement.

This corporal appropriation is evident in Dante Rossetti's poem "The Portrait" (1870). Published in 1870, "The Portrait" is a reworking of his original 1847 poem "On Mary's Portrait Which I painted Six Years Ago" and was initially buried with Siddal following her laudanum overdose in 1862. Interpreted as a companion piece to Rossetti's memento mori of Siddal titled *Beata Beatrix*, this 108-line dramatic monologue is an ekphrastic musing on an artist's deceased muse and wife. The speaker declares "This is her picture as she was," but he fails to distinguish or recognize that this is how she appeared to him (line 1). The speaker dwells on the "fleshly" aspects that allure him, like her "sweet lips" (line 7) and the "words of the sweet heart" (line 8), and the emotions that stir within him are rooted in his idealization and the sanctification of her image. The speaker declares "In painting her I shrined her face" (line 19), which elevates her as a sanctified image and solidifies his role as a creator of her legacy. Tricia Lootens considers this phenomenon "poet worship," which "idealizes and thus standardizes its subjects: the poet hero expresses himself, and in doing so, his time and the universe" (45). Lootens also recognizes the interpretations that women are "masculinized by grace" and "released by sanctity from the limitations ascribed to their gender" such as motherhood and domesticity (47); however, the PRB does not subscribe to this iteration of ideal Victorian womanhood. The Pre-Raphaelites are dedicated to depicting an unideal womanhood, which consisted of sensual innocence, emotional weakness, and corporeal passivity. Works by the Brotherhood sought to move away from the "Angle in the House" and render women who were sensual and flawed. If God's "Divine authority supersedes earthly authority," then Rossetti is playing God by sanctifying and "shrining" his beloved's face (46). Rossetti considers himself as a "poet hero" who must immortalize the perfection of his dead love to conceptualize his own artistic genius; and as Poe

has pointed out, “it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (Poe 165).

The first stanza of Rossetti’s “The Portrait” concludes with the line “And yet the earth is over her” (line 9), which in conjunction with the first line, “This is her picture as she was” (line 1), confirms that she is dead. It is curious that Rossetti chose to note the muse as below both the earth and his speaker, whereas “The Blessed Damozel” (1847), which was composed within the same year as this poem, depicts an opposing image. Also focused on lovers separated by death, “The Blessed Damozel” follows the muse observing her lover from above in Heaven. In this poem Rossetti also fixates on the “fleshly” attributes of the muse by noting her “robe, ungirt from clasp to hem” (line 7) and the “bar she leaned on warm[ed]” by her “bosom” (lines 45–46). This sensual and fleshly portrayal of the muse is rooted in physical desire, and compared to Siddal’s poetry—which emphasizes the speaker’s emotional connection to her lover—Rossetti’s work can be interpreted by a feminist reader as a representation of the conflicting identities of how he perceives his muse and how the muse perceives herself. As we have now seen, Rossetti’s “fleshly” poetry appropriates the bodies of his muses, and in turn their legacies, to immortalize his own.

So far, I have discussed paintings by Millais and Rossetti that emphasized the fleshly appeal of the woman’s physical bodies as opposed to their identities, but the women that were immersed within the movement also wanted to reestablish the autonomy of the models and muses by depicting the ideological tension of Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics. One such woman was Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, whose portrait titled *Ophelia* presents a stark visual difference in the presentation of the character. In this rendering, Ophelia is wearing a black cloak and her expression is not stylized or exaggerated to imply madness. By neglecting

the background and setting, visual emphasis is placed on the sitter, and a sole light source illuminates from the top of model's head. Although in this portrait the sitter's hair is loose, the only visual cue that hints to the viewer that this is Ophelia are the pure, white flowers pinned to the collar; both rosebuds on the verge of blooming yet still wilting to perhaps represent her life cut short. Cameron maintains Ophelia's dignity by posing her in such a way that suits her status as nobility, but despair is still evident in her facial expression. Natasha Aleksyuk describes Cameron's sitter as "aloof and slightly masculine" to portray "an image of controlled madness," an image that challenges the "shy and girlish" renderings that have come before (130–31).

Cameron revisits Ophelia in her *Untitled Ophelia* portrait from 1880, but this piece portrays Ophelia in a state of raving madness. Although this image also does not include a detailed or distracting background, the sitter for this portrait grasps at her loose hair and stares directly at the viewer with wide eyes. Ophelia's status is evident in the ornate gown she wears, also lined with flowers, but Cameron maintains her dignity by rejecting the eroticization of the Pre-Raphaelites' representations. Emphasis is placed on Ophelia's body as a source of physical narrative portrayal as opposed to sexual arousal, and the irony of presenting Ophelia as a contemporary woman contributes to her aesthetic rebuttal of Pre-Raphaelite tradition. While members of the Brotherhood found their "stunners" among women in limited positions of power with no means to support and exploited their vulnerability for visual pleasure, Cameron typically asked close friends to sit for her portraits. Instead of "stunners," Cameron's "sitters" injected a sense of visual familiarity within the literary figures they portrayed. Natasha Aleksyuk claims that "Cameron desire[d] to merge the real world of her sitters with the ideal world of 'Poetry and beauty'" because these renderings achieve their interpretations within the junction of literary



fiction and real-life associations (126). For Cameron, the beauty of her staged subjects resides in the irony of reimagining the greatest figures of the literary canon as average Victorian citizens.

Cameron was given her first camera by her daughter to “amuse” her, but her passion for rendering subtle and unconventional beauty earned her both ridicule and praise from her contemporaries<sup>1</sup>. According to Cameron herself, her goal was “to ennoble Photography and to secure for it the character and uses of High Art by combining the real and the Ideal and sacrificing nothing of the Truth by all possible devotion to poetry and beauty” (Cameron qtd. MoMA 34). These ideals render a striking similarity to that of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, who sought to aestheticize the secular beauty of the literary world for public consumption; however, Cameron’s approach rejected the “fleshly” traditions of the Brotherhood in favor of portraying the impracticality of Victorian social ideologies. Cameron tends to project literary or historical identities onto her models, but, as Aleksiuik questions, “Which holds the truth, the caption or the photo?” (128). Susan Sontag argues that within the discourse of photography as an artistic medium “The consequences of lying have to be more central...than they ever can be for painting, because the flat, usually rectangular images which are photographs make a claim to be true that paintings never make. A fake painting...falsifies the history of art. A fake photograph...falsifies reality” (Sontag 86). Cameron’s modern and realistic images of Ophelia therefore provide viewers with an image that emphasizes the *truth* of Ophelia’s plight. Ophelia—in these instances—could be any woman. Cameron’s iterations of Ophelia show her suffering at a pivotal point in her madness, and alive. The work of Julia Margaret Cameron, therefore, contributes to the same artistic and literary discourse as Lizzie Siddal and Christina Rossetti to rebuff the

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<sup>1</sup> The *Photographic Journal* referred to her work as a “series of out-of-focus portraits of celebrities” in 1864, while *The Illustrated London News* considered her “the nearest approach to art, or rather the most bold and successful applications of the principals of fine-art to photography”

romanticization of woman's madness. Even while working within the aesthetic conventions of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood movement, these women artists push back against that movement's objectification and exploitation of its female muses so that they may regain narrative autonomy over their bodies.

Immortalized as a muse herself, Elizabeth Siddal's poetry provides vibrant and authentic insight on the exploitation of models within the Pre-Raphaelite circle. Siddal's poem "The Lust of the Eyes" depicts the relationship between an artist and his muse, or "Lady," as an exchange that depends on the fleeting physical beauty of the woman. Told from the perspective of the artist, the speaker asserts:

I care not for my Lady's soul,  
Though I worship before her smile:  
I care not where be my Lady's goal  
When her beauty shall lose its wile. (lines 1–4)

The soul in this instance could be interpreted in two ways: the eternal soul that faces judgement after death, or the intrinsic nature of the figure's personal identity. By taking both definitions into consideration, the reader can discern two thematic interpretations. If the reader is assuming that the speaker is a masculine figure that remains contained within the lines of Siddal's poem, then the interpretation would follow the religious definition of "soul" in which the speaker is indifferent towards the Lady's religious identification. On the contrary, if the reader were to assume that the speaker is referencing the intrinsic identity of the Lady's soul, then the reader may participate in a more secular reading based off physical beauty rather than spirituality. From the perspective of the artist, his Lady is to serve as an aesthetic object and appeal to his

exploitative gaze, and Siddal presents both interpretations of the soul as ironic and intended to draw attention to the muse's objectification.

