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Unearthing Real Women: Reclaiming Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf from Their Suicide Narratives

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Unearthing Real Women:
Reclaiming Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf from Their Suicide Narratives

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
British Literature

by

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath are two well-known women writers of the twentieth century who committed suicide. The narratives created by their deaths have in some instances become as important as the canonical work they produced. In an effort to understand their motivations and struggles, critics and the public alike have sometimes reduced these women to victims of the patriarchy, mental illness, or even themselves.

Beginning with my own discovery of this issue in the legacies of Plath and Woolf combined with my personal dealings with suicide in my family, I recount how I lost these two women as exemplary figures because of their choice to commit suicide. I then take a look at what others have said about their deaths and how it has affected their legacies as writers. Finally, I take a look at Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Plath's *The Bell Jar* for an alternate perspective on suicide. Through this journey, I recount how I have been able to regain my respect for these two talented women by considering multiple viewpoints and acknowledging the nuance inherent in any account.

Mrs. Dalloway, Virginia Woolf, *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath, suicide, biographical criticism, autobiographical criticism, reader response, victimization, reduction, mental illness

Chapter 1: My Journey Beyond the Legacy of Suicide

“Why did Virginia Woolf kill herself?” asks Sylvia Plath in her diary from the 3rd of November, 1952 (*Unabridged Journals* 151). For Plath, a writer looking to Woolf as a female role model and literary predecessor, this was an important question to ask.

“Neurotic?” she continues as she wonders if Woolf’s writing, and possibly her own, served as “sublimation (oh horrible word) of deep, basic desires?” (151). It seems that Plath had already begun to worry about “neuroticism” in herself and was looking to Woolf as a source of guidance and inspiration (151). Six years later, Plath returned to her interest in Woolf, writing, “Virginia Woolf helps. Her novels make mine possible,” even describing her own voice as “Woolfish, alas, but tough” (315). From such comments, one would think she had made peace with Woolf’s apparent neuroticism and suicide.

It is not uncommon for writers to look to their predecessors for insight and inspiration. For women writers, whose foremothers have been few, that search is more complicated. Woolf herself made a concerted effort to locate her own literary foremothers, looking particularly to George Eliot. In her essay on this literary relationship, Alison Booth writes, “We see how Woolf devised a biographical reading of her predecessor that offered a possible reconciliation of the woman who suffers with the mind that creates, thus freeing herself to think back through Eliot” (Booth 95). If it is true, as Woolf says, that “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers,” then Woolf, in appropriating Eliot, is seeking a relationship to Eliot much like a daughter seeks direction and guidance from her mother (*Room* 97). Decades later, we see Plath doing something similar with Woolf herself.

In a *Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes about the importance of locating models for female writers at a time when many women were forced to look for models among the male writers who were esteemed at the time. Woolf differentiates between female and male forms of talent, their strengths and weaknesses, their varied interests and concerns, and asks that women muster the courage to be true to themselves and their sex. Woolf writes, "it is much more important to be oneself than to be anything else" (*Room* 111). Woolf calls for a new tradition of women writers who take pride in their creative voices and do not let society's expectation that they conform to traditional gender roles destroy their drive to create. And as she does so, she writes as a woman "who is modestly, earnestly trying to illuminate life by the reading of books" and hopes that her experience, "a woman's experience, the experience of life in houses and not on the broad thoroughfares, really has some interest" (Rose 42, 67).

In her reflections on the model Woolf offers, Plath acknowledges a significant problem for women writers seeking guidance from their literary foremothers: the complications of mental illness and suicide, which have loomed large in the legacy of important women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While Plath was able to move past Woolf's suicide to draw upon other more exemplary elements of Woolf's life, many popular representations of these women's lives and even some literary viewpoints today do not look much beyond Woolf's and Plath's suicides. The tendency to fixate on the female suicide has affected how many women writers are remembered within and outside of academia. A glaring example is a recent controversial photo shoot. For a spread to be titled "Last Words," *Vice* magazine photographed seven literary women of the twentieth century who had committed or attempted suicide (Gallagher).

The image recreating Sylvia Plath depicted a model in designer clothes posing in a kitchen, kneeling in profile in front of an open oven. Virginia Woolf was represented as a woman dressed in a typical Victorian lace dress standing shin deep in a muddy river embracing a rock as she resolutely gazes just past the camera. Other women featured in the spread were historian Iris Chang, novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, poet and writer Dorothy Parker, beat poet Elise Cowen, and Taiwanese author Sanmao. The spread was to include each author's name, date of birth, date of death, and the credits for the clothes the model was wearing (Gallagher).

Suicide is a delicate subject and a growing public awareness of the role that mental illness plays in suicide makes the issue even more complex. The most disturbing aspect of the *Vice* spread was its simplification of the issue, its complete absence of words. There was not even a brief biography of the women or a sampling of their writing. Despite their achievements as artists, the sensational nature of their deaths was all that seemed to matter. Ultimately the spread was pulled from the issue. Amid the controversy, *Vice* apologized and sought to explain their intention with the spread's content. But what does this incident say about the larger issue of women writers whose work and personalities are overshadowed by their suicides? Why do we fixate on their deaths instead of focusing on their life's work? What are the repercussions of this fixation on suicide? What do we lose?

When suicide overshadows the legacies of women such as Woolf and Plath and causes their words to become of secondary importance, female writers lose powerful models of women's writing. We lose our literary foremothers. These attempts at explaining suicide, what I will call "suicide-as-victim narratives," are often reductive and

create a warped view of the person they revolve around. To stop at the knowledge of suicide leaves other more useful information unconsidered and creates a distorted image of these writers. While most writers are judged by the quality of their work, the act of suicide causes focus to move from their work to judging their life and work based on their deaths. The life of the writer, which can provide useful insight into the work, is reduced to its termination and given too much value. Analysis of the writing inevitably suffers. Such narratives not only allow the reader to possibly misjudge Plath and Woolf, but also to end up devaluing their work.

These questions have not only intellectual significance but also a very personal significance to me. I have wrestled with them in my own discovery of Woolf and Plath, as their suicides have threatened to unseat them from the place of esteem they held in my mind. When I first encountered each of them, I was inspired by their powerful writings. Only later was I introduced to their suicides, in each case through popular representations that sensationalized their deaths and made me question the value of their lives and writings. I experienced the painful loss of these two potential mentors and have had to work hard to rediscover the respect I once had for them.

What does my personal journey matter, the trained scholar in my head asks. After years of education in the art and craft of proper essay writing on literary subjects, I had assumed that the best writers always keep a scholarly distance; no first-person allowed. To defend my reliance on the personal here, I defer to Nancy Miller who sees autobiography as “a different way of doing theory” (qtd. in Williams 86). Miller also talks about the necessity of extending the personal in such a way that it gains wider significance, and in my case, I have found that my own experience can generate larger

truths to share with my contemporaries, particularly other women who similarly struggle with the legacies of Plath's and Woolf's suicides. And like Miller, I find that the ideas that are "shared and shareable [...] only make sense to me if I can tell a collective story" (88). What is personal to me allows me to relate to so many others and, as I look outside my experience for understanding, to connect to a much wider collective experience. It allows me to speak to those who may be asking similar questions from different vantage points.

Beth Sutton-Ramspeck offers another helpful explanation for such personal connection in her study of Mary Ward, a Victorian Brontë scholar. She examines Ward's understanding of the personal and uncovers the value she places on writers, such as the Brontës, for the glimpse of the personal in their work. This glimpse causes readers to establish a connection to the author through their stories. In her criticism, Ward strove to show that to stray from the "objective" viewpoint that so many (particularly male) scholars relied upon "offers significant insight" (Sutton-Ramspeck 58). Such an approach departs from the traditional view that the author and the work are separate entities and that the biography of the author should not be used to inform an analysis of the work. She points out that "feminists have generally questioned the absolute separation of literature from author and reader," and that they are often interested in an author's "struggle in those words to express a personal experience, and [...] the way the words bring a reader into intense contact with that experience" (63, 73). These elements that often occur in women's writing explain the greater sense of attachment between the work and the reader and subsequently between the reader and the author. Plath's poetry and Woolf's fiction

reveal the minds and hearts of these two passionate, intelligent women. And it is this personal depth of their work that connected me to them as literary foremothers.

