Still Mad: The Legacy of Madwoman in the Attic in Two Contemporary Novels.

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Still Mad: The Legacy of Madwoman in the Attic in Two Contemporary Novels.

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A Thesis in the Field of English
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Abstract

The basic purpose of this thesis project is to explore the ways in which the figure of the “madwoman” and the claims of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *Madwoman in the Attic* appear in contemporary fiction by women. A secondary purpose of this thesis is to engage with criticism of *Madwoman in the Attic* in the context of feminism, both as it appears in contemporary fiction and also in academic theory. This thesis is necessary to understanding how certain concerns of the *Madwoman* project persist simultaneous to the ongoing concerns of the larger feminist movement, despite criticisms made against the book on theoretical—particularly post-structural—grounds. The two novels I use to approach the persistence of these concerns are Claire Messud’s *The Woman Upstairs* (2013) and Sheila Heti’s *Madwoman in the Attic* (2012), which are both novels written by women about women artists. Thus, representing a woman artist figure, the novels provide numerous opportunities to ask whether today’s woman artist encounters a similar experience of patriarchy as that offered in Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis of the work of 19th-century woman writers.

My analysis of *How Should a Person Be?* and *The Woman Upstairs* explores the enduring relevance of *Madwoman*’s central thesis concerning a tradition of “female literature,” a female “anxiety of authorship,” and the role of female precursors. To contextualize the question of *Madwoman*’s relevance—and my claim about it—I use a variety of secondary sources from the fields of feminism and literary theory, a collection of scholarly responses to *Madwoman*, a variety of author interviews and book reviews, as
well as writings on the history and current work of the feminist movement. These secondary sources serve to support my argument on the enduring relevance of Madwoman and work to illuminate the rich relationship of current women’s writing to recent literary criticism and feminist thought. Overall, my analysis of these two novels reveals that the woman artist today, as represented in these novels, does experience the oppression of patriarchy in a very similar fashion to those writers and artists discussed by Gilbert and Gubar and that women novelists are interested in representing the predicament of the woman artist through related Madwoman-esque themes and motifs, and also through intentional strategies regarding form and genre. Additionally, my findings indicate that the novels are engaged in a project—both aesthetic and political—that centers themes of unlikeability, ugliness, messiness, and anger. These findings lead me to conclude that the spirit of the “madwoman” depicted in Victorian literature is connected to the “revolt” of the feminist wave of which Gilbert and Gubar’s work was a part and that this connection extends to the priorities of women writing today.
Dedication

For Grace.
Table of Contents

Chapter I. Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2. *The Woman Upstairs*: Mothers and The Anxiety of Authorship ............ 24

The Masks of Bella Eldridge ............................................................................................... 27
Nora’s Inheritance .............................................................................................................. 32
Extraordinary Hope ............................................................................................................ 38
Life and Death .................................................................................................................... 41
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 45

Chapter 3. *How Should a Person Be?:* Confinement and Escape in Genre, Form, and Character ......................................................................................................................... 48

Good Form: Books and People ............................................................................................ 54
Convention and Ugliness ..................................................................................................... 59
The Blow-Job Artist Gets Free ............................................................................................ 63
Throwing Shit and Sand ...................................................................................................... 69
Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 73

Chapter 4. Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 76

Works Cited .......................................................................................................................... 78
Chapter 1
Introduction

In their well-known *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue for the existence of a shared “female literature,” positing that the oppression experienced by individual women manifests between the lines of their writing and revealing among women writers a shared suffering and creative frustration. Focusing on the 19\(^{th}\) century, *Madwoman* explores the dynamics and effects of patriarchy and oppression as manifest in the work of Jane Austen and the Brontës, Dickinson, and other women writers both famous and relatively unknown. Their work also uses 19\(^{th}\)-century criticism by men along with other cultural clues and artefacts that illustrate specific prejudices against women in general and women writers specifically, thus letting the work of these writers speak as responses to and negotiations of misogynist culture and illuminating this culture as the context of not only their novels but their womanhood. Exploring the right to write as conceived of as an exclusively male privilege, Gilbert and Gubar mine the literature for proof of the stigmatization of women writers and its effects and also for strategies of 19\(^{th}\) century women writers to subvert their own oppression and the ideals to which they are and have been held throughout history.

As is likely the case for many students of literature, my own encounter with Gilbert and Gubar’s *Madwoman* was profound; their analysis found its way into my reading of works of art, film, literature, and even commercial content, whether it was produced by men or women. And so I was surprised to see, at one semester’s end, this
giant work of literary theory treated as something of an anomaly—a classic work that must be taught, but which wasn’t always taken seriously as scholarship, both for its methods and for the implications of its findings. It was not as intellectually rigorous as, say, Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, and it was not doing the necessary work of addressing the concerns of women of color; it was too Freudian, too far away from the text itself, too eager to reduce the varieties of female experience into one account. In other words, it was “interesting” but ultimately incongruent with the approaches and concerns of feminist theory after the 1970s. Then, why, I asked, are so many works of fiction produced today, over thirty years later, also concerned with the very issues addressed in *Madwoman*, and why do we find in these works the same motifs and themes as those which play out in the work of Gilbert and Gubar’s 19th-century women writers? Beyond literary theory and outside the academy, what did the actual literature have to say about the relevance of *Madwoman* and the “female literary tradition” discussed therein?

While numerous novels of the last century have dealt with the plight of the woman artist and writer, from Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* to Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time*, two recent novels in particular offer striking examples of the legacy of the madwoman figure in contemporary fiction by women. The two novels I examine were chosen not only because they are written by women, but because they are about female artists and writers, offering ample opportunity to explore the figure of the woman artist. While Gilbert and Gubar didn’t exclusively address fictional artist characters, their primary concern was with the female writer and the ways in which her status as a woman were illuminated in her own work and in its reception within the male-dominated, male-centric field of writing. As Gilbert and Gubar explored experiences of patriarchal oppression
through the writers and works of a specific period, I will explore the lived reality of patriarchy by analyzing the image of the female artist within these contemporary texts.

Through a close analysis of Claire Messud’s *The Woman Upstairs* and Sheila Heti’s *How Should a Person Be?*, I hope not only to prove the relevance and accuracy of *Madwoman*’s claims but to illustrate the ways in which the concerns of Gilbert and Gubar’s 19\textsuperscript{th}-century writers have persisted in permutated form over the duration of a century which ostensibly promised freedom and equality for women. In addition, I hope to answer the concerns of the theorists who have criticized the work of Gilbert and Gubar by shifting focus away from theoretical claims about the constructed nature of gender and back toward the actual, albeit socialized and variable, experience of it; if it concerns us that wages are still unequal for men and women, if sexual violence toward women keeps our stern attention, then why should we dismiss the real and troubling female experiences and perspectives (for women authors, and even women theorists, are, in fact, living in the world) offered in these works of contemporary literature and by extension in *Madwoman*?