Like Dante Rossetti's deliberate use of location and positioning, Siddal humbles the speaker by placing him "Low...down at [his] Lady's feet," allowing him to "Gaz[e] through her wild eyes" (lines 5–6). By gazing "through" her eyes readers may assume that the artist is experiencing the intrinsic value of her soul, but all he considers in this moment is the time of her death, when their "starlike beauty dies" (lines 6–8). This is the first direct reference to death in the poem, and it alludes to both the death of the Lady and the artist's love for her. The artist knows that his love is not of *her* but the aesthetic value she holds, and he is certain that his attachment to her will cease once the "starlike beauty" leaves her eyes (line 8). These lines serve as Siddal's commentary and condemnation of the destructive relationship between the artist and the muse because she is interacting directly with the irony of the PRB's aesthetic mission. The Brotherhood strove to create art rooted in the desire for vibrant and sensual life, yet their work fetishizes physical weakness, death, and the restriction of woman's autonomy.

The third stanza returns to the Christian denotation of soul with the lines that read:

I care not if my Lady pray  
To our Father which is in Heaven;  
But for joy my heart's quick pulses play,  
For me her love is given. (lines 9–12)

The repetition of "I care not" reinforce the artist's indifference towards the muse's intrinsic identity in favor of the attention and physical love he receives from her (line 9). The artist is not jealous of his muse's relationship with God because he perceives their fleshly relationship superior to her spiritual one with God, yet he uses religious imagery to characterize their

connection. The speaker will “worship before her smile” but he will not acknowledge the existence of Heaven or the fulfilment of religious spirituality that his Lady possesses (line 2).

The speaker returns to imagery of death in the final lines that question who will prepare the muse’s body for burial or mourn her. These last lines emphasize the excitement the artist feels of mourning his muse because only then will he be able to fully manipulate her body to appear how he prefers. By “clos[ing his] Lady’s eyes” and “fold[ing] her hands,” the artist demonstrates full control over the Lady and physically manipulates her body to suit his desires (lines 13–14).

Siddal’s “The Lust of the Eyes” operates as a commentary on the physical and emotional manipulation faced by muses within the Pre-Raphaelite circle and how this manipulation degrades the muse’s autonomy. Siddal recognizes that her artistic relationship with Rossetti is rooted in his “fleshly” desires, and in turn she used a concise poetic form that contrasted Rossetti’s rhetorical excess. This juxtaposition may be interpreted as a form of poetic dissent from the teachings and traditions of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, in turn representing a rhetorical rebellion that undermines the efficacy of Rossetti’s linguistic aesthetic. In just a fraction of the lines, Siddal can convincingly portray the ironic nature of the artist’s relationship with his muse and represents a “fleshly” relationship devoid of the ekphrastic fetishization Rossetti was prone to employ when discussing the woman’s body. Both “The Blessed Damozel” and “The Portrait” use sensual language to emphasize the physicality of muses; “The Blessed Damozel” is “ungirt” with a loose robe and “hair that lay along her back,” and she leaned “Until her bosom must have made / The bar she leaned on warm (lines 7, 10, and 45–46); while “The Portrait” speaks only of her “sweet lips part[ed]” in the midst of a breath (line 7). In each of these instances, Rossetti is exhibiting complete control over his muse by projecting a specific aesthetic fantasy upon her image, ultimately controlling her legacy. Rossetti asserts that he must “make

[her memories] all [his] own” by “paint[ing] this picture” (lines 58–59). Rossetti acknowledges that the portrait he creates is not an authentic rendering, but his own interpretation of his muse’s memory; this is how *he* sees her face and how *he* renders her body. Siddal is interacting directly with this sentiment by crafting a poem that satirizes Rossetti’s presumed ownership of his muse’s body.

Christina Georgiana Rossetti also adheres to similar rhetorical conventions as Siddal, as seen in her poem “In an Artist’s Studio.” Completed in 1856, this piece is one of the most anthologized from Christina Rossetti and serves as a literary critique of her brother’s own exploitive tendencies. From the first line, Rossetti’s speaker is surveying the atelier of an artist and notes that one face “looks out from all his canvases, / One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:” (lines 1–2). From this, we know that the artist is a man and that most of his paintings feature the same woman in different scenarios: “A queen in opal of in ruby dress, / A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens, / A saint, an angel” (lines 5–7). In each of these scenarios, however, the woman is “nameless” and possesses no identity of her own (line 6). The woman reflects the artist’s vision of her. The following line reads “The same one meaning, neither more nor less” which further emphasizes the muse’s lack of autonomy.

One of the most condemning lines from Christina Rossetti’s piece reads “He feeds upon her face day and night, / And she with true kind eyes looks back on him” (lines 9–10). The word “feed” suggests the parasitic relationship between the artist and the muse, reminiscent of Siddal’s “The Lust of the Eyes,” but Christina Rossetti diverges from Siddal’s purpose by humanizing the muse rather than just condemning the artist. Rossetti emphasizes the muse’s “true kind eyes” (line 11) as opposed to Siddal’s artist that “Gaz[es] through her wild eyes” that possess a “starlike beauty” (lines 6–8). Christina Rossetti also describes the muse as “Fair as the moon and

joyful as the light: / Not wan with waiting, nor with sorrow dim; / not as she is but was when hope shone bright; / not as she is, but as she fills his dream” (lines 11–15). These final lines are in direct conversation with Dante Rossetti’s “The Portrait,” which begins with “This is her picture as she was” (line 1) and continues with the line “In painting her I shrined her face” (line 19). By placing these poems in conversation with one another—Dante Rossetti’s “The Portrait,” Elizabeth Siddal’s “The Lust of the Eyes,” and Christina Rossetti’s “In an Artist’s Studio”—readers can discern three iterations of the muse’s role in conjunction with the artist. Dante Rossetti believes the muse to be a blank canvas for the artist to project their own aesthetic fantasies upon, and Elizabeth Siddal and Christina Rossetti contradict that perspective by emphasizing the ironies of Pre-Raphaelite fetishization.

Elizabeth Siddal lived with mental illness and addiction throughout most of her life with Rossetti and the Brotherhood and coupled with the abuse and exploitation she experienced as a muse it is not surprising that these “dim phantoms” (line 13) manifested themselves within the lines of her poetry (“A Year and a Day”). Siddal’s poem “A Year and a Day” is just one example of the woman poet’s expression of her mental illness, and although writer’s biography should not supersede literary interpretation, it is impossible to separate the poet from the speaker in this instance. The poem opens with a morose aura of the passage of time, slow and tedious. Time and cadence are at the forefront in this poem, and by starting with “Slow” and repeating the word in the second line, Siddal commands that her reader to take their time with each line (line 1). “Slow” in this instance would also reference the poet’s own perception of her life: it is slowly passing her by, and she is merely an observer. Siddal recounts the early days of her “first dear love” and even measures the passing of time through her relationship; she is using the timeline of

her relationship with her lover as a means of keeping track (line 3). For Siddal, there is only before their love and after.

The speaker reminisces on her past relationship with her lover and insists that she wishes to “kiss him the old way” (line 4). The passage of time in this piece serves as a framework for the speaker’s distress; time is passing and her lover’s perception of her has changed. This sentiment, when compared to the poem’s setting in “the month of May”, suggests a conflicting image (line 6). The speaker “lie[s] among the tall green grass,” that “covers up [her] wasted face,” and “folds [her] in its bed / Tenderly and lovingly” (lines 7, 9, 10–11). The speaker is surrounded by natural beauty, which physically secures her, yet likens this moment to “grass above the dead” (line 12). Siddal’s reference to death, however, is not intended to suggest tragedy but peace. The speaker states that she is consumed by “dim phantoms of an unknown ill” that “float through [her] tiring brain,” and these “dim phantoms” are manifestations of Siddal’s mental distress (lines 13–14). The speaker recognizes that she can experience moments of peace on earth, but she is comforted by thoughts of death and a life free of pain in Heaven.