Now this is tricky, for while I advocate for autobiographical criticism in the hope that those in favor of scholarly distance will excuse a venture into my personal life as I examine these two women writers, I am critical of those scholars who use the authors' lives—focusing mainly on their suicides—to judge, and often overshadow, their writing and their legacy. For one cannot deny the unique perspective that all scholars bring to their subjects, and clearly the scholars who are fixated on the “suicide narratives” of Plath and Woolf have every right to approach their subject from their own particular perspectives. What I advocate, then, is merely that we not stop at our personal responses, but seek to consider the complexity of the larger truth of these women's lives and their writing. Just as my experience produced a strong reaction to these women's suicides that led to the second stage of my reading of their work (a stage marked by shock and disappointment and devaluation), it was not until I saw the need to step back from that view and consider possibilities outside of my experience or understanding that I was able to see these women and their work more accurately.

My next section will recount some of these limiting responses, and I will offer a counter perspective, not in an effort to prove anyone's observations wrong but in an effort to understand more fully responses that are so colored by the critics' reactions to female suicide and how they distort the legacies of Plath and Woolf. But first let me acquaint you with my own journey and my effort to step back and consider a more complete picture that does proper justice to these women, because, as I have stated, the

personal is very much tied to how we create meaning and relate to the world outside of ourselves.

My first impressions of Virginia Woolf came from her essay “A Sketch of the Past.” As a young woman, imagining myself a writer trying to make sense of my experience in life, I immediately related to her words regarding the “shock” of experience “followed by the desire to explain it”:

It is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. (*Moments of Being* 72)

Not knowing much about Woolf, these words struck me as courageously positive and helped to create the ideal of a woman dedicated to her own writing partly as a stay against experiences that threatened to overwhelm her. Woolf had found that by dedicating herself to the project of documenting her life and its impressions, she could turn those threatening experiences and emotions into art. Because I was still young and immature and lacked positive female role models, I was eager to find a heroine in Woolf’s writing. I felt an immediate affinity with this writer. Her words and the ideas conveyed by those words represented an alternative model to the women I had previously been in contact with and Woolf’s courage and ability to face a sometimes bleak reality with wit and intelligence won my immediate respect.

Sometime after reading “A Sketch of the Past,” I watched *The Hours*, a film that provided a complex homage to Woolf and her life, including her suicide. As I watched Woolf walk into the river (the image of her suicide encompassing and coloring all that occurs in the film), I was both shocked and intrigued. Shocked because I had little understanding or sympathy for her decision, which I saw as the ultimate act of selfishness. I was simultaneously intrigued because what I perceived as the selfishness of suicide defied my expectations of what a woman’s life should be, namely a life of nurturing others and selfless deference to others’ needs. The extreme brand of Christianity in which I was raised left me with rather Victorian notions about the proper role of women. Worse, her suicide seemed to contradict the idealized figure of Woolf as a writer that I had invented. In *The Hours*, Woolf’s suicide is depicted as a bold and abandoned act and that challenged my earlier vision of Woolf as a role model for my own life. Woolf had become a type of mother/heroine figure to me, but had ended her life because of a personal struggle that I could not understand. My desire to emulate her creative path in life evaporated.

About the same time that I was confronted with Woolf’s sensational suicide story, I was introduced to Sylvia Plath’s story. Familiar with some of her poetry, I admired the unapologetic angst that she conveyed in her writing. The Plath I constructed from my limited knowledge of her was intelligent, forthright, and honest. She was a woman not afraid to voice her opinion and express a sense of dissatisfaction. I respected the authority in her poetic voice, which spoke from experience and reflection, free of repressed, “unpleasant” emotions. She also seemed to be a woman I could learn something from.

After reading her novel *The Bell Jar*, I began to look further into Plath's biography and learned of her suicide. Several months later, I stumbled across the Plath biopic, *Sylvia*. Because I was aware of her suicide, it was not the event itself but rather the way that she was portrayed prior to her death that disturbed me as I watched the film. What struck me most was the juxtaposition between the courageous, fearless writer and woman I had imagined Plath to be from her writings and the haunted woman of the film who struggled with and eventually lost her battle with death and despair. Her portrayal in the film contradicted the woman I had imagined Plath to be, and in place of the strong, intuitive, and honest poet who lived in my imagination, I perceived a petty, confused, and often weak woman. I watched the brilliant but over-dramatic, almost self-destructive, Plath in the film and was again confronted with an alternative image of a woman I admired, like an undesired alter ego to my idealized heroine.

Another element of the film that bothered me was the seeming connection between her suicide and the dissolution of her marriage to Ted Hughes. This portrayal of Plath, as a woman who could not withstand the heartbreak of lost love, did not jibe with the empowered woman I sensed in her writing voice. In the maudlin scene, where she prepares to stick her head in the oven, I wondered what she might have been thinking.

Confronted with the suicides of two of my most valued heroines, I was forced to revisit my own thoughts on suicide, territory that was both uncomfortable and confusing. I had experienced first-hand how suicide casts a shadow over a person's entire life. My maternal grandfather committed suicide long before I could know him, when my mother was in elementary school. For the longest time this was all that I knew about him, and to this day I do not know much more, for this glaring act stands out so strongly in my

mother's memory that it cannot help but negatively taint everything related to him. My mother's recollections of her father swing between trying to explain his suicide—"He was physically ill, he was an alcoholic"—and revisiting her own hurt at remembering her father before his death and how these potential explanations for his later action negatively affected her as a small child. Only in passing comments by my aunts, who have their own memories, do I get any other information about this man who was their father.

Remembering that suicide, it is no wonder that learning of the suicide of the women I admired threw me for a loop. Their suicides somehow put them in league with my grandfather and other suicides whom I in no way admired. That they could take their own lives made me wonder how I could have found their work so inspiring. I struggled to keep the respect I once had for Plath and Woolf and eventually allowed these complicated women to drift to the background of my literary consciousness.

Shortly after I completed my undergraduate degree, my mother attempted suicide. I dealt with the immediate consequences and lingering repercussions of her decision the best I could and struggled to make my peace with that decision during the months following her attempt. Once again, suicide came very near and made itself impossible to ignore. Yet this time, I was not dealing with images I had created for myself, but a very real woman, whom I had struggled with for the entirety of my life. She had not been the model mother, and I had long since given up ever viewing her as a mother figure. Of course, this is why Plath and Woolf and other women like them were so important to me. Yet as I moved forward to graduate school, still struggling to find women who had something to teach me and lives that were, in some measure, worth emulating, I realized that I would have to consider alternatives that I had not previously considered. It was at

this point that I began seriously to think about suicide in a different way—and to come to a different understanding of an individual's right to determine how her life should be lived and how her life should end.

In my struggle to understand the legacy of suicide in my own family, I turned to Plath and Woolf for answers. I wanted to be able to appreciate their lives and works without allowing their suicides to overshadow and mar everything they had struggled to create. By looking past the sometimes reductive readings I found in my research and endeavoring to piece together the aspects of their personalities that shone through, I was able to answer the following questions in the affirmative. Was it possible to be inspired by a woman who ultimately committed suicide, and could I make peace with the taint of suicide on Plath's and Woolf's legacies? Is it possible to retain the female suicide as an exemplary figure?