The three interrelated themes of Gilbert and Gubar’s work in *Madwoman in the Attic* that I will trace in Messud and Heti’s novels are 1) a uniquely female “anxiety of authorship” and process of “self-authorship,” Gilbert and Gubar’s revision of Harold Bloom’s theory of the “anxiety of influence,” 2) the role of “precursors” in the lives and processes of women artists, and 3) the tradition of “female literature.” I ask, do the women artists and writers in these novels exhibit an anxiety of authorship akin to that described in Gilbert and Gubar’s survey of women writers, do they seek and find female precursors, and are these contemporary women writers thus a part of the female literary
tradition described in *Madwoman*? My answer to these questions is yes. However, these two contemporary novels mark new territory, perspective, concerns, and approaches to understanding the woman writer’s anxiety. Their contemporary take on Madwoman’s themes can be found, for example, in how these novels portray single women and how these women struggle with cultural messages and impulses that are simultaneously oppressive and liberating. Further, by seeing these new works within the female literary tradition, we are able to locate elements of female experience as portrayed by the likes of Austen and Bronte that have faded toward the background and other elements that have taken center stage; we are even able to see, for example, how the women’s liberation movements that occurred during the very writing of *Madwoman* may have played a role, over time, in a particular a sense of disappointment among the older generation and a sense of apathy in the younger. The role of the female precursor today is perhaps not what it was for Victorian women writers nor what Gilbert and Gubar hoped it might be in the decades following their publication. The characters in these novels illustrate, as another example of their shift in view, how despite the fact that women are now encouraged to take on careers instead of full-time mothering roles, the “feminine virtue” of selflessness—so deeply bound up with motherhood—persists as an ideal to which many women feel disproportionately beholden. As they depict women of different generations, the novels mark contrasts between different women and their responses to patriarchy, thus suggesting that a “tradition” must not be conceived of as limiting or imposed from without, but rather that there are certain shared experiences across generations and populations despite the subtle or profound differences between them.
It will be useful to briefly define some of Gilbert and Gubar’s terms that will be used frequently throughout this thesis. While the whole work of *Madwoman* is focused on drawing out examples of literature by women and the connections between them, the idea of a female literary tradition is perhaps best described in Gilbert and Gubar’s preface. They write, “even when we studied women’s achievements in radically different genres, we found what began to seem a distinctively female literary tradition (…) (Gilbert, xi).” The elements that bind the collectivity of women’s works as a tradition are then described as follows:

Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors—such patterns recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia. (xi)

The images, themes, and patterns are born, Gilbert and Gubar argue, of a common experience of anxiety of authorship—“a radical fear that [the woman artist] cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her (49).” According to Gilbert and Gubar, the female tradition is not only defined by these shared fears and concerns, but by the woman writer’s active search for a “female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible. (49)” Connected to each of these concepts is Gilbert and Gubar’s notion of “self-authorship”—the woman writer’s ultimate goal of writing *her self*, both out of male-authored versions of the ideal woman and into a self-determined version of her own. Gilbert and Gubar write, “the one plot that seems to be concealed in most of the 19th-century literature by women which will concern us here is in some sense a story of the woman writer’s quest for her own
story; it is the story, in other words, of the woman’s quest for self-definition. (76)” As noted above, it is this triad of themes—the anxiety of authorship, the female tradition, and the female precursor—that will be traced and considered in the contemporary novels examined here, the ways in which the shared plot of the female tradition extends from the 19th century and into the twenty-first. My close reading of the novels reveals an image of the female artist, and an apparent interest in producing this image, that is fraught with resentment, doubleness, inadequacy, and a will to self-liberate. In these anxieties and concerns, one finds Gilbert and Gubar’s specifically female anxiety of authorship, and in the shared nature of these anxieties, as well as in the artists’ responses to them, we find both the female tradition and the tendency and importance of seeking precursors in other female artists.

_The Woman Upstairs_ is the story of a middle-aged school teacher whose past dreams of artistic greatness have not so much died as been transformed into an incredible longing for recognition and redemption. The narrator and main character of the novel, Nora Eldridge, tells a story that is superficially about her friendship and artistic collaboration with another woman artist, but which is quite deeply about her relationship with her mother and the legacy of her mother’s own stunted life. It is a story of intergenerational conflict around womanhood, freedom, and the contradictory messages of feminism and society at large. Speaking to the intermingling messages to women about their womanhood and about their artist-hood, Nora’s relationship with her mother and her relationship with the female artist precursors she seeks are inseparable. Despite sufficiently fulfilling the noble, feminine roles of school teacher and devoted daughter, Nora is unwilling and unable to silence her anger, and her narrative constitutes a letting
loose of her own “madwoman in the attic”—a madwoman that burns even as her docile
double exists in the world as the harmless “woman upstairs.” Nora’s “fuck you all”
attitude, her abrasive language, and her refusal to bow to the naiveté of positive, reach-
for-the-stars thinking all contribute to the sense that Nora is a difficult person, a view
expressed by a Publisher’s Weekly interviewer who told Messud that Nora was the kind
of character “you wouldn’t want to be friends with” (McCleave Wilson). Another critic
praises the novel, but ultimately see its angry, daring ending—”Just watch me”—as an
indication of Nora’s imminent descent into madness (Lurie). In either case, Nora is
shown as a realistic portrayal, but of a person we specifically don’t want to be, a person
we don’t respect, a person who exemplifies a tragic life. Nora is, in other words,
 Unlikeable; her personality is ugly, and even her raw, brave confrontation with the ideals
of womanhood clashing within her can not redeem her superficial failures—single,
unsuccessful, unseen. But, I ask, can today’s woman really afford to avoid this
confrontation for the sake of being likeable? And while my research consistently suggests
that the point of literature is perhaps not to exhibit exclusively admirable, good
characters, it is crucial to engage with screaming, cursing, self-destructing characters, and
not merely with a shrug or a chastising shake of the head. For it is the wreck and
reconciliation of Nora’s selfhood that is not only her story, but the story of the
madwoman, too. In chapter one, I argue that Nora’s raging narrative is crucial to the
process of deconstructing her womanhood (if the narrative is not that process itself) and
also to the task of self-authorization that follows

*How Should a Person Be?* is the autobiographical, first-person story of a young
playwright living in Toronto and navigating the questions of how to be a good artist, how
to be in relationships with friends and lovers, and how to be “a person.” Sheila’s narrative begins after she has gone through a divorce and has begun working on a play that she struggles to complete. Significantly, she looks to her new friend, Margaux, a painter who struggles with her own identity as an artist—both for personal validation and creative inspiration. How Should a Person Be? is written in five acts, with much of the dialogue written in script-form, although the novel also makes copious use of other forms including prose, lists, and emails. The novel is a collection of material that reflects the dual protagonist-author as both unconfined and utterly lost, apparently free but nonetheless driven by an erratic desire for approval, redemption, and artistic greatness.