The final two stanzas of “A Year and a Day” conjure images of Ophelia and her own demise, noting a “river ever running down / Between its grassy bed” (lines 20–21) where she is “ly[ing] empty of all love” (line 29) as if in death. As previously noted, water, floral imagery, and suicide are all trademarks of the Ophelia trope, and Siddal’s inclusion of these images can be interpreted as her own conflation with the literary icon. It is worth noting, however, that this connection to Ophelia is not intended to negate the poet’s own identity but used as an iconographic device that reminisces on the “uniformed visions of [her] life” which “Pass by in [a] ghostly train” (lines 15–16). Siddal acknowledges that, just as Ophelia’s identity is tied to Hamlet’s tragedy, so is her life tied to Ophelia’s iconography.

The tendency to read poems through the biography of the poet may be problematic; however, in the case of Siddal's poetry, to read her work devoid of her experiences as a woman artist, muse, and writer with mental illness would be a disservice to the text. Elizabeth Siddal's elevation to a Pre-Raphaelite icon resulted in the immortalization of her physical body, but not her body of work. The lasting impression of Elizabeth Siddal's contribution to Pre-Raphaelite and Victorian aesthetics may continue to focus on how her body was used by the artists surrounding her, but the growing critical interest in her own oeuvre paints a promising picture for the future of her increasing prominence in the literary canon. As the previous close readings and analysis have demonstrated, Siddal's work is vastly intertextual and thematically complex, allowing for readings that both challenge and reject the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic. Elizabeth Siddal used her voice as an artist and writer to reclaim a sense of her own autonomy and exercise her talents free from the confines of the studios she was so often restricted to. To give recognition and a voice to the countless women writers who were silenced by a misogynistic canon that valued only their aesthetic worth, this contextualization and interpretation of Siddal's work, when read in conjunction with other Victorian works, demonstrates a rhetorical attempt to reclaim her body and craft a new narrative that captures the authenticity of her experiences as a woman living with mental illness. Siddal's oeuvre, along with the work of Christina Rossetti and Julia Margaret Cameron, participate in a long-standing literary tradition that both embraces the confines of Victorian femininity and rejects notions of artistic and misogynistic exploitation. Within this discourse of feminist disability studies, Elizabeth Siddal's work renounces the Pre-Raphaelite's fetishization of her ailing form, and instead dictates her authentic identity as a women poet with mental illness to make her body heard.



CHAPTER TWO: RENDERING THE 'FANTASIA' OF WOMEN'S MENTAL ILLNESS IN  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Dying,  
Is an art, Like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.

–Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus” Lines 43–45

There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—  
patched, retreaded and approved for the road,

–Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (244)

When Sylvia Plath committed suicide on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 1963, she left behind a binder containing the forty manuscripts for her final collection of poetry, *Ariel*. Plath led a life of literary notoriety because of her staunch confessional style and bold portrayals of motherhood and wifhood, but her struggle with mental illness eventually became too overwhelming for the poet, who was diagnosed with depression at twenty years old. The rights to *Ariel*, along with the rest of Plath's oeuvre, were granted to her husband Ted Hughes after her suicide, and after considerable edits and omissions by Hughes, Plath's final collection was published in 1965. As Frieda Hughes, Plath's daughter, writes in the foreword to *Ariel*, Hughes decided to remove certain poems because of the “extreme ferocity” that Plath's final poems possessed, and the opportunity these poems provided to “dismember those close to her” (Frieda Hughes xv). Although feminist disability studies resist interpretations of work based on the author's biography, within the discourse of Plath's confessional poetry, these connections are relevant. In their piece “Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration,” M.D. Uroff interprets

Plath's work as confessional because she "put the speaker herself at the center of her poems in such a way as to make her psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of her civilization" (104). Plath's work, in other words, reflects experiences that readers will find familiar, but the burden of these experiences is a result of social environment. By interpreting Plath's work, specifically her most controversial poems from *Ariel*, as confessional poems through feminist disability studies, readers are exposed to a literary discourse that authenticates the lived and traumatic experiences of women with mental illness.

The initial publication of *Ariel*, under the supervision of Ted Hughes, omitted thirteen poems because of their veiled indictments of men in Plath's life, such as family members and acquaintances (Freida Hughes xv–xvi). Ted Hughes's decision to censor Plath's creative vision after her death was rooted in a desire to preserve his reputation. Plath gained status as a literary martyr after her suicide because of the feminist themes she explored, ideas which also earned her a cult following that idolized and politicized her literary personas. Hughes faced the brunt of the public's criticism and blame for driving his wife to suicide, and although we as readers can never determine the true motives of Sylvia Plath's decision to commit suicide, the undeniably tragic circumstances that surrounded her are comparable to Elizabeth Siddal's. Also married to a prominent literary figure, Sylvia Plath's relationship with Ted Hughes was fraught with difficulty, differences of opinions, and extramarital affairs. Hughes' poem "Last Letter" even details his recollection of the night Plath committed suicide, which he spent in the same bed as the couple's wedding night, only this time with another woman. "Of all places," Hughes wrote, "Why did we go there? / Perversity / In the artistry of our fate," he concluded ("Last Letter" lines 122-25). The "Perversity" of Hughes's choice to execute his affairs within his marriage bed creates an ironic symmetry between the couple; Hughes spent the night consummating a new

relationship in a location that signified the beginning of his first marriage while Plath took her own life. Plath and Hughes's divorce was never finalized before her death—a detail that Hughes stressed regularly—but that did not prevent Hughes from moving forward.

Suddenly a single mother at the zenith of her literary career, Plath had to reconcile her identity as a writer with her obligations as a mother, ultimately preventing her from exercising her identity outside of the one that was valued by society. This is not to say that Sylvia Plath did not appreciate her role as a mother, only to point out that the gender ideologies of her culture restricted her access to the same opportunities as her husband who moved on to become Poet Laureate in 1984. The gender ideologies that Friedan denounced in her book and dominated American culture throughout the twentieth century devalued women's self-determination and intellectual achievements while they overvalued their domestic roles. Plath continually returns to the theme of her conflicting identities as a mother and a writer throughout her work.

Sylvia Plath's literary notoriety only grew following her suicide, and contemporary social movements, like the second-wave feminist movement, started to build traction within the time of *The Bell Jar* and *Ariel's* publication. The overt feminist messages that Plath expressed, although highly nuanced and personal, were appropriated by second-wave feminists as a quasi-manifesto along with her identity as a woman writer, crafting a mythos around her poetic personas. Indeed, on four separate occasions some of Plath's most devoted followers went so far as to remove the poet's married surname "Hughes" from her gravestone. Hughes responded to the vandalism by publishing a letter to the editor titled "The Place Where Sylvia Plath Should Rest in Peace" in 1989, more than twenty years after her death. In his response, Hughes repeatedly calls Plath's cultural popularity a "fantasia" and a "fantasy" that was driven by a desire to vilify him based on his wife's poetry, and his attempts to rewrite Plath's cultural narrative toward "[his] truth"

continue to usurp the woman writer's artistic agency (Hughes n.p.). In the same letter, Hughes writes:

In the years soon after her death, when scholars approached me, I tried to take their apparently serious concern for the truth about Sylvia Plath seriously. But I learned my lesson early. The honorable few who have justified my trust have been few indeed. With others, if I tried to tell them exactly how something happened, in the hopes of correcting some fantasy, I was quite likely to be accused of trying to suppress Free Speech. In general, my refusal to have anything to do with the Plath Fantasia has been regarded as an attempt to suppress Free Speech. Where my correction was accepted, it rarely displaced a fantasy. (n.p.)