It seems dishonest to avoid the personal connection that so influences my continued study of Woolf and Plath. Had I not been forced to deal with suicide's effect on my view of my mother, I might not have gone on to more fully uncover the inspirational women that Woolf and Plath continue to be, in spite of their suicides. My own experience with suicide has enabled me to combat the suicide-narratives that have been imposed on Plath and Woolf and has shown me the necessity of questioning the narratives that suicide invite. Without this experience in my personal life, I might have kept the distorted view that their suicides created in my head and never looked further into these women's lives. Instead, I have been able to push past my initial discomfort to unearth real women, women who represent so much in the history of women's literature and who have provided women with alternative models over the decades.

My initial reaction to Plath's and Woolf's suicides is not unique. A look at the wealth of critical responses to these women's deaths, responses sometimes personal, sometimes scientific, show reactions as varied as the people who respond. However, a common thread unfortunately persists—once suicide becomes the focus, the readings of the work and life take on the shadow of that act and suffer reduction and distortion. Suicide casts a pall over their accomplishments and for some indicates a deeper dysfunction or despair. One cannot completely divorce Woolf and Plath's writing from their suicides, but to allow this act to color every word they wrote is to skew the impact of their creative achievements and taint their voices with the pall of death.

In order to preserve these women's status as models, we must liberate them from the limiting narratives imposed on them due to their decisions to commit suicide. "Because suicide both sets a limit and opens up a gap, it enables a certain number of questions about how we construct a self, and about how we construct a narrative," writes Margaret Higonnet in her article "Frames of Female Suicide" (229). Suicide, the "essential autobiographical act" with "the suicide as enigmatic object of interpretation" avoids closure by generating subsequent narratives that others use in an effort to interpret and understand the act (229-30). By taking a look at some of these suicide-as-victim narratives and how they affect the legacies of Plath and Woolf, I will begin to construct a more complete picture of these women. By talking back to some of the more prevalent readings of their deaths, I hope to gain a more balanced picture, one less focused on despair and dysfunction but enriched by the many details and nuances that composed these complicated women who defy our attempts to define them. A deconstruction of common readings that perpetuate the narrative of victimhood that surrounds these writers

can allow Woolf and Plath to fully occupy their rightful place in our female literary heritage.

Chapter 2: What Suicide Does to a Legacy: The Reductivism of Suicide-as-Victim Narratives

When a person chooses to end their life, that choice opens up possibilities for interpreting that life. Higgonet explains, “Paradoxically, a suicide punctuates a particular life-story and provokes further stories. Because a suicide defies our understanding and eludes the social order, narratives of suicide are sites of social reconstruction. The act provokes a multiplication of interpretative approaches” (“Frames” 241). Both male and female suicides generate curiosity and narratives to explain them, but women are more often made into helpless victims of forces outside themselves.

In her essay “Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the 19th Century,” Margaret Higonnet analyzes the “tension between free will and social determinism, between autonomous affirmation of identity and the breakdown of identity” (114). Looking at literary representations of female suicide from Cleopatra to Anna Karenina, she finds a tendency for the act of suicide to be viewed as a “voluntary act [that] appears involuntary; the quest for autonomy is replaced by breakdown of identity” (114,116). Although she stops in the nineteenth century, we can see this reading of female suicides continuing into the twentieth century, particularly in the conversation surrounding the suicides of Woolf and Plath. In attempting to explain and understand their deaths, scholars continue to assume a dissolution of identity that robs them of their agency and questions their success as women, wives, and mothers. For some, suicide points to

dysfunction and because these women committed suicide they must have in some way been dysfunctional. Dysfunction implies lesser, unsuccessful women, yet these writers were far from inept or made powerless by whatever dysfunction they may have suffered, be it chemically, emotionally, or relationally. Both women lived empowered, successful lives and the way they chose to end their lives should not change our view of their legacies.

Before looking at how their suicides have colored their legacies as writers and the reception of their work, it is helpful to look at opinions of their work not informed by their deaths to establish the importance of their writing for its own sake. Virginia Woolf's thirty-year literary career ensured her mark in the literary world she so admired. With nine novels and countless other essays and writings, Woolf became "the leading woman writer of her age" (Booth 85). Her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, is "more uneven than Woolf's later works, and its charms are the charms of a first novel" (Rose 50). One of her most well-known novels, *Mrs. Dalloway*, offers "the best description of a kind of visionary state that many people in the twentieth century have experienced in other ways" with "creativity and madness" as its central subjects (126). Her unique style became more pronounced as her literary career continued and the pressure she felt to continue to write well shows up in the pages of her journals and is evidenced by the anxiety she experienced after she finished a book and waited for its reception.

Sylvia Plath, on the other hand, had a much shorter career and never saw her reputation established before she died. At the time of her death, Plath was a young mother of two, married to Ted Hughes, another famous poet. In *The New York Times*, Rosalyn Drexler talks about how Plath's death affects her legacy to such a great extent

that, “There is some controversy as to whether the dramatic details of her death brought her to prominence, or whether her present acclaim is indeed due to her talent.” Yet reaction to Plath’s early poetry before her death was positive. *The Colossus* was praised for its “complex syntax, excellent control, and technical accomplishment” (Egeland 31). The “impressive learning and craftsmanship” that her early poems exemplified were also noted for their deviation from “standard female style and repertoire” (31). Plath’s competitive and highly perfectionist nature shows through in her early writing as an intense attention to detail, a trait which may not have won her the fame she desired but at least brought respect for her talent within literary circles. The *Colossus* poems and her novel *The Bell Jar* were the only manuscripts published before her death and the early critical responses to them can be looked at before the shadow of her suicide began to affect readers’ reactions. Noted as the “first feminine novel in the Salinger mood,” *The Bell Jar* was published in England under a pseudonym and received “lukewarm reviews” (31-2). What would become even more telling is that, after her death, some noted the novel “read so much like the truth” that critics had a hard time disassociating Esther’s first person narrative from the author (31).

After Woolf’s and Plath’s deaths, it became nearly impossible for critics to assess their works apart from their suicides. Some have chosen to view Plath and Woolf’s suicides as acts of feminist rebellion against patriarchal authority or assertions of female agency in the face of masculine manipulations or coercion. Solenne Lestienne sees their suicides as responses to the “chaos of life: embracing death appears to be their answer to the harsh suffering and despair both in their lives and works” (13). Unable to find meaning and fulfillment in the options presented to them, “haunted by chaos,” these

women's deaths are reactions to forces outside of themselves. While she asserts that both women were "drawn to feminism and to rebellion against male authority," she sees this as a rebellion that cost them their lives (12). She follows the example of many scholars, who turn to Plath's and Woolf's fictional characters, and especially those female characters who commit or attempt suicide, to explain the authors' suicides: Rhoda in *The Waves* and Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar*. In these readings, critics attribute the characters' suicides to the loss of identity that results from the "scattered self" in a patriarchal system (13). While this view may initially look at the agency of feminist rebellion to explain suicide, this narrative eventually ends up translating to an ultimate loss of self that results from that rebellion. This leaves us with women not consciously choosing their paths, but helplessly reacting within a system too powerful to combat against, and this is not an idea of Plath and Woolf I can ascribe to.

Another focus of feminists' analysis is Woolf and Plath's relationships with the men in their lives. Again, Lestienne claims that Plath and Woolf were "unfulfilled in their marriages" and that this disconnect from the men in their lives contributed to the divided selves that appeared in their writings, and resulted in their suicides (12). She claims that various symptoms of male oppression directly affected their desire to continue to live.

Leonard Woolf has been criticized for his excessive care of his wife, his overly controlling nature, and his overbearing influence on her decisions; critics have even suggested that his management of her care might have contributed to her illness and suicide. Susan Kenney questions the dynamics of their relationship and suspects Leonard's "lack of insight into his wife's complicated personality" ("Two Endings" 269). Leonard consulted physicians and orchestrated her care during her illnesses. Even when

Virginia was healthy, he documented her moods and stressors, seeking to better understand his wife's illness in hopes of preventing future breakdowns and ensuring that she could continue the work that was so important to her. Yet Kenney quotes Leonard's comment that his wife's illness was due to "mental defect" and finds him lacking in "sympathy and understanding" (268). Another scholar critical of Leonard, Carolyn Heilbrun, points to Leonard's tendency to go "behind her back to the doctors, to impose upon her a regime she dreaded, [...] to decide too readily that he knew more of her needs than she knew or could understand" (18). Those who view possible coldness in her husband or his tendency to logically, not emotionally, organize their affairs as the reason for Woolf's illness or suicide are not as prevalent as those who attribute Plath's death to Ted Hughes, yet both readings accuse the writers' husbands of victimizing their wives.