While James Woods’ critical piece in the New Yorker reveals in no uncertain terms the critic’s dislike of the book, and his condescending disappointment in the author (“There’s that ungainly prose again. It’s a shame that Heti’s writing, normally pellucid, is so loose here”), his criticism fits Heti’s project like a glove. He begins:

Proust said that all of Dostoyevsky’s novels could be called “Crime and Punishment.” The Tolstoyan title of Sheila Heti’s “How Should a Person Be?” (Henry Holt) would surely serve for uncountably many works of fiction. But Heti’s first stab at an answer, which appears on the second page, is disconcerting (...).

First, we have a powerful male critic placing Heti in the tradition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, under the judging eye of Proust, and second we have “stab,” Woods’ first accusation of sloppiness and unseriousness. He goes on:

On the one hand, there is the timeless seriousness of the question, and on the other hand there is the hapless, incoherent present-day chaos of the reply, which takes a whole messy book to fail to answer. The inadequacy of the response is a kind of contemporary confession, just as Heti intends her book to be a larger portrait of a generation that knows the right questions but struggles to find the right answers.
That Woods assumes that “how to be” is, absolutely, the right question to ask, that there are right answers to the question, and that Heti actually wanted to answer it, that, for example, she does (and ought to) take herself as seriously as a moral sermonizer a la Tolstoy, is precisely Heti’s point. Woods is the voice of the “Should” in Heti’s title—a should that pertains not only to human moral responsibility but also to art and literature, what can and should be portrayed, by whom, and how. And if Heti’s portrayal rings true to any of us, but is dubbed immature or vapid by a giant like James Woods, what does that say about us? What if the “right question” is not how to be a person at all? What if, for anyone other than the white male patriarchs of the canon, the right question concerns how to be oneself, how to write oneself out of the “oughts” of the Western literary tradition? In chapter two, I argue that Sheila Heti’s “messy” narrative and characters are meant both to intentionally undermine the standards of such giants throughout history and to clear space for new modes of storytelling and representation.

It is clear from the small fraction of the critical attention paid these two novels detailed here that both of them have caused some agitation. In addition, they have sold well. Like Madwoman, these novels came out and appealed to regular readers and hyper-literary critics alike, but above all, they stirred controversy and conversation, opening up space for touchy conversations on female characters, likeability, acceptable literary forms, and the degree to which an author should be in her work. In their first edition paperbacks, both books are preceded by pages and pages of blurbs, if not endorsements, from literary magazines and papers to pop-culture blogs. The criticism and praise of these works can be as rich and informative as the books themselves. For example, The Paris Review frames an interview with Sheila Heti by suggesting, “If you’ve been loving Lena
Dunham’s *Girls*, you should most certainly pick up a copy of Sheila Heti’s new novel, *How Should a Person Be?* Either this language is untastefully sales-y (what exactly are we selling here?), or the recommendation is sincere—the author is onto something.

In a piece written on the Post45 blog, Maggie Doherty captures the shared theme of self-exposure in Dunham’s hit show and the two novels I explore here, ultimately arguing that the defining literary genre of the early 21st century is the novel of the female artist. And then there’s Lena Dunham’s blurb on the back cover of the Heti book—“A really amazing metafiction-meets-nonfiction novel.” It is the reach and effect of both of these novels, their appeal as both literature and pop, that motivates this deeper investigation into what they are getting at, what they say about contemporary life, and what tradition, if any, they take part in. Annette Federico’s remarks on critiques that label the scholarship of *Madwoman* as “primitive” capture the way these new works speak to audiences now:

If *The Madwoman in the Attic* seems intellectually primitive to some feminist, maybe that’s because it is: primitive in the way the primitive part of our brains, the basal ganglia drives high-level cognition. The primitive thing, the fundamental experience, those “click” moment women used to send to Ms. Magazine when they realized sexism was not merely a personal problem—those instinctive, vestigial responses are often the things that get the complex theoretical reactions started. (8)

Like *Madwoman*, and like *Girls*, even like some of the literature produced by women in the 19th century, these two novels provoke and entertain, but most importantly they prod readers, scholars, writers—in short, culture—forward in their refusal to see gender as a non-issue and in their vivid examination of how women and women artists are formed. Whether you love it or hate it, something “clicks,” and you respond. Through these novels, the madwoman seems to whisper, “I’m still here,” and readers seem to listen.
A close-reading of these novels reveals, in particular, narrative and character-based strategies of ugliness and unlikeability that respond to an overwhelming pressure from the public, from critics, and from our internal selves to be likeable and to be so at the cost of one’s authenticity. These strategies undermine historical social directives on how to be a woman, how to be a woman artist, and lastly on how to write a book. They also correlate directly to the strategies of Victorian women writers unearthed and explored by Gilbert and Gubar. As the permutated forms mentioned above suggest, a novel by a woman need not literally involve a Bertha-type madwoman in the attic to explore and expose the doubleness of female experience; the woman author’s double in contemporary fiction won’t throw herself from the roof of her husband’s house, but she can certainly attempt to dismantle it, dislodge its foundation, or at least describe the shape of her room there.

Because I hope to show the relevance of Madwoman’s claims for contemporary women, it’s necessary to briefly engage with the criticism of Gilbert and Gubar’s work, in particular the claim that their theory essentializes female experience or reduces all women to a set of behaviors and strategies that the theorists have only extrapolated from the writings of a few. By revealing the commonalities among women, despite the circumstances of their individual conditioning, and by speaking to the freedom and confinement at stake in the lives of women writers, I hope to negotiate with the accusations of essentialism made against Madwoman. In her Introduction to The Madwoman in the Attic: After Thirty Years, Federico considers the anti-essentialist critique with two questions raised by Madwoman’s methods and conclusions. She writes,
Did Gilbert and Gubar go straight to the truth about women’s art, or did they apply a distorting master narrative “a repetitious sexist drama”? Did they bridge differences among women writers by identifying a common struggle against “patriarchal poetry,” or did they limit women’s achievements by reducing them to a symptom? (Federico, 8)

In its most basic form, essentialism (in particular, “gender essentialism”) entails the belief that there are innate differences between men and women—that all men and all women share certain fixed properties. Because, for example, Gilbert and Gubar extend elements of Charlotte Bronte or Jane Austen’s psychology—the psychology of one or two woman writers—to the psychology of the singular woman writer, because the tendencies of a select group of writers become the literary tradition rather than a literary tradition, their theory risks glossing over the differences among such women, among their motives and strategies for writing and in their relationships to patriarchy and politics. When such criticism of a work rests on an accusation of an essentialist lens or practice, it simultaneously makes the accusation that the issue of identity as a social construct has been ignored and that an essence—in this case, the essence of femaleness—has been taken for granted. As opposed to assuming an innate and natural female essence, a strict anti-essentialist or constructionist view holds that there is no essence, there is only socially constructed identity.