It is necessary to note that Hughes's derogatory use of the word "fantasia" is rooted in his desire to separate his personal identity from the narrative that Plath's readers construct of the author's life based on her poetic personas. Based on the rhetoric of this letter, Hughes urges his readers to accept his version of events as truth and reject the "fantasy" crafted around Plath's literary personas, a fantasy that can both legitimize and trivialize the poet's legacy.

The Plath fantasia eventually evolved into a mythos about the writer's life, and because of the immense cultural notoriety of her writing after her death, her identity was fetishized by media subcultures. Plath's creative work and personal identity were appropriated by two opposing forces: Ted Hughes, who was determined to censor his late wife's work to conform to his own artistic ideals and to preserve his personal reputation, and the fans who projected their own second-wave feminist interpretations onto the Plath's work. The publicity of Plath's suicide thrust her work into the mainstream media, and because of her poetry's ability to resonate a sense of emotional familiarity within readers, her work could reside within the liminal space of

popular culture and literary elitism. In other words, her overwhelming images of violence and suffering proved common ground for both literary criticism and the everyday reader. In both instances, Plath's identity was commodified and obtained a cultural currency that allowed her "madness" to become emblematic of second-wave feminist movements, further propelling an image of violent feminist ideals after her death.

Sylvia Plath's poetic persona grapples with the expectations of mid-twentieth century womanhood and femininity to, according to critic Kathleen Margaret Lant, "*transcend* her femaleness" and the weakness that her culture associated with womanhood (Lant 633). Although Plath may not be intentionally using her writing to craft a new social order in opposition to the current one, we can explicate her work as a critique of the actual harm that this social order can inflict upon participants. Her final collection *Ariel* comprises some of the Plath's most violent and disturbing work, and the sheer emotion that bleeds through each line may be read as analogous to Siddal's own poetic tradition. *Ariel* confronts the developmental process of becoming-daughter, wife, and mother, and further explications through feminist disability studies may elucidate the tension Plath perceived between socially conditioned womanhood and professional identity.

Compared to her first published poetry collection *The Colossus* in 1960, *Ariel* retains Plath's passionate confessional style, but the poet begins to interact more with ideas of suicide and modern womanhood. "Daddy," one of her most controversial poems, combines shocking Nazi imagery in a confessional elegiac style to ultimately kill the image of the father. Plath's own father died when she was only eight years old, and as a female writer fully immersed within a patriarchal society, Plath concludes that the only way to fully liberate herself as an artist is to destroy the father figure. The poem opens with an image of the speaker living "like a foot" (line

3) under her father's control, even after his death, and Plath's use of violent language coincides with a desire to de-feminize her speaker. Plath's ability to write according to a masculine tradition as a woman demonstrates her association of patriarchal language with power, but the overarching feminist themes of "Daddy" appropriate violent and masculine language to craft a persona that rejects the expected passivity of women. The speaker herself rebels against her previous passivity by acknowledging her previous fear, "You do not do, you do not do / Any more, black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo" (lines 1-5), but this fear has culminated to frustration and an eventual call to action with the line "Daddy, I have to kill you" (line 6). The "black shoe" is a symbol of patriarchal authority and male professionalism, and by killing her father the speaker is creating a professional space for herself free from misogynistic gender ideologies (line 2).

One of the most disturbing characteristics of this poem, along with others by Plath, is her tendency to use Holocaust and Nazi imagery as a metaphor for her oppressive patriarchal society. The speaker interacts with these ideas in the sixth and seventh stanzas which read:

It [my tongue] stuck in a barb wire snare.

Ich, ich, ich, ich.

I could hardly speak.

I thought every German was you.

And the language obscene

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew.

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

I began to talk like a Jew

I think I may well be a Jew. (Lines 26–35)

Here, the speaker uses language that readers may find uncomfortable, but Plath's intentions to cause discomfort are to relay the speaker's loss of identity and dehumanization at the hands of the patriarchy. Plath's use of violent language and images, therefore, become a way for her to reject rhetorical conventions and distinguish herself and her writing as one to be "taken seriously" by her male readers. Although we can see in her imagining of an approving masculine readership who will take her work seriously because of its 'masculine' language, we can also see her awareness of her own capitulation to that status quo. Through the years, Plath's corpus has earned a reputation that devalues its literary merit because of her predominantly female readership. In their published conversation, Arielle Greenberg and Becca Klaver even confront the assumption that Plath's fanbase is comprised of "the teenage girl reader/ writer ... wallowing in self-pity," and that the reader's appreciation of Plath usually "ends with adolescence" (180). The notion that Plath's work should not be interpreted critically because of its readership diminishes the social impact of Plath's work. By using violent and masculine rhetoric, Plath's speaker projects a violent desire to be heard by her masculine oppressors. The poet's desire for male validation is not a reflection of anti-feminist ideals, but a desire to be perceived as a successful woman writer despite her gender. Plath's use of gendered language can be interpreted as an attempt to come to terms with the gendered ideology she was raised within, and the lines that read "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you" finally allows for Plath's literary persona to peer through the veil of internalized misogyny (lines 48–50). Her "fascist" father is the quintessential male figure that thrives within an environment rooted in violence and brutality (line 48). For Plath to render a persona that

challenges the cultural perception of masculinity, she must use a rhetoric that reflects the seriousness of the matter, which in this instance should be images of the insurmountable tragedy of the Holocaust. For Plath's speaker to sever her dependency of her father, she must erase her internalized dependency of him.

If "Daddy" is a destruction of masculine oppression and the father figure, "Lady Lazarus" is an embrace of self-destructive thoughts in hopes of rebirth. Like "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus" is a poem that uses violent and assertive language to situate the speaker within a position of power to portray self-destructive actions. The poem itself explores suicidal behavior to end one life in hopes of achieving a spiritual and physical rebirth. The speaker is meant to appear threatening to those who witness her self-destruction as entertainment, but the speaker is "featureless, fine," (line 8) and "smiling" on the outside to portray a sense of normalcy (line 19). The dark and suicidal musings are thoughts that only exist inside of the speaker, under her clothes. The speaker's covering is both physical and emotional protection from the "peanut-crunching crowd" that makes a spectacle of her death (line 26). The audience watches as they "unwrap [her] hand and foot—" for "The big strip tease" (lines 28–29). This state of undress is meant to be provocative to the audience, but the speaker's nakedness is an action that strips the body of the performative femininity that oppressed her. But the "strip tease" (line 29) is a theatrical act meant to seduce the crowd, not a "self-defining" action "designed to please or to appease her viewers more than to release herself" (Lant 653). Plath uses nakedness as a manifestation of the exploitation that she experienced as a woman artist, putting her bare body on display for readers to objectify and eroticize. Although she shares her writing intentionally, the male reader's tendency to disregard her art—which is also her body, her "hands," "knees," "skin and bones" (lines 31–33)—as inconsequential delineates her frustration as a woman writer. The speaker's



naked body in this instance is not used as a metaphor for sexual liberation, but a representation of the fetishization of women artists and their work.

The poem's title, "Lady Lazarus," is a reference to the Biblical story of Lazarus, who Christ resurrected. Resurrection is a central theme of this poem, and Plath's own struggles with depression and suicide are compared to an act of artistic expression. Previous suicide attempts are described using a combination of feminine symbols and gross objects. In the second suicide attempt, the speaker "rocked shut / as a seashell" and they had to "pick the worms off [her] like sticky pearls" (lines 39–42). Seashells and pearls, objects typically associated with femininity, purity, and beauty, are appropriated in these lines to represent the murk of patriarchal oppression that invade the speaker's body; the closed shell is representative of her desire for isolation, and the "sticky pearls" are actually "worms" that begin to break down her body in death. Perhaps two of the most widely recognized stanzas from "Lady Lazarus" read:

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call. (Lines 43-48).