Viviane Forrester in 2015 implies that the blame for Woolf's suicide should rest very strongly on Leonard's head. Analyzing the relationship between husband and wife, Forrester deduces that Leonard's issues caused him to deny certain elements of his wife's personality and as a result he did not treat her as an autonomous adult—"What was Virginia Woolf denied? Respect" (203). She also points to Woolf's suicide pact, made in fear of Hitler's invasion of Britain, and argues that "the idea of suicide is thus introduced to her, very concretely and precisely, by the champion of reason within an arena that has turned tragic" (58). Other factors such as Vanessa's "lethal letter" to Virginia, in which Vanessa makes clear how inconvenient a breakdown would be in this time of war, all work together to cause what Forrester sees as a humiliation of Woolf by those who were closest to her (199). Such accusations imply that Woolf was subject to the overbearing oppressions of others and not able to protect herself. "Virginia Woolf in isolation would

founder,” Forrester concludes as she views Leonard and Virginia’s marriage as “lives [that] run parallel but never meet” (186, 189).

Placing blame on Leonard greatly affects our view of his wife, fashioning her as a victim, and many critics are willing to see a more nuanced version of the story that allows Woolf to maintain her agency. Though Heilbrun criticizes Leonard, she does not believe Woolf’s death “was due to the treatment she received, but to a decision she had taken about life itself, and to the desperate strain of the times” (18). Heilbrun’s relationship to Woolf is a complicated one, her opinion informed by her own decision to commit suicide in her seventies. She does, however, offer a useful counter perspective to the suicide-as-victim critics. Most importantly, Heilbrun allows Woolf her autonomy and considers all that she had accomplished, including her “achievement of being fifty-five, and of finding the courage and relief to utter forbidden words” (22). She points out Woolf’s long-held brave logic that “life is not of value at any price” and sees her suicide as “a free act, a choice,” a decision made for herself “before the chance to make that decision [...] could be taken from her” (28, 30).

Virginia Woolf’s own writing speaks loudly on the subject of her relationship with her husband. “If it were not for the divine goodness of L.,” she writes, “how many times I should be thinking of death” (qtd. in Lee 314). This sentiment, among others expressed in her journals, shows Woolf’s gratitude to her husband for his stabilizing influence in her life. Never an idealist, Woolf seems to have had reasonable expectations of married life and understood what several characters in her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* acknowledge, that “one gives up something when one is married” (Woolf 66). As Phyllis Rose argues, her choice to marry showed a “willed commitment to normality” that

allowed Woolf's creativity to flourish but not overwhelm her because of the stability her relationship provided (67). She understood that while she might have given up certain things, she gained something as well, for she was "so careful a guardian of her talent" that she chose a man who allowed her to dedicate herself to her work and who did not expect her to fulfill the conventional role for a woman at that time (81). What is important here is that she was aware of the choice she was making, and made it with her eyes open, not out of desperation, but having considered her position and options. Providing even greater contrast to those who blame Woolf's suicide on marital victimization, Anne Oliver Bell finds a "certain valiancy" in Woolf's "choosing death in the hope that L, the 'inviolable centre' of her life, might continue his" (viii).

Critics question Woolf's autonomy in a similar fashion when they look at her relationship with her father, the writer and critic Leslie Stephen. Like those who blame Leonard for Woolf's suicide, these critics give Stephen responsibility that he does not deserve, implying that her life choices were a direct response to her powerlessness in her relationship with him. One such critic, Shirley Panken, focusing on the psychoanalytic aspect of their relationship, assumes that the closeness between father and daughter caused much guilt after the death of the mother, which led to many other issues (13). Such observations are useful and interesting from a psychological standpoint, but in an effort to restore Woolf to herself we must acknowledge all that she rose above alongside the potential psychological limitations she suffered. Phyllis Rose writes, for example, that Woolf's "intellectual, analytic spirit" stands as "strong proof of her identification with her father" (Rose 112). Hermione Lee points out how, as a child, Stephen's youngest daughter desired to do everything her father did, but also how, as she grew older, much

that she did “was formulated in reaction against him” (72). Years after Stephen’s death, Woolf wrote that his absence had allowed her to become who she was. If he had lived beyond her teen years and come to depend upon her care, she said, “his life would have entirely ended mine ... No writing, no books;--inconceivable” (qtd. in Lee 69). Lee also notes that Woolf was later able to “write about him as someone separate from her” and to use him as the basis for one of the characters in *To the Lighthouse* (Lee 68). By “laying a parent to rest” in such a way, she was able to move past victimization and assume the autonomy that characterized her later years. And though she undoubtedly continued to struggle with this ghost from her past, Stephen’s influence by no means sums up her story.

Contrary to one predominant narrative regarding her early years that focus on the dysfunction in her relationships with men, the “tyranny” and “sexual abuse” she suffered from her father and half-brothers, is Woolf’s early involvement with her intellectual community (Caramagno 10). In later life, she came to be closely associated with the Bloomsbury group, men and women living artistically driven lives, often in opposition to traditional Victorian values. She also developed life-long friendships with such well-known scholars and writers as Lytton Strachey and E.M. Forster, and it is through this connection that she became friends with Leonard Woolf, who would later become her husband. Yet Woolf’s feelings about what she often perceived as a men’s club certainly counters the notion that she lived a life of repression and subjugated herself to patriarchy. As a young woman surrounded by her brother’s friends from Cambridge, she experienced “disillusion with Thoby’s famous young men,” but the “competitiveness” that was a part of that world would continue to fuel her writing and her allegiances (Lee 206, 209). “Far

from forming her writing under the influence of the Cambridge graduates, she forms it in opposition to them,” placing value on her experiences as a woman and a person suffering from illness that “gave her a language and a range of feelings not available to these [...] men” (209).

Critics also look at Plath’s victimization by her father and her husband. Plath’s marriage was at an end at the time of her death. Many critics see the dissolution of this relationship as the primary cause of Plath’s unraveling. Not many go as far as Robin Morgan, who in a poem accuses Ted Hughes of Plath’s murder, but many have taken up Plath as a “cause and saw Ted Hughes as responsible for her death,” appropriating Plath as a “feminist martyr” (Hagström 37). Less radical feminists regard Plath’s marriage as an “example of the oppression women suffer in traditional marriages” and “its setbacks as symptomatic of more general problems in society” (38). In these interpretations, Plath is portrayed as the kind, submissive wife under the yoke of the egotistical, violent husband. However, anyone who has read even a small portion of Plath’s diaries or biography addressing Plath’s personality knows that this is not the whole story.

Making Plath the victim of Ted Hughes ignores the complexity of the dynamics in any marriage and puts Plath solidly in the role of the damsel who dies for lost love. Evidence from her life and her writing points to the fact that Plath was anything but that. She chose to marry Hughes and have children; those were things she wanted along with her literary fame. Looking to her journals, one sees that the two writers benefited at times from mutual support and cooperation in their work. Yes, there was competition but that can be placed as solidly on Plath’s head for her competitive nature and her desire to be as famous as her husband, and to have her hard work pay off. She expressed her moments of

pride in her husband, “I married a real poet, and my life is redeemed: to love, serve & create” (*Unabridged Journals* 346). She also acknowledged her husband’s support of her literary aspirations: “He doesn’t care about the flashy success, but about me & my writing. Which will see me through” (296). One cannot ignore the effect that the breakup of a marriage has on anyone’s happiness, and it is no wonder that this relationship is the first place that many look to explain Plath’s suicide. Yet to make Hughes the villain of the story, or his infidelity and control of Plath as the main causes of her suicide, is reductive and unfair. Her *Ariel* poems especially display the voice of a woman who has found strength and freedom in her role as a woman and an artist, and these, being the last poems written before her death, do not support the idea that she killed herself because of lost love.