The accusation of essentialism in Madwoman is voiced primarily by the feminist scholars Toril Moi and Mary Jacobus, who both see Gilbert and Gubar’s theory of the 19th-century woman writer’s literary imagination as one which falsely “postulates a real woman hidden behind the patriarchal textual façade” (Moi, 60). For the purposes of this thesis, the most notable of Moi and Jacobus’s responses, all of which follow logically their insistence on the absence of a “real woman,” is their shared claim that Gilbert and
Gubar’s project provides a distorting master narrative, that the authors deceptively depict an “Ur-woman” to stand for all women, and that in doing so Gilbert and Gubar themselves attempt to speak for other women, thus undermining the support for women’s self-authorization that is so central to their work (Moi, 66). In her review of Madwoman, Jacobus takes issue with Gilbert and Gubar’s notion of “female literature” as framing women writers as no more than “exceptionally articulate victims of a patriarchally engendered plot,” reducing great writers to a set of symptoms (Jacobus, 522). Moi captures the anti-essentialist angle, arguing that Gilbert and Gubar see Bronte, Austen, and Eliot as exhibiting a “natural, essential, inborn quality to all women,” insinuating that it is unfair to the genius of these writers to argue that their biological sex has to some extent determined the nature of their creative lives (Moi, 64). However, I believe Moi is herself guilty of reductionism, for example, when she uncharitably characterizes Gilbert and Gubar’s work as follows: “in a given patriarchal society all women (because they are biologically female) will adopt certain strategies to counter patriarchal oppression. (64).” Additionally, there is no point in the work of Gilbert and Gubar that biology is named as the cause of the female author’s plight—rather it is patriarchal ideology, acting on female bodies, which is clearly accused as culprit.

Repeatedly, post-structuralist critics like Moi intentionally omit a key premise of Gilbert and Gubar’s work, a premise that falls between, in Moi’s words, being “biologically female” and the adoption of “certain strategies”: the premise that biological sex is a basis for the social conditions of gender that lead to such shared experiences of oppression and survival strategies as rebellion through self-authorship. This missing premise, central to thesis of Madwoman, is ignored in the post-structuralist’s quest to
delegitimize any theory that takes for granted the existence of actual women subjects. To neglect this premise is the equivalent of saying that just because some or most women, and not all women, experience sexual harassment in the workplace, that does not mean we generally do have a systemic issue with regard to gender and power in those contexts. The “common experience of exclusion and neglect” makes us women just as much as societal norms and discourses do—the two are impossible to unbind. At the same time, different varieties of oppression and particular manifestations of misogyny create different experiences of exclusion and neglect—the fact is simply that Gilbert and Gubar were focused on the massive, undeniable similarities of experience and how women writers have dealt with them (Federico, 133). As they admit in their Introduction to the second edition of Madwoman, it is such “theoretical nuance,” found lacking by the anti-essentialists, which “may be precisely what [they] couldn’t afford” at the time of their work’s publication (Gilbert, xi). In other words, they were aware of the simplifications at play in their theory, but the overwhelming connections among the texts and lives considered were too profound to ignore.

At the expense of recognizing gender-as-it-is-constructed as itself a shared experience, anti-essentialist critics have taken issue with words and categories themselves, arguing over whether “the author,” “the self,” and “the woman” in fact exist while sexism in the arts, the academy, and beyond runs rampant. Simply put, categories are necessary to thinking and talking about gender, just as categories are necessary to thinking about race, sexuality, and any other socially constructed category. In her Essentially Speaking, a book which deals specifically with the essentialism debate and the “impasse in feminism” it creates, Diana Fuss argues that “essentially speaking we
need to theorize essentialist spaces from which to speak and, simultaneously, to
deconstruct those spaces and keep them from solidifying. (Fuss, 667)” In other words, it
is necessary and productive, a “strategic essentialism,” for Gilbert and Gubar to focus on
shared experience and employ broad categories in their work, especially if it is to have
any hope of disrupting the foundations of oppressive ideologies and practices. This is one
of the arguments in “Madwomen Inspired by Madwoman,” Susan Fraiman’s response to

Madwoman and its critiques. As Fraiman writes,

Whereas much queer theory recruits poststructuralism in the service of an anti-
identitarian politics, the project represented by Madwoman assumes the
provisional stability and strategic uses of identity categories like ‘woman’ and
‘lesbian.’ And much as I appreciate the pressure exerted on these categories by
those who note their exclusivity and normativity, I also see them as necessary if
not sufficient to thinking about gender and sexuality, and to a politics stemming
from these. (33)

It is crucial to understand gender as both constructed and experienced, as both infinitely
particular and necessarily political; that accounts of “being a woman” must not be written
off simply because they are based in an experience of a constructed category; that
although “womanhood” is dictated by social, historical forces, it would not be
unreasonable, for example, for a woman to worry—because she is a woman—about
walking home alone at night or about whether her hard work is worth as much as a
man’s.

In their depiction of the female artist as resentful, doubled, and fraught with
inadequacy, and in their suggestion of alternative modes of being and writing, How
Should a Person Be? and The Woman Upstairs support arguments for a middle ground
between shared female experience and construction, as well as for a reconciliation of so-
called “waves.” For even while they confirm Madwoman’s theories, offering up uncanny
parallels and extensions, the novels and their characters often straddle a divide between different feminist modes. For example, Sheila Heti’s novel, in its glorious self-awareness, as well as its shock factor, models the playful self-awareness of the current “wave” of feminism that is often aligned with post-structuralist feminist thought, but it also remains attached to the second wave’s dismantling of patriarchy through undermining and re-fitting traditional forms. Both earnest and irreverent, political and personal, How Should a Person Be? is interested both in revealing the oppressive nature of the male canon in art and literature and in offering an intimate glimpse at the messy, even ugly, psychology of the author herself.

A “female literature” and an “anxiety of authorship,” as described by Gilbert and Gubar, can be traced in themes and concerns over “natural talent,” whether one is a “real artist,” dead and absent mothers, being single and needing to justify/explain why, domestic and artistic spaces as confining and/or liberating, the female artist’s existential status as remainder, delusion and madness, and the woman artist’s need for new forms and models. The commonality of these themes not only supports the claims of Madwoman but confirms the persistence of symptomatic experiences of gender-based oppression, thus calling attention to the symptoms and their causes rather than emphasizing the possibility of a post-gender society.