And art is created as a reflection of human emotion to evoke reactions from an audience. Just as Millais's *Ophelia* makes art and a spectacle of suicide and madness, the death of Plath's speaker is also a performance. The "art" is a violent representation of suicidal desires in hopes of achieving something more in a new life—as if the suicide attempt will provide her with a fresh

start. Plath's speaker does not want the aestheticized death of the Pre-Raphaelites, but a memorable almost-death to serve as a painful expulsion of the exploitation she experienced at the hands of an oppressive social order. The speaker wishes to be reborn through death to create a social order in which *she* is the violent aggressor, not the audience that exploits her.

"Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" explore the sexual exploitation that women writers endure, but Plath's poem "Barren Woman" examines the ideological expectations projected on women to enact their roles as mothers. Feelings of emptiness, dissatisfaction, and shame are at the forefront in the first stanza which reads:

Empty, I echo to the least footfall,  
Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas.  
In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself.  
Nun-hearted and blind to the world. Marble lilies  
Exhale their pallor like scent. (Lines 1–5)

The image of a desolate museum is used to portray the same hollow feeling of a woman who cannot conceive; she maintains an outward appearance of beauty and function, but the speaker's emptiness is only a reminder of the role that she cannot fill. Architecturally the museum possesses the foundation expected of the space, save the statues that it houses. Although the fountain is functional, it "leaps and sinks back into itself," alluding to the fact that the speaker is unable to spread new life (line 3). The objects that exist within this space are sallow and lifeless, images that express sterility and death, like "marble lilies" with a "pallor like scent" (lines 4–5). The references to both flowers and water evoke a Pre-Raphaelite space and images of Ophelia, but the speaker mourns not for the loss of her life but the life that she is unable to create. Plath's

use of a beautiful, yet ineffectual, space reflects a sorrow comparable to a woman unable to fulfil her role as a biological mother; through the eyes of the poet, this woman is to be pitied.

The second stanza interacts with the *potential* of motherhood as opposed to the first stanza's acceptance of a barren life. The speaker "imagines" herself as the "Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos" (lines 6–7). The Nike and Apollos, or daughter and sons, reside inside of the womb of the museum's rotunda, where the speaker also imagines a "great public" to admire her offspring (line 6). The need for public acknowledgement drives the speaker's desire, and because she is unable to fulfil one of her predetermined roles—daughter, wife, and mother—she is othered by her social order. The Barren Woman, therefore, becomes disabled by her inability to conceive and must come to terms with her body where "nothing can happen" (line 8).

Plath herself did become a mother, and yet the motherhood rendered in "Magi" portrays a similar discouragement as "Barren Woman." The infant's face is described as an "ethereal blank" and "as pure as boiled water" with an expression that is as "Loveless as the multiplication table" (lines 3, 7, and 8). These descriptions of emotional separation between a mother and her child embody the speaker's own desensitized conception of motherhood. Even though the speaker can biologically reproduce, she is still dissatisfied by her life and disenchanted by her social order, and wonders "What girl ever flourished in such company?" (Line 18). The mother figures in both "Barren Woman" and "Magi" represent a consistent emotional dissatisfaction because of the unrealistic and gendered expectations of their societies for both women who conform and reject their roles.

Despite the professional acclaim that she received in her life, Sylvia Plath's suicide only caused the "fantasia" that surrounded her identity and work to grow, further mystifying her as

literary output. Her associations between violence, masculinity, and feminist rebellions are evident in her poetry, and by freeing her poetic personas from the confines of internalized gender ideologies, readers may themselves recognize their own dissatisfaction with pre-determined social roles. Her poems gave a voice to the underrepresented and ostracized women who refused to conform to the roles expected them, and instead of conforming to the popular forms of mid-century America, she used her poems as a territory to negotiate the conflicting personas within her: that of daughter, wife, and mother, and that of artist. Plath's clear contention between her identity as a woman and a writer manifest within the violence of her poetry, and the fantasia of her death made a spectacle of her work. The autobiographical and confessional nature of Plath's work provide ample material for readers to project their own fantasy of the writer, but the tendency to radicalize Plath's poems as second-wave feminist manifesto can undermine the more complex readings of her work as representations of women's mental illness within a social collective that avoided acknowledging their existence.

#### Reading *The Bell Jar* through Feminist Disability Studies

The popularity of literary representations that chronicle the mental breakdowns of creative minds is not a new trend, and neither is the fantasia surrounding the writer's biography. As we have previously seen, writers may acquire a cultural currency after death, and in the case of Sylvia Plath, her literary identity broadened past her origins as a columnist and poet. Published in London only a month before her suicide, *The Bell Jar* represents a cultural flashpoint for the madwoman trope, and Esther's own complex relationship with sexuality and autonomy plays a crucial role in her infamous mental decline. Like the feminist messages of her poetry, Plath's novel explores the systemic patriarchal oppression of mid-century American gender ideologies and their effect upon the woman artist. An inability to reconcile domestic

identities with creative personas can trigger emotional breaks, and within Plath's novel, Esther's madness can be traced to her inability to conform to her social role as a wife and mother and her desire for creative fulfilment. Although some readings consider Plath's novel through her biography, this interpretation will explicate *The Bell Jar* using the same feminist disability studies theoretical framework as the previous discussion of her poetry, positioning Esther Greenwood as a twentieth century Ophelia.

Plath's novel is set in 1953, "the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs" (1). Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were a Jewish-American couple accused of betraying governmental secrets to the Soviet Union; a crime that—like betraying one's gender ideologies—is punishable by electrocution. The rhetoric that surrounded Cold War America was rooted in the capitalist ideologies that distinguish the US from the communist countries like the USSR, and one component of that was the propaganda of the nuclear family. Esther in turn associates shock, both electroshock and emotional shocks, as a punishment for her inability to conform to her post-war patriarchal society. The bombardment of news regarding the Rosenberg's executions triggers a divide between Esther's thoughts and emotional response, causing her to wonder "what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. I thought it must be one of the worst things in the world" (1). Esther's early self-destructive thoughts and her fixation with the Rosenberg's prompted her to recognize that "something was wrong" with her mind (2). Immediately within the novel, Esther demonstrates a fascination with death and electrocution that foreshadows her fate.

Narratives that chronicle women's mental illness, such as Plath's *The Bell Jar*, use the intellectual liberation of female characters as an indicator of their social nonconformity, and both Sylvia Plath and her protagonist Esther Greenwood interact with this tradition by using their

creative writing to craft literary alter egos that mirror their own experiences. Esther's internship with *Ladies' Day* magazine initiates her mental decline. Esther's nineteenth summer allows her to experience the pleasures of an independent woman who is permitted to refine her professional and social skills through an acceptable outlet: an internship domestic women's magazine.

*Ladies' Day* concerns itself with subjects of typical femininity such as beauty, gossip, and domestic duties, and Esther immediately situates herself against the other girls who "hang around New York waiting to get married to some career man or other" (Plath 4). To Esther, these girls "seemed bored as hell," and "make [her] sick" because of their disinterest in living lives outside of their social spheres (4). Esther distinguishes herself from the typical young woman immersed within the inherent patriarchy by emphasizing her professional aspirations. To Esther, writing and motherhood were antagonistic. Elaine Showalter considers the division between "creativity and femininity [as] the basis for her schizophrenia," and combined with the constrictions of her sexuality, Esther's mental decline reflects a common experience of many post-war women (216). Writing and creativity are typically associated with masculinity, and by positioning herself against the frivolity of her female peers, Esther established herself as an "awakened" woman that can operate within the liminal space between the gender binary.

Plath's novel also interacts with images of water and themes of sexual maturation, both of which are concepts associated with the Ophelia trope. Returning to the Victorian gender ideologies that served as a basis for twentieth century housewife culture, women were expected to remain chaste until marriage to preserve their purity, and Esther's obsession with physical cleanliness can be interpreted as a manifestation of the misogynistic behaviors that were inherent to her culture. Within Esther's social confines, sexual intercourse was perceived as a task that women were expected to perform for male pleasure and biological reproduction. This is not to

say that women were not acknowledged as sexual beings, only that they were dissuaded from acting upon or advertising these impulses within the public sphere. Plath's image of the bell jar even evokes this same sense of performance and female commodification. The objects underneath the bell jar become suffocated within their permitted environment, and although they have a view of life outside, they are entrapped within a crystal tomb of oppression.