The movie *Sylvia* and several biographies of Plath--Anne Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame* and Diane Middlebrook’s *Her Husband* to name but two--avoid the Ted Hughes-as-villain narrative. The film constructs a petty, jealous, insecure Plath whose actions make for an inevitable unraveling. Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame* goes the way of the film to highlight Plath’s ability to be unpleasant and abrasive and paints Hughes in a more forgiving light, while *Her Husband* takes a look at the Hugheses’ marriage and in the process shows two writers each deserving of sympathy and understanding. As Hagström says, these varied images “tell us something about ourselves—our culture and our time—and about contemporary methods of constructing meaning” (35). Many have appropriated Plath for their own agenda and in the process allowed her varying degrees of agency. In so doing, they perpetuate the “cultural icon Sylvia Plath as an obstacle to a proper appreciation of Plath’s writing” (35).

A. Alvarez, who knew both Plath and Hughes, comments on what he saw as the difference between the two poets and what later turned out to be the difference between Plath's earlier poetry and the *Ariel* poems that made her famous. In his article from *The Guardian* he says, "Her sensibility was different from his - more urban and intellectual, more nerves than instincts," which many identify as a quality that changed over the course of her career. In his opinion, "she was also determined to break through, as he [Hughes] had done, to the inner demons that would make her write the poems she knew she had in her." Whatever the cause, a rawness surfaces in her later poems as she wrote with more release and clarity and less concern for how her words might be perceived. Would scholars note the same shift in her poetic voice had she not committed suicide shortly after their composition? It is hard to know if these poems were received so differently because of their cost, as some saw her suicide as the direct result of an unbalanced pursuit of the voice she found in her later poems. Kate Kellaway concurs with this view in *The Guardian* as she finds that such inquiry encourages the view of Plath's later work as the "poetry of danger and emergency."

Some reduce Plath's writing to the strictly personal and confessional, allowing no distance between the poet and the persona. This results in another common view of her death, that of the "sacrificial artist" (Hagström 41). In Rosalyn Drexler's view: "There is a need in most of us to think of the poet as sacrificial victim." This label of sacrificial victim can be seen in analyses of Plath that view the artists' intense dedication to her craft as an unbalancing obsession that eventually motivates or precipitates her suicide (see, for example, A. Alvarez and E. Hardwick). The immediacy and emotion in Plath's final poems, when read in light of her death, cause even fellow writers to view her work as an

extended suicide note of sorts (see, for example, A. Sexton and E. Jong). Such images focus on her willingness to go all the way, even to suicide, to produce real, moving poetry. This idea “that Plath’s suicide should somehow be linked to her artistic pursuits” limits interpretation of her poetry to the instances of her biography and even stands in direct opposition to claims that Plath herself made about her poetry—she called them “purely poems, autonomous” (42). The view of her life as a sacrifice to her art once again places control of her life outside of Plath herself and makes her decision to die an inevitability, as she unwittingly goes too far for her writing and must pay the cost. This view makes her a victim of her creative drive, and perpetuates the image of a woman on a train unable to get off, a helpless victim to her own creativity, who had no say in the matter of her own death. Hagström continues, “The suicidal drive is presented as a threatening force in her personality, which is strengthened by her choosing it as a poetic subject,” and it is this perspective that once again makes Plath a victim of forces beyond her control (43).

When Plath’s unabridged journals were released in 2000, critics found that “Plath’s worst enemy was not Ted Hughes - as feminists have claimed - but herself” (Kellaway). Her journals reveal every documented thought and mood swing, moments of triumph and despair, and these indicators of instability are what many look to in order to explain her death (see, for example, Maris and Lazerwitz, Schaefer, and Moses). This move to focus on Plath’s own inner dialogue, while potentially victimizing because of possible indication of mental illness, also allows for a more complete picture of the situation. Anyone who reads her accounts can see that she had moments of confidence and happiness alongside moments of despair and self-doubt, and understand that Plath

was not all tragedy or angst but a passionate, human being who was brave enough to face even the darkest parts of herself in her writing. Still problematic is the fuel that such publications lend to the focus on Plath's life rather than her writing. As "Plath's poetry is left behind" yet again, we must combat the tendency to get caught up in her life at the expense of acknowledging the importance of the poetry she produced (Kellaway).

Recent biopic films of Plath and Woolf are particularly guilty of robbing both writers of agency and consequently of devaluing their work. The 2003 film *Sylvia* focuses on the "soap opera story of the romance and breakdown that interests readers" at the expense of any focus on Plath's work (Brain 24). The film is yet another example of pandering to an audience's desire for sensationalism. Plath's estate denied the filmmakers any right to use Plath's poetry, and they relied, as a result, on the drama of her relationship with Ted Hughes. Tracy Brain analyzes the film in the light of Plath's life and work and laments that it failed "to say anything serious or important about the poetry." It merely perpetuates, according to Brain, "what is perhaps the most oft-repeated and fallacious link between Plath and her work" (25). The film focuses on her instability and depicts her unraveling after her separation from Ted in a way that reinforces the sacrificial artist stereotype. It further implies that "the final manuscript she left when she died, prefigured and caused her death," suggesting, in essence, that the composition of Plath's final, reckless poems were not an endeavor she could come back from (26). This view coincides with the idea that Plath had no control over her life or her writing and that she could only produce great art at the expense of herself. Such a view belittles the talented Plath and assumes that she did not have the ability to establish

creative distance in her work or to operate outside of the extremely volatile personal connection to her poetry.

Annika Hagström criticizes the film for its focus on Plath's "raging temper" (46). Drawing attention to Plath's mental illness, the film presents Plath as "completely unreasonable" and "paranoid" (48). Her irrational responses to events are what perpetuate the drama and heartache, and her instability makes one feel sorry for Hughes and blames the collapse of their marriage and her suicide on her mental illness. Yet even here, no longer the victim of a man, Plath becomes a child, tossed back and forth by her violent moods, unable to establish any traction with her emotions because she is powerless against her own brain chemistry. Once again, this portrait only shows part of the truth, and a part, unfortunately, that robs Plath of her greatest achievement: her writing. In the film, she is reduced to an irrational, jealous wife who cannot make sense of her world without her man. This contradicts the historical Plath represented in her poetry and diary, who took responsibility and pride in herself and made meaning from her passion for creativity and motherhood. When Plath commits suicide at the end of the film, one is left with the despair and hopelessness of this act.

Scholars make Plath a victim of her mental illness. Hagström writes:

The idea that Plath's suicide was mainly caused by her mental illness is frequently repeated in and outside of biographies. Her own work is often used as evidence of that illness. For many readers, *SP* is what she writes—her writing has always been, perhaps unfairly, interpreted as autobiographical. (44)

Such readings appropriate Plath's art as evidence of her instability and look at her life as plagued by what Ida Kodrlová calls "suicidal risk factors" in an effort "to track and compare risk and protective factors for suicide in lives of these two creative women."

Such readings result in a clinically accurate but narrow, utilitarian view. Mark Wunderlich speaks to a similar issue when he writes that many readers have "come to see her creative work as a sort of extended suicide note, rather than as the work of an emerging poet whose career and output had been cut short by a tragic, early death."