Between these novels, we see depictions of women wanting to make art, wanting to be successful at making art, and wanting to be seen, both by themselves and others, as legitimate artists but also as admirable people. It is never a simple thing for them to achieve any of these goals, nor do either of these novelists suggest that it should be. Further we see that the barriers between the female artist’s desires and their fulfillment
are often the hardest to break in her own mind. Despite the force and fashion of post-structuralist theory, with regard to the psychology of the female artist, *Madwoman’s* diagnosis rings true in these artist characters, as do many motifs related to enclosure and escape, motherhood and daughterhood, authenticity, claustrophobia, and more. Undoubtedly, the findings in these novels reveal a set of shared experiences, depicted in the female artist character, that support Gilbert and Gubar’s claim of a shared female literature. And while the four novels represent different degrees of willingness to “say” something about gender, they nevertheless sustain a female literary lineage.
The Woman Upstairs (2013) is the story of a middle-aged schoolteacher, Nora Edlridge, her feelings of wasted potential, and her desire to be redeemed. Told by Nora herself, the narrative focuses on the story of Nora’s relationship with a family she first falls in love with and then comes to despise. But, naturally, Nora is also situated within both a history of female characters in novels and within a history of female artists, and Nora’s author, Claire Messud, is herself located in a history of female writers, albeit nearby. Messud self-consciously engages with these histories, most obviously in the novel’s title. As an early New York Times review points out, The Woman Upstairs is an “entirely intentional” allusion to Bertha Mason of Charlotte’s Jane Eyre (Schillinger). More closely situating the novel in relationship to Gilbert and Gubar’s work, a New York Times survey of Messud’s novels describes “the Woman Upstairs” motif in The Woman Upstairs as a “play on the 19th century trope of the madwoman in the attic. (Franklin)” Importantly, Nora explicitly herself identifies as “a Woman Upstairs” and even makes sure to distinguish herself from the “madwoman in the attic.” In Nora’s words, “We’re not the madwomen in the attic—they get lots of play, one way or another. We’re the quiet woman at the end of the third floor hallway, whose trash is always tidy, who smiles brightly in the stairwell. (Messud, 6)” Still, Nora is mad (as in “angry”), and her narrative is an attempt at authentic expression, to have her feelings witnessed and understood.
Neither of the above-mentioned Times pieces explicitly refers to Gilbert and Gubar’s theoretical work on literary madwoman as an influence on Messud’s novel. But Gilbert and Gubar’s exploration of the women writers who brought the “trope” to life is just as relevant to Nora’s story as the trope itself.

While critics have paid significant attention to Nora’s relationship to Sirena, to Nora’s “unlikeable” disposition, and to Nora’s desire to be seen, few have remarked on the role of Nora’s mother in the novel, and particularly on the way Nora approaches the topic of her mother through and over the course of her narrative. Gilbert and Gubar’s theory on the role of the “precursor,” as well as on the process of “self-authorship,” bears striking resemblance to the roles of the characters and the trajectory of the narrative in *The Woman Upstairs*, and literal and symbolic relationships of mother and daughter are central in both *Madwoman* and *The Woman Upstairs*. Applying Gilbert and Gubar’s theoretical lens to a reading of Nora’s mother and the arc of both the story and the narrative, *The Woman Upstairs* offers a useful interpretation of how contemporary women might be affected by and relate to the roles played by their mothers, and particularly of how women may conceive of possibility when their mothers signify regret and lost potential.

Nora’s mother, her suffocated life, and her slow, sad death sit at the core of Nora’s self-conception and her internal sense of a woman’s ability to be free—and freely herself—in the world. Despite being dead, Bella Eldridge pervades Nora’s first-person narrative. Through this narrative the image of her mother becomes sharper, larger, and closer to Nora’s experience, as if Nora is deciphering and removing the masks on her mother’s face to reveal, memorialize, and learn from it. It is useful, here, to revisit the
meaning of a mask. The first definition of “mask” listed by the Oxford English Dictionary is “A covering for all or part of the face, worn as a disguise, or to amuse or frighten others,” which might inform the questions of why one might cover one’s own face or the face of another and why one would want to un-disguise herself and others (Oxford English Dictionary, “Mask”). To live in a society or culture is, necessarily, to take on masks. It is an issue of good behavior—one must perform roles to keep the ideologies and structures of that society or culture functioning and to maintain one’s own function in that society—and also an issue of the barriers between true and apparent selves. To reject the masks appropriate and available to you—of the “good daughter” or “devoted wife,” for example—is to undermine the forces that determine our meaning as individuals and group members and to personally risk ridicule, punishment, and exile. To examine one’s own mask, then, is to explore and define the forces determining one’s existence or performance in the social, political world. And to remove one’s mask is to discover one’s self as one exists authentically and glimpse the possibility of defining or authoring oneself. The theme of masks is, understandably, present in numerous important works of fiction, but also in works of theory related to gender, race, and culture. In addition to many other themes, devices, and motifs, *The Madwoman in the Attic* present a rich inventory of masks throughout literature by men and women, paying particular attention to the language of masks on female characters and authors who attempt to decipher and deconstruct their own identities.

According to how the process is described by Gilbert and Gubar, Nora’s process of self-definition constitutes a crucial first step toward the woman artist’s goal of “self-assertion” or “self-authorship”. Importantly, in doing the work of peeling back her
mother’s masks, Nora is also deciphering and removing the masks she wears herself.

Because Nora returns again and again to her mother’s death, and because Nora’s identity as both a woman and an artist is what is ultimately at stake in her story, the narrative of *The Woman Upstairs* can be understood as a woman’s coming-to-terms with her own grief and a parallel coming-to-terms with her socialization and liberation as a woman and an artist. Lastly, while Nora wrestles with her mother’s life and legacy in the telling of the central story—that of her betrayal by the Shahids—her narrative reveals surprising connections between Mrs. Eldridge and Sirena Shahid that shed light on the relationship of mothers, daughters, and what Gilbert and Gubar would call the “female anxiety of authorship.” (Gilbert and Gubar, 51).