Young women were expected to play the role of an object of desire for men to obtain, physical beauty, and physical cleanliness portrays a sense of sexual purity. Esther's obsessive and ritualistic bathing routine demonstrates her association between socialization and filth. For example, Esther participates in a dissociative night out with her friend, Doreen, while in New York. Throughout the evening Esther and Doreen both assume false identities and celebrate with alcohol, men, and dancing. Once Doreen and a man, Lenny Shepherd, become physically intimate in front of Esther, she becomes uncomfortable and returns to her apartment for a bath. "There must be quite a few things a hot bath won't cure, but I don't know many of them," Esther states (Plath 19). Esther only feels emotionally and physically drained once she sheds the identity of Elly Higginbottom, and the bath is an attempt to physically sooth and wash away the grime of her actions, running her alter ego down the drain. Esther thinks to herself:

I feel myself growing pure again. I don't believe in baptism or the waters of Jordan or anything like that, but I guess I feel about a hot bath the way those religious people feel about holy water. I said to myself: 'Doreen is dissolving, Lenny Shepherd is dissolving, New York is dissolving, they are all dissolving away and none of them matter anymore. I don't know them, I have never known them, and I am very pure. All that liquor and those sticky kisses I saw and the dirt that settled on my skin on the way back is turning into something pure' (Plath 20).

Here, Esther's bathing ritual gives her physical comfort; she is soothed by the idea that her immoral actions that evening could be "dissolved" along with the outside world, only to leave behind a fresh, new, clean body to try again the next day. It is the outside world and influences that corrupt her mental well-being, until finally she steps out of the tub feeling "pure and sweet as a new baby," fully christened as Esther Greenwood once again (20).

Furthermore, the iconographic implications of a woman immersing herself within a body of water as a signification of death or rebirth is not a new image within the visual tradition. We may be reminded of Millais 1852 rendering of Siddal as Ophelia, who herself was confined to a bathtub while posing for the painting; or of Frida Kahlo's painting *What the Water Gave Me* from 1938. This self-portrait of Kahlo is interpreted as a biographical painting, with Kahlo's toes just breaking the surface of the water. Above the hidden contours of her legs are numerous, seemingly unrelated, symbols that represent the narrative of the artist's identity. Surrounding a visual narrative of icons that embody Kahlo's life—a skyscraper erupting from a volcano, a portrait of her parents, and a dead bird on top of a barren tree among others—are a woman's naked body pulled underwater by a noose, and a floating Tehuana gown, both rendered in a visual style that mimics Millais's. Surrounding both the woman and the dress are various floral pieces that interconnect some icons with others, perhaps used to connect this figure with her natural world as well. Liza Bakewell interprets Kahlo's landscape as "a surface not of the imaginary, not of images of the unified self, but a landscape in which conflict is portrayed and problematized. There was nothing passive about this landscape/ woman" (179). Kahlo, who was physically disabled during her youth from both polio and a trolley car accident, also suffered from mental illness and an inability to biologically conceive a child. While a larger project may take Kahlo's artistic identity as a disabled woman of color into consideration within the larger



conversation of the Ophelia trope, here we can recognize the interdisciplinary, intertextual, and transnational influences of the Victorian Opheliacs upon iconographic visual culture.

Esther's obsession with cleanliness reemerges in chapter six, in which she recalls a weekend trip to visit her boyfriend, Buddy, at medical school. During this visit, Buddy takes Esther to watch a live birth, when another student tells Esther that she "oughtn't see this" because she would "never want to have a baby" if she did (65). This assumption—along with Esther's own description of the scene as one filled with physical pain and emotional detachment, and chaos—contributes to her perception of ideal womanhood as something abhorrent. Esther describes the mother giving birth as having "an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs" and making an "unhuman whooping noise" (65-66). This description is far from the typical romanticized depictions of childbirth that tend to emphasize the intimate bond between mother and child, and the admiration of maternal labor. Esther imagines her own labor to resemble something completely different from what she just witnessed: "I had always imagined myself...dead white, of course, with no makeup and from the awful ordeal, but smiling and radiant, with my hair down to my waist, and reaching out for my first little squirming child" (67). Esther's description of a laboring mother resembles a Pre-Raphaelite feminine aesthetic; she pictures herself as "dead white" with long and loose hair, like an alternate-Ophelia that survived her madness (67). Once Buddy asks Esther her thoughts on the ordeal, she replies "Wonderful ... I could see something like that every day" (67). Esther's lie is a reversion back to her performative identity, in which she must repress her true feelings in favor of projecting a persona that suits her social circumstances.

Esther's attraction to Buddy is also a manifestation of her obsession with cleanliness. After watching the birth scene together, Esther asks Buddy if he had ever had sex, which he

responds without hesitation “Well, yes, I have” (70). Buddy’s reputation as a young man who “came from such a fine, clean family” and that was “so athletic and so handsome and so intelligent” is also a reflection of his own public persona. The truth—that Buddy was seduced by an older woman while on vacation in Cape Cod—diminishes his status as a potential marital partner for Esther, who assumed he was “saving himself for when [he] gets married to somebody pure and a virgin like you [Esther]” (69). This interaction allows Esther to realize that a man’s virginity is not something that is coveted by her social structure the same way a woman’s is. Men are permitted to participate in sexual acts for pleasure, while women should abstain until marriage as a show of restraint. But it was not the idea of Buddy having sex with another woman, or even his vulgar justification for it—that the woman was “free, white and twenty-one”—that upset Esther (72). Esther is upset because of Buddy’s “pretending [she] was so sexy and he was so pure, when all the time he’d been having an affair with that tarty waitress and must have felt like laughing in my face” (71). Esther is irritated by her feelings of inadequacy and sexual inexperience compared to someone who’s public persona is so ingenuine and so convincing. While Esther wishes to portray a public persona that projects confidence, experience, and power, the reality that she remained a virgin is, to her, embarrassing. Esther’s purity, which she carried like an albatross that stifled her own liberation, is now something that she no longer must defend.

Esther’s incentive to earn sexual experience to inspire more of her writing also allows her to begin blurring the division between her public and private personas. One of the most recognizable and widely quoted passages from Plath’s novel is her allegory of the fig tree, which reads:

I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and the other fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. 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. (77)

This predicament that Esther is describing is the pressure women experience when faced between the choice of wife and motherhood, or the life of a woman creator. While men are allowed the luxury of multitudes, the women in Esther's society are limited to one defining action, an action that can also dictate whether they are accepted or ostracized by their collective. Esther recognizes that she may be allowed options and aspirations for her life, but these options, as Nóra Séllei points out, contribute to her schizophrenia and mental downfall (128). This is not to say that Esther is presented with an overwhelming number of realistic professional options, but to point out that these aspirations, when in direct opposition to the social order, could lead to "the basic existential experience of the self's alienation from the body" to forge an "impossibility of reconciliation, or any harmony between the female body and the creative mind" (128). In

other words, Esther's warring identities—that of writer and future-wife—are unable to coexist within the same body.

Perhaps a cognitively *unintentional* attempt at suicide, the scene in which Esther swims out to a buoy proves an interesting juxtaposition to Ophelia's drowning, which was "as one incapable of her own distress" (Shakespeare 4.7.178). In a scene where she risks her life to push her body to its physical limits, Esther continues to push her body further and further until her "heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in [her] ears" (158). Esther's chant "I am I am I am" roots her psyche within her physical body serves as a reminder of her own power (158). Here, there are no clashing identities or fears of rotting figs; only Esther's mind responding to the adrenaline created by her body.