In his study on suicide, Alvarez finds details that prove that Plath was "taking care not to succeed" on the last day of her life (*Savage God* 50). He is "convinced that she did not intend to die," that her attempt was meant to be a "'cry for help' that fatally misfired" or a way of facing the drive that haunted her and by facing it and surviving, expelling it," one "last desperate attempt to exorcize the death she had summoned up in her poems" (49, 53). Alvarez explains this by comparing her separation from Hughes with what she must have felt when she lost her father as a child, the same "piercing grief and bereavement" (53). He believes that her suicide was a mistake and that she meant to be found and saved, in the hope of finally exhausting her fascination with self-harm and death. He suspects that "she wanted to have done with the theme once and for all" (54). These are heartbreaking observations, yet Alvarez moves from despair to a focus on the immense accomplishment that is her poetry (even in the midst of such personal turmoil): "Above all, it [the myth of Plath as a sacrificial victim] misses the courage with which she was able to turn disaster into art. The pity is not that there is a myth of Sylvia Plath but the myth is not simply that of an enormously gifted poet whose death came carelessly, by mistake, and too soon" (55).

Far from seeing herself as the victim, there is much evidence that Plath took responsibility for happenings in her life. Tracy Brain analyzes several of Plath's poems ("The Rabbit Catcher" and "Event") and finds that "both poems look at the shared responsibility of the man and woman for the chasms that develop as the result of constant intimacy, and the price that both of them pay" (16). Instead of seeing these poems as angry and immediate responses to events in her actual life, Brain advocates that readers reestablish distance and not rob Plath of her ability to write from the safety of a poetic persona. Plath was an accomplished poet and it is important to keep in mind her ability to "move from the personal rage of the moment to a carefully considered meditation" (20). Brain constructs a reading of the poetry that tells "a story that Plath makes bigger than herself, and which contradicts any confessional narrative of the woman as lone victim" (17). Brain also comments on the "unfortunate effect of the assumptions that a writer is confessional," because such assumptions not only reduce the range and meaning of her poetry, but also the impact of her life and the perception of her legacy (20).

Thomas Caramagno's analysis of the variety of psychoanalytic approaches to Woolf's writing acknowledges the tendency for critics similarly to rely on Woolf's biography to diagnose dysfunction or repression. He talks back to several scholars--Susan Kenney, Mark Spilka, and Shirley Panken, to name a few,--who use her biography to diagnose Woolf in a way that he sees as reductive. Her physical and mental symptoms are attributed to "morbid guilt or repressed sexuality" by some, while those more sympathetic see "her lifelong grief" at the early loss of her mother as a factor which "alternately produced novels and madness instead of full womanhood" (Caramagno 10).

Such readings belittle Woolf, implying that she had no insight into her own condition and that her greatest accomplishments were a result of dysfunction.

While some scholars make Woolf a victim of her mental illness, others choose to look at the picture more holistically, considering multiple factors and viewpoints. Susan and Edwin Kenney point out the danger of this “labeling” of Woolf in their article “Virginia Woolf and the Art of Madness.” They write, “By thinking of Woolf and her fiction as manic-depressive, ‘mad,’ or even just plain ‘out of control,’ many biographers and critics thus deny her the element of control over her life that we find so evident in her diaries, letters, memoirs, and manuscripts, and also in other people’s recollections of her” (163). The evidence of “her extraordinarily controlled and productive life” contrasts with the portrayal of an out of control Woolf who was merely a victim of her mental illness (164). Though Kenney perhaps goes too far when he imagines that Woolf chose her illness for the opportunities it provided her, for insight and for rest, this reading avoids victimization of a woman who bravely faced one of the challenges that life offered her.

Woolf herself called her illness an “experience [...] where I still find most of the things I write about,” turning these terrible times into moments that “taught me a good deal about what is called oneself” (*Letters* 4 180). In the midst of scholarly diagnosis, analysis, and assumptions related to possible repression, abuse, latent anger, and guilt that cannot be definitively proven, the discussion of Woolf’s mental illness makes one thing clear. Woolf was a complex woman with many life experiences that challenged and confused her. Rather than make assumptions about her limitations, would it not be more beneficial to our understanding of Woolf to take what we do know as shown in her writing and her biography to construct a more autonomous and less victimized woman, a

complex female writer whose life and career contain many exemplary elements? She was a woman who, in spite of everything “lived this life devoted to detecting life, reviving it, extracting it from its futility, capturing it in her pages, saved from lifelessness, fixed in its transience” (Forrester 59). Such a description, rather than focusing on limitations, acknowledges her many victories.

Analysis of Woolf’s mental states and her level of repression make her a victim of forces outside of her control. Yet others who knew her and were familiar with her unique perspective on life paint a very different picture, one of a woman very much in control of her life. In the preface to the final volume of Woolf’s diary, which contains her personal writings from the last five years of her life, Anne Oliver Bell writes:

But despite the horrors and sorrows of these years, this is by no means a wholly cheerless or dispiriting chronicle. Virginia’s need to write—to gain a hold on reality by writing things down, served often enough as a safety-valve for despair; and her natural curiosity and capacity for enjoyment, and the pleasure she took in setting down her observations in apposite language, make these pages alive with high-spirited and vivid descriptions and reports. (vii)

In a similar manner, Hermione Lee chooses a different vein of analysis when she discusses Woolf’s “madness.” Avoiding the temptation to diagnose Woolf, she focuses on “what she [Woolf] did with” her mental illness, how she used it as creative inspiration (194). She admires her “creation of a language which faces it and makes something of it,” rather than diminishing Woolf’s craft as “therapy” that empties “her writing of all content except the curative” and serves to “narrow its ambition” (190). While there is no ignoring

the frequency of breakdown and illness in Woolf's life, Lee, like Rose, advocates for a focus on Woolf's action in the face of adverse circumstances—"This is a life of heroism, not of oppression, a life of writing wrestled from illness, fear, and pain" (195). Woolf's illness was "her own unique adventure"—a perspective that implies not powerlessness but participation—a desire to put to good use something that could have been wholly detrimental. She chose to value her illness because it allowed her to transcend "the limitations of a housebound young lady's experience" (Rose 72).

In contrast to the many scholars who explain Woolf's suicide in a way that victimizes her, Carolyn Heilbrun looks at Woolf's late-in-life feminism as contributing to the "isolation" that might have caused feelings of despair before her death (23). Contrary to the victimization that the feminist framework normally embraces, Heilbrun discusses the dilemma of Woolf's second awakening after she turned fifty. Looking at the work she produced during the last ten years of her life, Heilbrun finds a woman who "no longer fears the expression of her anger or its effects on the men who heard it" (17). Though she acknowledges the trials in Woolf's life and her feelings of despair and uncertainty, by considering the various elements as a complete picture, she allows Woolf autonomy while acknowledging the difficulties she faced trying to reconcile her many selves to the society in which she lived.

In the 2004 film *The Hours*, Woolf's legacy is not as negatively attached to the portrayal of her suicide as Plath's legacy is attached to her suicide in the movie *Sylvia*. The film creates a nuanced version of Woolf. Beginning and ending with her death, the film juxtaposes the story of Woolf's writing of *Mrs. Dalloway* with another interwoven storyline that follows a woman reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1951, and yet and another

woman, who is reminiscent of Clarissa Dalloway, the novel's protagonist, in 2001. In his analysis of the film, Michael LeBlanc discerns the film's final scene, which depicts Woolf walking into the river, as "giving emphasis to her transcendent, hopeful words ('always the love') rather than to her temporary psychological state" (107). So while Woolf's suicide, and suicide in general, is a theme throughout the film, suicide does not drown out the importance of her life and work, though it does bookend these accomplishments for effect in the film.