**The Masks of Bella Eldridge**

The tragedy of Bella Eldridge is the contrast between the life she lives and her seventies-era feminist beliefs about women’s equality, education, and independence. Her beliefs and her advice to Nora clash with her performed roles of housewife and mother, and Nora captures in her memory the moments in which the inner ideals clash with the outward performance, in which her mother’s shame and anger rise through the cracks of her mask. These moments disclose and reveal her mother’s contradiction and sudden sadness, and they prove to be significant markers within Nora’s narrative as she explores her own self and life in the space of the novel. In a conversation about whether Nora will go to college for art or something more practical, Nora’s mother explains her own life’s trajectory: “Didn’t you know, I make a house a home? That’s what mothers do.” But she continues sternly, “It’s not like when I was a girl, the MRS degree and all that. You won’t live off pin money, off any man, no matter how much you love him. You won’t depend
on anyone but yourself. We agreed, right? (49)” At once, Nora’s mother values independence and, with the “salary” she gets from her husband, she models quite the opposite (53). Her college degree, “in its frame under the eaves in the attic, festooned with dust bunnies, among a dozen disavowed artworks,” symbolizes what a woman of her generation had to stifle in order to bear the role of housewife. But stifling oneself has consequences, among them the doubling and fracture of one’s self. Bella Eldridge’s hidden rage explodes forth in intense moments of shame and despair, and it is just as easily buried when she is cued to perform socially, as in a scene at the grocery store:

As she stacked the groceries on the conveyor belt there was an expression of such impassioned nostalgia on her face that she looked like a Norman Rockwell portrait. I could see her genuinely believing what she’d told Sadie, believing that it was the best time of year. Someone else had wept and yelled at me minutes before, and Bella Eldridge would never have recognized her. (55)

In this scene, Bella is despondent because her housewife allowance is not enough for her to treat the children to much this Christmas, a scene Rockwell would never have painted in his time romantically representing idyllic suburban life for the Saturday Evening Post. A cheerful transaction at the A&P (another relic of America’s past, and one with male literary connections, as well) would have been perfect for a painting, though, and thus Nora critiques the lifestyle propaganda of her youth by equating it with a false representation—or mask—fixed on the face of her suppressed mother. The two sides of this woman—the polite and sociable mother and the “rageful, viperish” woman within—parallel the duplicity to which Gilbert and Gubar frequently refer in their work, namely the doubles of the “angel in the house” and the “madwoman in the attic.” The hidden, neglected parts of ourselves are our true selves, and hiding them in the attic only feeds the madwoman who lives there, ready to “snap.” Where Gilbert and Gubar see the writers
they explore as letting the madwoman speak through their poetry and prose, arising “from a silence in which neither she nor her author can continue to acquiesce,” it is Nora, the artist and storyteller within this novel, who recalls the ways in which her own mother’s madwoman spoke up or was silenced as a suburban housewife and mother (Gilbert and Gubar, 77).

In many ways, Nora’s mother serves as an artistic “precursor.” In their revision of Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” Gilbert and Gubar argue that the woman artist can only begin a struggle for self-authorship “by actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal authority is possible. (49)” Well acquainted with her mother’s beliefs about the importance of determining and achieving one’s own goals, especially as a woman, Nora watches her mother accept the death bed with utter frustration, indicating to the reader how she felt about her mother’s passivity throughout her life. As narrator, Nora asks, “But can I say now that she is dead, long dead, that I only half believed in her? I wanted—I needed—her to revolt. (60)” She continues, “I wanted her ignoble, irresponsible, unreasonable, petty, grasping, fucking greedy for the lot of it, jostling and spitting and clawing for every grain of life.” Nora’s mother seems to have surrendered in what Gilbert and Gubar would call her “battle for self-creation” (49). In recalling her mother’s unsuccessful attempts at creativity (children’s books and fashion design among them) and referring to her as a “beloved embarrassment,” in identifying her “Norman Rockwell” masks and replaying her mother’s passive death, Nora recognizes that having half a madwoman as a model couldn’t have taught her to rebel herself. Bella Eldridge could only succeed at modeling for Nora how not to pursue one’s own goals, how not to
“get out of this stodgy little dump” and “see the world. (20, 49)” She shows Nora that to revolt and to be greedy are too much to ask, even while putting the pressure on her to do just that. In as much as Bella rubs off on Nora, she is a female precursor, but as a model of rebellion, she fails to fulfill the role of precursor in the ways Nora urgently needs it. In Nora’s duty as the quiet, tidy, cheerful “woman upstairs,” she has inherited her mother’s angel-self; in her desire to shout, “FUCK YOU ALL,” she has inherited her madwoman-self; and in the end, one can only hope that in the telling of her story, she will somehow discover a self of her own.

The central literary reference of The Woman Upstairs lies in the name its main character shares with the extraordinary Nora Helmer in Fredrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. But Nora Eldridge is not a strict parallel to Nora Helmer; Nora Eldridge does not have children and isn’t married, and Nora Helmer has no apparent artistic ambitions nor the sense of thwarted ambition so characteristic of Nora Eldridge. The life of Bella Eldridge, however, does echo the experience of Ibsen’s iconic housewife so sharply that Nora Helmer and Bella seem to be of one lineage—they speak across centuries, illustrating just the kind of “shared plot concealed in poetry and prose” Gilbert and Gubar illuminate in Madwoman (Federico, 3). Bella Eldridge and Nora Helmer both have children and are married. Neither works for her own money, although both find ways to attempt and enjoy a degree of financial independence—Bella with schemes for recipe books and fashion designs, inevitably abandoned, and Nora with the “copying” jobs she takes to pay back her lenders. In fact, both women are consumed with the need for more money, especially from their husbands, and particularly for spending on the family’s Christmas gifts. The crucial difference between Bella Eldridge and Nora Helmer is that Nora Helmer
eventually seizes her independence at the cost of losing her entire family and Bella Eldridge is never able to do that. Rather, Bella Eldridge weeps over fortune cookie messages of wasted potential and urges her daughter to be different, to learn and become for herself—Bella is ostensibly aware that her college degree, her artworks, and her sewing machine collect dust in the attic. In contrast, Nora Helmer spends most of the play “humming happily,” apparently oblivious to her subjugation as “little skylark,” “little squirrel,” “little frightened dove,” but her realization of having been completely misunderstood and unseen comes quickly and without a doubt (Ibsen, 147). Her redemption comes beautifully in a literary blaze of glory, while Bella dies incomplete. Nora Helmer’s life has just begun, and Bella’s is decidedly over, perhaps before it even begins.

With such fascinating parallels between Nora Helmer and Bella Eldridge, how are the two Nora characters connected through The Woman Upstairs? Bella Eldridge wants her daughter not to follow in her footsteps, but to be as fiercely self-determined as Nora Helmer is in the final scene of A Doll’s House. Before leaving her post as mother, wife, and “little doll,” Nora Helmer courageously commits to attending to the “sacred duty” she owes to herself and her own education (Ibsen; 228, 225). As Bella has sacrificed her own self in servitude to her family, she places enormous faith in her daughter to live that sacred duty which she herself has abandoned. The novel does not suggest that Bella knowingly named her daughter “after” Nora Helmer, but the reference within Nora’s name illustrates the burden of fearless autonomy that Nora Eldridge must carry—and carry out—against a strong current of social conditioning and despite her mother’s failures. The name also links Nora Eldridge to her own mother through Nora Helmer’s
similarly servile and dependent mother- and wife-hood. In addition, Bella Eldridge’s struggle to break free suggests that the chronology of women’s liberation does not end with Nora Helmer’s late 19th-century self-determination, nor will it end with the imminent revolt of Nora Eldridge in this 2013 novel. Finally, permitting that we can ask whether Nora Eldridge achieves what Nora Helmer is able to, a parallel might be drawn between the Shahids as those determining Nora Eldridge’s self-worth and Torvald Helmer as the one determining that of his wife, suggesting that both Nora characters are in motion at the end of their stories—in motion away from selflessness and toward selfishness, away from an oppressive, external axis of meaning toward one that is internal or intrinsic. Both are in parallel processes of selfishness and self-authorship. In this way, Nora Helmer can be seen as an artistic precursor, as conceived by Gilbert and Gubar, to both Nora and Bella Eldridge. Even while the influence of Nora Helmer as a “literary mother” is not directly stated in *A Woman Upstairs*, we might understand that all women are under it, recognizing the confinement of domesticity and reaching for the opportunity to break free.