Esther's decision to perform her final suicide attempt in her home's cellar reflects a desire to reject her previous rituals of cleanliness. The cellar is cramped, "dim," full of "rotting fireplace logs" and "cobwebs that touched [Esther's] face with the softness of moths" (169). Ophelia may have perished surrounded by the flowers and water that enriched her home at Elsinore, but Esther wants her body to be consumed and enveloped within the womb-like safety of her childhood home. "It was completely dark," Esther remembers, "I felt the darkness, but nothing else ... someone was moaning. Then a great, hard weight smashed against my cheek like a stone wall" (170). Esther's rescue passes by in a blur, but to readers it may mirror that of a birth. Esther is consumed by darkness, until a bright light bleeds into her womb-protection and she's greeted with a weight on her cheek, like a doctor striking the first breath from a newborn; but instead of sobs, "a voice cried. 'Mother!' (171). This cry, presumably from Esther, announces her resurrection into a new phase of her life. From this moment on, in the novel Esther will undergo "treatments" for her schizophrenia, including electroshock therapy, only to

be faced with a grueling road to recovery that relies on Esther's own *desire* to heal. "There ought to be," Esther thought, "a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (244). But while they may not be a ritual to rise from the dead, like a new Lady Lazarus, Esther's medical treatments and scientific analysis only left her with more questions about her mental illness; however, two things were certain: Esther had plans, and marriage was not one of them. Esther's desire to reconcile her two personas—one creative the other domestic—was impossible. Her decision to undergo social ostracization proved the riper of the two figs, and by listening to the "old brag of [her]heart," and declaring "I am I am I am," Esther was free to explore her new persona firmly within her own body, free from the confines of her social obligations and reflective of her true desires (243).

Sylvia Plath's identity as a writer, mother, and woman living with mental illness became, as mentioned earlier, usurped by two opposing public forces which instilled their own predispositions of the poet. Ted Hughes's literary reputation was just as susceptible to the mid-century Plath fantasia as the poet herself, but his decision to sanitize and censor his late wife's final corpus only proved the very ideological tensions Plath's work explored. By explicating Plath's final poems through the personalization of each persona, we can discern the emotional toll that mid-twentieth century American gender ideologies took on women who were not able to conform. While "Barren Woman" and "Magi" use a persona that must reconcile cultural expectations of motherhood with disability—physical and mental— "Daddy" perceives the oppressive childhood with an overbearing father figure as a "disabling" experience which prevents the speaker from achieving her own identity, thus "killing" the father to initiate a rebirth. "Lady Lazarus" denotes both a physical and a spiritual rebirth from self-inflicted death, and like a phoenix rising from the ashes, the speaker is reborn with a new and powerful persona

to “eat men like air” (line 84). The speaker lives again only to destroy what weakened her in her past life. Esther Greenwood experiences a similar rebirth, only her death is not rendered as “an art,” but as a physical manifestation of her cultural misconceptions. Her cleanliness and purity are no longer used as ritualistic practices to maintain her public persona, and only by crawling back into the dark and dirty confines of the childhood traumas that defined her conception of gender ideologies, could Esther reemerge from the womb and re-orient herself within the world. The mythic fantasia that surrounds both Plath and her many literary personas complicates this evolution of the Ophelia trope for public consumption because of the elevation of the writer from human to literary sainthood after her death; her mental illness becomes sensationalized and conflated with her speaker, making the two interchangeable within the public sphere. Just as Elizabeth Siddal was conflated with Ophelia, so was Plath with Esther Greenwood.

## CONCLUSION: OPHELIA'S AFTERLIFE: TOWARDS A NEW RENDERING OF WOMEN'S MENTAL ILLNESS

Madness, not just physical abuse, was the punishment for too much talk if you were female. Yet even as this fear of madness haunted me, hanging over my writing like a monstrous shadow, I could not stop the words, making thought, writing speech. For this terrible madness which I feared, which I was sure was the destiny of daring women born into intense speech (after all, the authorities emphasized this point daily), was not as threatening as imposed silence, as suppressed speech. Safety and sanity were to be sacrificed if I were to experience defiant speech.

—bell hooks, “talking back” (7)

Ophelia's influence has moved well beyond the Elizabethan stage, and although Shakespeare's original Ophelia may have served as little more than a plot device to further Hamlet's narrative, her story of madness, innocence, and tragedy were appropriated by literary and visual cultures as a reflection of women's mental illness throughout generations. Chapters one and two examined where the Ophelia trope achieved widespread cultural familiarity and how women's mental illnesses were rendered in the art and literature of Victorian and mid-century America; in this conclusion I consider briefly how Ophelia's influence can still be felt in contemporary culture. Ophelia's rendering by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood shifted the trajectory of Victorian aesthetics—and of Elizabeth Siddal's life. Siddal created literary personae that frequently explored feelings of loneliness and depression, and considering the poet's own history with drug abuse and mental illness, readers may understand why Ophelia's motifs reemerge within her own work. Bodies of water, flowers, loose, long hair, and the deaths of

beautiful women constituted Ophelia's iconography, and within the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, these details also became synonymous with ideal Victorian womanhood. This thesis began by asking how the aestheticization of women's madness contributed to the proliferation of British gender ideology, and one factor is social conditioning. Following the insights of Michael Foucault and the cultural studies scholarship that followed in his wake, we understand that art and literature are not merely reflective but productive of individuals' identities, beliefs, and ideals—never more so, perhaps, than in relation to gender roles. Certainly, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood's art and poetry, in idealizing and normalizing female submissiveness, helped shape their culture's gender roles. Millais's portrait and the Opheliac movement acted as a flashpoint of the aesthetic eroticization of the women's ailing form within the Anglo-American culture. By recognizing the reoccurring symbolic associations of Ophelia's narrative, we can map the trajectory of her impact through twenty-first century works to discern her role in rendering women's mental illness in art and literature along with the literary movement that empowered women with mental illness to write their own bodies.

In 1975, French feminist and philosopher Hélène Cixous urged women to reclaim autonomy over their bodies by writing them. In her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous claims:

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor the breath and speech at the same time.

Write your self. Your body must be heard. (880)



Cixous, who wrote within the Eurocentric second-wave feminist movement, has been criticized for essentializing gender binaries and failing to account for intersections of gender with race, class, etc., succeeded in politicizing language as a form of patriarchal oppression. However, Cixous's landmark essay did not consider the role that disability may play in women's writing. The "ailing or dead figure" that Cixous refers to may remind us of the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, which commonly depicted women as dead and dying, and by never acknowledging their own bodies in their writing, women may, according to Cixous relinquish their authority. If a woman does not write her body, then she has no body, and "A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can't possibly be a good fighter" (880). This radicalized rhetoric is customary to the second-wave values which Sylvia Plath's corpus was composed within, but the derogatory language that Cixous uses diminishes the literary agency of women writers with disabilities. Cixous claims that a woman without a body is "dumb, blind" and "can't possibly be a good fighter," but feminist disability studies argue otherwise (880). By "othering" women whose bodies may not be examined or celebrated literarily the same way that Cixous describes, scholars are alienating a large portion of their population. The goal of feminist disability studies, Garland-Thompson states, "is to augment the terms and confront the limits of how we understand human diversity, the materiality of the body, multiculturalism, and the social formations that interpret bodily differences ... as a category of analysis and a system of representation deepens, expands, and challenges feminist theory" (15). Just as Cixous believes, the woman's body remains a battleground for feminist criticism, but as scholarship evolves to include more diverse interpretations, so must scholars develop new discourses to represent their bodies and minds.