Contrary to the death-obsessed woman of *The Hours* who is isolated from the pleasures of life by her madness, according to Rose, Woolf "enjoyed beauty intensely" and her ability to do so shows itself in her writing (7). *Mrs. Dalloway* shows life and death, sanity and insanity side by side, as Clarissa Dalloway reflects on Septimus Smith's suicide which she feels "made her feel the beauty" (Woolf 186). Likewise, Lee writes that Woolf was often enamored with life and "enchanted herself with the process of writing it down" (Lee 22). In opposition to what some critics see as a life-long death wish, she writes of her pleasure in her walks, her writing, her life—"I have no wish to perish," she writes in 1911 (237). Although Woolf's "proud sense of being singled out for tragedy" can be seen in the way she writes about life and death, this sense can in no way be applied to every reading of her work or her life (169). Woolf is by no means controlled by this sense and lives her life in spite of this feeling. It is important to consider this side of Woolf's personality in order to appreciate the fullness of her life and work, and to work at dispelling the common perception of her legacy. Just as any one perspective on a person or a life is made by privileging some facts and ignoring others, any reading of Woolf risks reduction of her person because of the complexity of her life and situation.

Rose points out “the danger that exists of overly normalizing a unique and complicated person” even in our best efforts to understand Woolf (xvii).

Taking into account this background of critical materials and the many different suicide narratives they create, we will now look at two novels that offer other alternatives to these reductive suicide narratives generated about Plath and Woolf. Using their own words, we can begin to bring the pieces together to form a more complete, empowered picture of these two women writers.

Chapter 3: Mistress of Her Fate: An Alternative View of Suicide

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

—William Ernest Henley

Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway* offers many ways to read Septimus Smith’s suicide. In general, however, critics have read his death in the same ways that biographers have read Woolf’s own suicide. David Dowling identifies Septimus’s suicide as a result of his mental illness or “shell shock” (87). Woolf’s mention of Septimus’s writing and drawings function as elements that allow him to be identified as a sacrificial artist type, a sensitive soul who is unable to establish a proper relation to the world, choosing instead to live in an altered reality where he is the prophetic artist “muttering messages about beauty” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 97). Finally, yet other critics have seen him as a victim of the psychiatric treatment he receives and his doctor’s limited understanding and sympathy for his condition—another poor soul at the mercy of the medical system—and critics such as Alex Zwerdling acknowledge Woolf’s desire to “criticize the social system” (145).

All three of these views point to the powerlessness of the suicide, and all three diminish Septimus's agency and responsibility for his actions. For the sake of understanding Woolf's suicide, we can look at Septimus' death for clues that may help us reclaim Woolf as the "master of her fate," even the master of her decision to die. To recast Septimus's suicide as a deliberate and conscious act rather than a passive response to outside forces may help us understand how Woolf viewed suicide and allow us to see even this act as a gesture of power.

Septimus Smith, the suicide in Woolf's novel, is a young survivor of World War I. He admits the panic that seizes him when he realizes "that he could not feel" after living through the horrors of the war and the death of his friend Evans (*Mrs. Dalloway* 86). He succumbs to the shock of his experience by losing touch with reality. His wife takes him to see several psychiatrists who label him immediately. "It was a case of complete breakdown—complete physical and nervous breakdown, with every symptom in an advanced stage," thinks Dr. William Bradshaw in the first moments of his encounter with Septimus (95). The passage goes on to describe a clinical, detached session where the doctor takes very little time to assess the patient yet confidently prescribes rest in a home in the country in an effort to reestablish the patient's sense of "proportion" (99).

Septimus responds to the doctors negatively, feeling threatened by their need to restore him to society as a happy, functioning cog. He perceives his doctor's attitude and perspective as "remorseless" and "cruel," and extends this opinion to include what he believes about "human nature"—that his fellow human beings are uninspired, vindictive people who cannot understand or appreciate the artistic sight he has been gifted with (98). His wife also feels discomfort at the brusque nature of these men's godlike prescriptions.

Septimus, rather than passively submit to their rest cure, chooses to defy the “brutes” by flinging himself from the window, his last words being, “I’ll give it you!” (149).

In his final moments, Woolf shows Septimus’s resistance as he thinks, “he did not want to die. Life was good,” and makes his act one of defiance against “the cruelty of human nature” which is unable to understand what he is experiencing (149, 140).

Immediately after the act, the doctor pronounces Septimus a “coward,” underscoring the disparity between the two camps, the artist and society, the sane and the insane (149). Clearly, Septimus was not acting out of fear but in an effort to take control of his own fate.

Clarissa Dalloway confirms this as she learns of Septimus’s death. Hearing of it while in the midst of her party, she immediately thinks of his act of “defiance [as] an attempt to communicate” (184). She seems to think him brave for having “flung” his life away in an attempt to “reach the center,” a level of understanding or connection (184). “A thing there was that mattered [...] he had preserved,” she thinks (184). Rather than view his death as a waste, she sees it as a deliberate act and views Septimus as the master of his fate rather than a victim of his circumstances (176). He chose how and when he would die rather than have that choice taken away from him. Clarissa further aligns herself with the suicide by acknowledging how men like Doctors Bradshaw and Holmes “make life intolerable” and admits the “awful fear” that accompanies the responsibility of this life (185). “She felt somehow very like him,” Clarissa thinks as she ponders this young man’s choice and almost seems to envy his freedom (186).

In *Mrs. Dalloway* the function of the suicide can be best understood from the other characters’ reaction to the act, and its effect on them. Clarissa is the most moved

and sympathetic to Septimus and shares his sensitive nature so much that his suicide “made her feel the beauty” even as she ruminates on the fleeting nature of life (186). Woolf does not deny the sadness of the death of the shell-shocked war veteran, but focuses more on the fact that he does not accept “their idea of tragedy” (149). Rather than submit to a cure he does not wish for that would return him to the status quo and rob him of his creative insight, he will actively opt out by choosing his own death.

Suicide functions differently in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. Esther Greenwood’s first-person account of mental breakdown, a death wish that leads to a suicide attempt and her recovery, focuses on her internal condition. Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway*, which is narrated in a stream-of-consciousness narration from the perspectives of several characters, only one of whom is Septimus Smith, *The Bell Jar* gives little insight into the effects of Esther’s actions on others and instead shows her journey from hopelessness to empowerment. She may act as a victim at times, but it is as a victim of her own inner voice made more extreme by mental illness. By looking closer, one can see the seeds of responsibility and agency even in the choices that lead up to her suicide attempt. After that attempt, several characters show her how to take responsibility in a positive way which allows her to begin to own who she is as a woman and a writer.

Critics see Esther’s recovery in different lights, some seeing real renewal and resolution while others find signs of only momentary wholeness. Stephen Axelrod sees *The Bell Jar* as a “feminist novel of awakening” and finds Esther mostly successful in reestablishing connection with her world (138). Feminists such as Diane Bonds see Esther’s struggle as a failed quest for self-discovery because she remains “dominated by the patriarchal images of womanhood that she rejects” (60). Other critics, such as

Stephanie Tsank, analyze Plath's novel with an eye to psychology and find that Esther exhibits the "commonplace tendencies of the depressive" and undergoes complete mental breakdown (171). While yet others, such as Jane Duran, focus on the philosophical elements of Plath's novel and use *The Bell Jar* to point to Plath's "semisolipsistic philosophy" as reflected in Esther. Duran, however, laments the fact that Plath's suicide-narrative or "myth has a tendency to bury the actual work" and is able to keep in mind the difference between Plath and her character (228, 231). Critics who focus on Esther's insurmountable dysfunction often make her a victim of whatever issue they choose to focus on for their purposes.

An alternative to such disempowering perspectives comes from looking at Esther's agency in the novel. She attempts suicide not in response to outside forces but in response to what she has denied in herself, her inability to realize the control that she may claim over herself, her life, and her artistic voice. Esther takes responsibility for herself by taking ownership of her body and her sexuality. At first, she does this in destructive ways. Before her suicide attempt and while living in New York City, she acts in an empowered yet confused way, for she has no understanding of the emotions behind her actions nor does she feel any connection to her desperate acts. She associates sexuality with sin and dirtiness and struggles with her need to align herself with the "good girls" and to keep up a successful, other-directed self-image. This struggle manifests itself in the conflict she feels over choosing to befriend Doreen, who made her feel "wise and cynical as all hell," or Betsy, the "Pollyanna Cowgirl" (*The Bell Jar* 8, 22). Her friendship with Doreen feels like a "concrete testimony to my own dirty nature" that Esther feels that she must disown (23). Though she feels this conflict and sees purity as

“the great divide,” she acts in several situations to break out of her puritanical shell, first by deciding to let Constantine seduce her and then by going with Doreen to encounter Marco, the woman hater (82). In each situation, Esther is trying to free herself from the rigid boundaries placed on her, trying to feel some power of her own. Her sexual encounter with Marco stops short of rape, yet in her deranged state she defies him by refusing to hide the evidence of her battle with him—she chooses to leave the streaks of his dried blood on her face to “carry them around like the relic of a dead lover” (113).