**Nora’s Inheritance**

In the furious first pages of the novel, Nora refines her description of what it is that makes her so angry. Despairing over what she sees as an appearance-obsessed youth growing up around her, she asks, “How did all that revolutionary talk of the seventies land us in a place where being female means playing dumb and looking good? (4)” In Nora’s mother, we can see exactly how “that revolutionary talk” landed us in this place; despite the good intentions and sound principles of the seventies movements, the larger social pressure for many women to conform and turn a blind eye to their own beliefs
inevitably outweighed conviction. They, like Bella, became literally “wedded to the ordinary” (21). And further, these women had children, like Nora, who grew up with an angel in the house whose mask wasn’t fixed on quite right, whose inner madwoman howled from the attic. In Nora we see the neurotic daughter of a woman both shaped by the feminist movement and lost to the traditional roles of keeping house and having children. Incapable of authenticity or liberation, Bella is Nora’s introduction to life in the Fun House, its “fattening mirrors and elongating mirrors and inside-out upside-down mirrors,” its rooms “painted to confuse perspective. (5)” As Nora will tell us repeatedly, there is no exit from this Fun House—it is her metaphor for life itself.

Nora’s role as a teacher illuminates the ways in which she has absorbed an ethos of selflessness and feminine duty, but it also shows just how much of that selflessness is merely public performance. Where a teacher in America is expected to tell children that they can achieve their greatest dreams and to build in children a foundation of confidence, imagination, and possibility, it is also expected that such a teacher believe in and model the truth and value of such teachings. Nora, however, knows that while the values themselves may be true in principle, they are practically inaccessible, if not absurd, to girls and women. Pages after Nora asks herself how feminism “landed us” in a world where her female students “care more about their hair or their shoes than about galaxies or caterpillars or hieroglyphics,” she answers her own question with a specimen from her psyche, a paragraph that begins “When you’re a girl (...):

You learn a whole other polite way of speaking to the people who mustn’t see you clearly, and you know—you get told by others—that they think you’re really sweet, and you feel a thrill of triumph: “Yes, I’m good at history/biology/French, and I’m good at this, too.” It doesn’t ever occur to you, as you fashion your mask so carefully, that it will grow into your skin and graft itself, come to seem irremovable. (4, 22)
As a person, she both sees and is resigned to the power imbalance inevitably experienced by all girls and women; she both sees and is resigned to the performative element of gender—the literal selflessness at the core of a girl hiding who she is in order to perform who she is desired to be. The only two female students Nora mentions in the narrative are twins named Chastity and Ebullience: an echo of Victorian womanhood—you shouldn’t simply be a good girl (Chastity), you should like it, too (Ebullience). Not once do we see Nora mentor or admire the girls, nor does she show an interest in mothering them as she does with Reza Shahid. It’s not that Nora doesn’t see the problem, it’s that she doesn’t know what to do about it. While Nora herself is frustrated with her life in the Fun House, from which there is no exit, she can also be seen as escorting her students through it. For, what else can she do?

Nora’s confused perspective fuels her belief that if she can’t imagine something, then it isn’t possible: “All my life, I’d shied away from things I couldn’t imagine (195).” “This conviction,” she says, “was behind my renunciation of the artist’s life before I’d begun to live it. I couldn’t imagine how to be an artist in this world.” She couldn’t imagine this for herself, because she had never actually seen it, or anything like it, done. Further, rather than telling us that she pursued the things she could imagine, she frames possibility in the negative; her focus fixates on closed doors, not open ones. In her “debilitating inadequacy,” a symptom which Gilbert and Gubar identify as part of the experience of gender for most women in a patriarchal society, she has developed a “disease” typical of the woman writer’s anxiety of authorship (Gilbert and Gubar, 50). The anxiety of influence, as experienced by the female author is an “even more primary ‘anxiety of authorship’”—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never
become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her. (Gilbert and Gubar, 48)” For Nora, the fear that she can never create runs deep, but her desire to create, both art and children, is always there, collecting dust like her mother’s disavowed artworks. Since her youth, Nora had wanted to be an artist and a mother; she tells us that “the art and the children—they were non-negotiable. (17)” And yet, as she graduates from college and works herself into society, she abandons art, can’t commit to a relationship, and continues to be frustrated by her mother’s inability to revolt. Explaining why she declined her ex’s proposal—and the possibility of having children with him—she even tells us that “there would have been no art, no oxygen. (86)” Unable to imagine her own revolt, she deprives herself of that which she knows will make her not only thrive, but survive. Without a true precursor, Nora begins her transformation into the woman upstairs—a life of “quiet desperation,” “completely invisible,” “no different at all. (6)”

Just as Nora both needs and rejects art in her life, her doubleness also manifests as a combination of narcissism and self-loathing. Nora incessantly puts herself down, claiming that she is not a “real artist”; but she also hopes to “prove [her] greatness, however small” by telling her story, and in the story itself is ever hoping for external validation of her greatness (18). She admits to a “lifelong secret certainty of specialness, [her] precious, hidden specialness,” but can be easily characterized as a woman plagued by insecurity and self-doubt (143). While she tries to take personal responsibility for her unfulfilled life, the mixed messages of her upbringing undoubtedly shape Nora’s contradictory inner selves, her personality disorder. Nora’s anxiety is not unlike that of another “woman upstairs”—Emily Dickinson—as described by Gilbert and Gubar when they write,
her own anxiety of authorship was a ‘Despair’ inhaled not only from the infections suffered by her own ailing physical mother, and her many tormented literary mothers, but from the literary fathers who spoke to her—even ‘lied’ to her—sometime near at hand, sometimes ‘at distances’ of Centuries’… (53)