While I do acknowledge the Eurocentric approach that this thesis takes when discussing the art and literature of women's madness, a larger rendition of this work should include more

discussions about women writers of color with mental illness and how their experiences complicate a cultural perception of mental disability. A broader comparative approach to the topic would include a more thorough discussion of works beyond the Anglo-American tradition, like Kahlo's painting, which I discussed briefly in chapter two, or Chimiamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* from 2003 which follows protagonist Kambili through her adolescent years of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her father and her journey of emotional healing. The works of Audre Lorde and bell hooks would also enrich this discussion by contributing perspectives of race and sexuality within the conversation. Lorde's speech "The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House" confronts the importance of representation when it comes to the progression of feminist discourses. Lorde writes:

It is a particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians ... What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable. (110)

The "academic arrogance" that advocates for feminist progression while disregarding the experiences of all women, specifically minority women, may only benefit the patriarchal order. For discussions of women's mental illness to improve the cultural perception of disability, the terms that scholars use to refer to these disabilities must be augmented to approach mental illness not as something that is *wrong* with the body, but something that can be used as a "category of analysis and a system of representation" to "challenge feminist theory" (Garland-Thompson 15). Challenging feminist theory, however, does not weaken or negate the discussions that occurred

prior to the implementation of feminist disability studies; and it is these discussions that provided the foundation for a more inclusive third-wave feminist liberation.

bell hooks also interacts with cultural perceptions of women's mental illness in her essay *talking back* from 1989. In this essay, hooks examines the power of speech in relation to race and autonomy through the action of "talking back," or an act of courage when one "speaks as an equal to an authority figure" (5). hooks writes:

Madness, not just physical abuse, was the punishment for too much talk if you were female. Yet even as this fear of madness haunted me, hanging over my writing like a monstrous shadow, I could not stop the words, making thought, writing speech ... Safety and sanity were to be sacrificed if I were to experience defiant speech. (7)

The social conditioning that hooks refers to, that women writers were "disabled" and ostracized by their communities, positions literacy and argument as a demonstration of dominance for the women who practice it. For hooks, the diagnosis of madness by her society was preferable to the shame and fear she would feel if she chose to stay silent. The "destiny of daring women" to be ostracized for their inability to conform speaks to the same literary tradition as Elizabeth Siddal, Sylvia Plath, Hélène Cixous, and more.

In addition to including a more thorough discussion of representations of mental illness for women of color, a potential expansion of this project would also look at more modern interpretations of Ophelia within literature and visual culture. While reimagining Shakespeare's corpus to appeal to a contemporary audience is not a new line of inquiry, and film adaptations of *Hamlet* are recreated almost every decade, the Ophelia trope has immersed itself within the literary and visual tradition as a typecast of women living with mental illness. The past decade, specifically, has contributed texts, films, and television shows that confront the many iterations

of women's madness, and many of these new pieces reflect similar gender ideologies and iconographies that harken back to Victorian and mid-century aesthetics. From guidebooks that assist with the emotional development of young girls to cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's play, Ophelia has been appropriated by countless mediums as a symbol of mental illness and adolescent angst. Lisa Klein's young adult novel *Ophelia*, for example, reimagines Shakespeare's play from the perspective of the titular character. Published in 2006, Klein takes tremendous liberties to craft an Ophelia that twenty-first century readers may empathize with, and the writer's narrative decision for Ophelia to feign madness instead of succumbing to it demonstrates a modern exigency for empowered female characters. Although Ophelia's ability to feign madness might be read as ableist—that is the “performance” of madness could insinuate that women living with mental illnesses are unable to cope with it—her ability to recognize the misogynistic basis for eroticized madness and use it to her advantage is a testament to her desire to live. In the scene where Horatio confronts Ophelia about her plan, she responds:

I am not as I seem. I wear this guise of madness for a purpose. I may put it on and take it off at will ... I prove the common belief that a woman, being weaker in body and mind than a man, will easily run mad when stricken by grief ... it is a useful lie. (185)

Klein's Ophelia weaponizes her culture's gender ideologies by performing the role of a grief-stricken and love melancholy maiden allowed her to survive the drama, but by erasing her mental illness, Klein perpetuates a tradition that cannot, or does not, imagine a heroine who really suffers from mental illness.

Klein notes in her biography located on the novel's dust jacket that she was “always dissatisfied with interpretations of Ophelia” and wanted to “breathe new life into her story”; however, her reimagining of Ophelia's story also serves as further evidence of the grasp that the

Ophelia trope has on twenty-first-century literary culture, specifically young adults. This Ophelia is taken under Queen Gertrude's wing as a daughter, educated by the same tutors as her brother, and holds aspirations of becoming a healer before the events of the play unravel her hopes. Klein instills in her Ophelia a sense of independence and intellectual prowess to make her more appealing to young readers, and in his article "Old Tales Made New Again: Shakespeare's Place in Young Adult Literature," Mark Letcher argues that Klein's novel "demonstrates how Shakespeare continues to influence our culture, and how his stories and characters continually breathe with new life and vigor" (92). Klein's *Ophelia* maintains the overall narrative integrity of Shakespeare's play while also creating a new prototype of how a twenty-first century Ophelia would respond, in turn allowing the Ophelia trope to now embolden the character and those who identify with her.

Marketed towards the same demographic, Jay Asher's young adult novel, and the subsequent Netflix adaptation, *13 Reasons Why* confronts the uncomfortable realities and social stigmas that continue to surround discussions of mental illness even today. The novel begins with protagonist Clay Jensen receiving a box of tapes from recently deceased classmate, Hannah, who took her own life from a drug overdose. These tapes contain "the story of [Hannah's] life. More specifically, why it ended" (7). Clay listens to Hannah's story and discovers what events contributed to Hannah's depression and decision to end her own life. The tapes recount in unflinching detail how Hannah is bullied by her peers, sexually assaulted by a classmate, and disregarded by the adults responsible for protecting her. The tapes that Hannah leaves behind as a suicide note allows her to achieve some amount of control over her mental illness. Each tape is intended for a specific person who she believes played a role in her decision to end her own life, and the confessional style of the tapes may even be considered a textual rendering of her

suffering. While we may not interpret Hannah's tapes as literary or artistic, they may be interpreted as creative narratives that detail her suffering with mental illness, like Siddal and Plath's literary personas.

Although she is never given a physical description in the novel, Hannah's behavioral portrayal elicits an innocence and vulnerability that young readers may empathize with. In the Netflix adaptation, Hannah is portrayed by actress Katherine Langford, whose pale complexion, red lips, long, dark, curly hair, and large eyes are reminiscent of a Pre-Raphaelite stunner. One distinct difference between the novel and the adaptation is Hannah's method of suicide. In the novel she "swallowed a handful of pills," but in the adaptation she cuts her wrists in a bathtub (8). This disturbing scene shows Hannah fully clothed in a tub of water, holding a single razor blade. Hannah's reflection is seen on the still surface of the water as she makes the first cut, and perhaps is a stylistic choice that serves a similar purpose as the water's reflection in Frida Kahlo's painting *What the Water Gave Me*. Hannah pauses and stares at her reflection, perhaps reminiscing on her life until this point, but viewers cannot know for certain. This pause is, however, a clear indication of her hesitation and uncertainty about suicide. This scene, which has now been removed from the episode because of its disturbing content, does not romanticize or idealize suicide or mental illness as something beautiful like the Pre-Raphaelites did, but renders a realistic moment of the fear and desperation associated with mental illness that has so often been neglected by Anglo-American culture. By considering Hannah Baker's story, readers can recognize distinct similarities—such as her aestheticized death scene—that harken back to the Pre-Raphaelite renderings of Ophelia, further indicating the enduring hold that the "death of a beautiful woman" maintains as a means of cultural consumption (Poe).

Shakespeare's Ophelia remains embedded within literary and visual culture as a woman who wears many faces. She is Elizabeth Siddal, whose body was abused by the very men who gave her face eternal life; She is Sylvia Plath, whose body of work remains some of the most widely read and radicalized texts to this day; and she is every woman with mental illness that was ostracized by the same collectives that fetishized their madness. The oppressive gender ideologies of Victorian England normalized the disenfranchisement of women and romanticized the debilitated female form as an object of art. Similarly, the post-war culture of the United States undermined women's intellectual aspirations by endorsing a social structure that valued women's domestic identities over all others. To give themselves, and their gender, an opportunity to "return to the body which has been more than confiscated" from them, women writers adopted literary personas to instill agency over their own experiences (Cixous 880). While we have moved forward towards a more inclusive and empathetic mode of discussing women's mental illness in literature—towards a more multifaceted Ophelia—there is still more work to be done to give the generations of women who came before a voice in telling their own stories.

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