Esther’s desperate need to kill herself comes from her inability to connect emotionally to her world. Her desperation also affects her ability to write and communicate. Her experiences in New York City force to the fore all the issues in herself that she has not dealt with and brings her to a breaking point. Like Septimus’s resistance to Drs. Bradshaw and Holmes in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Esther’s desperation becomes more intense after her visit with the male psychiatrist Dr. Gordon. His manner and questions “made it sound as if nothing was *really* wrong. I only *thought* it was wrong” (130). His lack of sympathy and understanding causes further frustration for Esther, and she becomes even more determined to do the deed in order to avoid having to see this man ever again, especially after her first botched electric shock treatment.

Her sense of responsibility becomes extreme at times, and she even desires to punish herself for some sin she imagines she has committed. She breaks her leg skiing and could very easily have blamed her boyfriend Buddy for pushing her to attempt a slope that she did not feel ready for but instead thinks, “No, I broke it myself. I broke it on purpose to pay myself back for being such a heel” (86). She feels inadequate and guilty for not being able to “go the whole way doing what I should anymore” as well as

“go the whole way doing what I shouldn’t” (30). In each scenario, Esther finds a way to berate herself, making her choice to commit suicide the only option to achieve freedom from numbness and her sense of failure. She also identifies suicide as an escape, feeling that in her altered mental state her body’s survival instinct “would trap me in its stupid cage for fifty years without any sense at all” (159). This fear of loss of autonomy is shared by Septimus Smith and echoed by Virginia Woolf herself when they consider suicide as a way to avoid the alterations brought on by old age and decreased mental function.

Esther suffers, much like Septimus, from an inability to feel. At her father’s grave she “couldn’t understand why I was crying so hard,” though she admits, “I had never cried for my father’s death” (167). In the hospital, after her failed suicide attempt, she remains bent on self-destruction until Dr. Nolan, a female psychiatrist, enters the picture and helps her to establish a more healthy relationship to herself, her emotions, and others. Dr. Nolan treats Esther with “tenderness” and respect, offering a very different experience from Esther’s earlier sessions with Dr. Gordon (219). Finally able to admit her issues with her mother and to begin to trust another woman, Esther is eventually led to freedom and healthy self-empowerment. In regards to her old college boyfriend Buddy, she realized that “it would be a step, placing him, renouncing him” and her need of his approval (218). Dr. Nolan helps her to get the birth control she needs in order to attain “freedom from marrying the wrong person just because of sex”: Esther is able to embrace her sexuality free from fear of consequence or judgment (223). Sex is put in its proper place in her mind and is no longer “a specific evil” that corrupts good girls (220).

The Bell Jar shows a different perspective on suicide from *Mrs. Dalloway*, allowing Esther to recover and establish a healthy form of autonomy. Far from suffering in the role of victim, then, Esther's story very clearly places the responsibility for her suicide attempt on no one but herself. Making this issue very clear, Plath provides a scene where Buddy visits Esther after she is mostly recovered. He is petrified that he had somehow caused Esther's illness. Speaking of another of their friends who succeeded in killing herself, Esther echoes Buddy's fears of responsibility for Joan's suicide. Dr. Nolan very forcefully says, "Nobody did it. *She* did it!" making the suicide not a victim but the actor and sole responsible party in the decision to die (240). Plath clearly places the responsibility on the suicide, allowing them to retain their autonomy and power.

Woolf and Plath dealt with suicide in other works—Woolf explicitly in and the novel *The Waves* and Plath in many poems, "Lady Lazarus," "Edge," "Ariel," and "Death & Co."—yet by looking at these two novels and their approach to the topic one can see what attitude these women might have had towards suicide. We cannot assume they are their characters but since their writing, both fiction and non-fiction, is a major part of the information we can gather that is not filtered through another's perspective, it is useful to consider these elements of connection and illumination. The ideas surrounding suicide in their work can offer one perspective on their eventual decision to die. The individual circumstances of these writer's deaths are admittedly very different, but what has proven helpful to me in my quest to find answers has been the resounding similarity in these women's lives and works. Both struggled with the harsh realities of existence and rather than living in denial chose to acknowledge and deal with their difficulties through writing and producing art. I have been attracted by their honesty and courage when many have

chosen the safety of blind optimism. Regardless of men, mental illness, or relationships, both Plath and Woolf wrote and lived as empowered women—not perfectly, but valiantly determined to understand themselves the best they could. They even seemed to feel similarly about suicide. Yes, they experienced obstacles and moments of weakness, but their decision to commit suicide need not invalidate their claim to literary greatness or call into question their place in the canon of important women writers. And for me personally, as someone whose initial response to Plath's and Woolf's suicides almost caused me to dismiss them as writers, this new perspective allows me to consider another side of suicide, and understand that one act does not define an entire life and its effect. Plath and Woolf stand as strong symbols of female empowerment and as women even more deserving of my admiration for their honest, courageous, and successful writing lives in their pre-feminist world.

Woolf and Plath are often analyzed in terms of their marriages, their relationships to their fathers, and their stance in relation to women's place in their respective cultures. Their writing and their suicides are sometimes viewed as reactions to the repression they experienced because of these factors yet, with a closer look at their writing and their lives, it becomes obvious that neither of these women played the passive victim. Often, instead of giving up their agency in these relationships, they made choices and wrote with an awareness of the effects of their relationships to their husbands, fathers, and society. Though both women show symptoms of mental illness, to reduce their lives and work to what can be seen through a psychological lens misses much that adds depth and power to their writing. As Thomas Caramagno writes, "Woolf's work is the very opposite of the formulaic; it challenges our thinking, subverts our assumptions and aims not to reduce

but enlarge our vision. [We should avoid] reducing Virginia Woolf to the limited scope of our critical lens [for when we do so we] magnify a truth more telling about our own needs than [the needs of] Woolf” (“Lure” 325). By remaining mindful of the complexities that must be considered when attempting to understand these women and their writing, one can avoid the trap of allowing their suicides to overshadow their legacies as writers. Both Plath and Woolf can stand apart from their deaths as the talented writers and complex individuals they were.

We can begin to restore these women to their places as literary foremothers not by excluding the unpleasant facts but by considering all the aspects of their lives that worked together to compose the complex individuals they were—women who defy our attempts at explanation and reduction. By considering the potential for agency in the act of suicide in this way, the negative effect of the act is neutralized in these women’s legacies. Women are again free to consider Plath and Woolf as models for a successful literary life because of their commitment to their art regardless of the way their lives ended. By removing the stigma from these women’s suicides, we can move past the act to appreciate the many other positive elements of their lives that are indeed exemplary for women and writers.

Phyllis Rose writes in the introduction to her biography of Woolf,

I think it unfortunate in more ways than one that some of the leading women writers of our century—one thinks of Plath and Sexton as well as Woolf—have killed themselves. Erica Jong calls this the “head-in-the-oven” school of women writers, and like her, I would prefer to see less

emphasis on despair, more on resilience in the literary history of women.

(xvi).

My journey has allowed me to focus on the resilience in Plath and Woolf's stories rather than on despair, and I hope that the conversation surrounding these women will continue to evolve to include all the variations of their stories proving that women need not be static, angelic figures but living, breathing realities even after suicide.

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