As trauma has its legacy, so too does a mother’s split self, the hide-and-seek of who she is and who the historical “fathers” expect her to be. Concerning Nora’s ruminations on her mother’s stifled life, Gilbert and Gubar offer a parallel from a scene in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, in which Aurora sees her mother’s corpse transform “by turns / Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite” (18). The Madwoman authors explain that this means,

not only that she herself is fated to inhabit male-defined masks and costumes, as her mother did, but that male-defined masks and costumes inevitably inhabit her, altering her vision. (19)

Thus, what really makes Nora so angry is a combination of three things: first, that we are told we can be whatever we want and are encouraged to reach for the stars; second, that the actual experience of living “in this world” is an experience of absurd limitation and competition—“the mountain of greens” is of “Everest proportions”; and, finally, the manner in which the realities of inequity and social pressure combine with the idealistic narrative of equality and achievement to produce legions of women whose lives are spent between the two poles of despair and delusion, self-doubt and fantasy. If Gilbert and Gubar are correct about *Aurora Leigh* and the way patriarchal gender norms inhabit and influence our very perception, then Nora is justified in her frustration with the inevitability of masks and with the overwhelming feelings she experiences in the face of her own liberation. For the questions of how she will make art and of whether anyone will ever understand her do overwhelm Nora, but it is the question of whether and how
she will see and understand (or “come to terms” with) herself that will determine whether her own personal and artistic revolution is possible.

Nora’s personal identification with and description of “the Woman Upstairs” reveals both her inheritance of her mother’s “angel in the house” mask as well as the fact that she has begun the process of defining herself. As explicated by Gilbert and Gubar, the Victorian idea of the “angel in the house” is a woman of “unselfish grace, gentleness, simplicity, and nobility. (22)” She should “devote herself to the good of others. (24)” This is the role of the housewife, to serve the needs of her husband and children. Explaining why she hasn’t “seen the world,” she tells Nora, “I’ve had my moment, sweetie. Maybe another will come. But for now, I’m needed right here. (49)” What Bella means when she says she’s “had her moment” is that she’s missed her chance. Bella’s dreams and desires are simply not applicable to her life in the house, they are out of the question. Of old family photos, Nora tells us “My mother is hardly in these pictures at all, anywhere. She must have been taking them”—casually striking on her mother’s invisibility and concealment, her distance from the action that “matters,” recounting this as if she doesn’t quite comprehend the loneliness of her mother’s existence (51).

However, while Nora inserts these comments about her mother’s life, she describes herself in similar terms: as peripheral or inconsequential, “the other one”; as unseen, “I really am invisible”; as fixated on missed opportunities, “my art isn’t, after all, about what is or what might be, but about what was” (8, 209, 152). When Nora jokes that “the Woman Upstairs would never aspire in such self-serving ways” as having a personal totem pole, she is letting on that all “Women Upstairs” are expected to be selfless out in the world, but that inside they are just as focused as everyone else—if not more—on the
state of their private selves (280). The repeated identification of both her mother and herself with a surface appearance of selflessness, duty, and insignificance and an interior reality of fury demonstrates how Nora is in a process of self-definition, recognizing her social existence as a construction and moving toward self-assertion. Gilbert and Gubar explain the logic of this process, with regard to the literary woman artist, as follows: “For all literary artists, of course, self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion: the creative ‘I AM’ cannot be uttered if the ‘I’ knows not what it is. (17)” As she becomes acquainted with her mother, she knowingly or unknowingly becomes acquainted with herself, and the same way she clamored within for her mother’s revolt, she now clamors for her own. Even naming herself “the Woman Upstairs” is a sign of life and creative potential.

Extraordinary Hope

Despite believing in the absurdity of childhood’s messages of freedom and achievement, Nora nonetheless clings to the idea of the extraordinary—an other way of being. The extraordinary symbolizes an exit from the Fun House in which she is trapped. Nora expresses her comorbid disillusionment with and belief in greatness when she remarks on the exceptionality of young Reza Shahid:

Each child is strong in a different way, we always told them. We all have different gifts. We can all make good choices if we try. But Reza gave the lie to this, bound in his charm and beauty as if in a net. (13)

She is repulsed by the lies she must tell children about their specialness, but she is also spellbound by greatness. To glimpse greatness in a person is to be reminded that there is a world beyond her average life, a harbinger of hope that the greatness and “hidden specialness” inside of her has some potential for expression. In addition to the way Reza
stands in for the children Nora hasn’t had, the Shahids attract Nora because they are both foreign and distinguished—Sirena a successful Italian woman artist and Skandar a Lebanese academic with a post at Harvard. “I’ve always been attracted to foreignness,” Nora tells us just before elaborating on a high school friendship with a girl from England who was, for a short time, her “one claim to specialness” (37, 38). Like greatness, foreignness is a door between “stuck” and “free,” between confined stagnation and unlimited expansion. Sirena’s name, siren, highlights Nora’s illogical obsession, the way in which she feels spellbound by her. Whether it’s babysitting or helping with her Wonderland installation, Nora simply can’t say no to Sirena. Nora looks to Sirena, in particular, for an external, authoritative redemption of her own inner giftedness, and she hopes that the whole family will truly see, understand, and ultimately need her.

Among the many images Nora uses to understand herself and her world—the “black monk,” the Fun House—is the figure of Lucy Jordan, a sort of devil-on-the-shoulder constantly reminding Nora of the kind of unremarkable life she is trying to escape. A character from a Marianne Faithful song, Lucy Jordan is a woman who, “At the age of thirty-seven, she realized she’d never ride through Paris in a sports car, with the warm wind in her hair…” Although Lucy Jordan clearly stands for that which Nora fears, half of the references to her come at times when Nora is ecstatically hopeful: once when Skandar tells her a story from his youth about the infinite possibilities of the present, and once when she experiences Sirena’s Wonderland show in New York. In the first case, Nora feels “the opposite of a Lucy Jordan moment” and in the second, she feels “the antithesis of a Lucy Jordan moment” (189, 278). In these “happy-crazy” manic moments, where “the world was filled with light” and Nora is wrapped up in a “joyful panic,” she is
carried to that happy feeling by someone else’s art, by Skandar’s storytelling and Sirena’s installation (170, 189). By association, he is redeemed. Likewise, she allows Reza to fulfill her desire for motherhood. Nora relies on the Shahids to deliver her to other worlds where she is what she longs to be and, in doing so, fails to find her own authentic being independently. Thus, when she takes leave from teaching and embarks for Europe, she does so not to explore herself or her art, but to find the Shahids and tap back into their glamour, possibility, and foreignness. Like an addict, she chases the painkiller in the hope that once more they might offer a glimpse of that “richer and more fulfilling and more wondrously open and aware existence that so briefly had seemed possible. (289)”

What is perhaps most significant about these moments of “antithesis” and “opposite,” is that they embody a negation of Nora’s mother’s life and fate. This is because Bella Eldrige effectively is Lucy Jordan. When Nora tells her story, she is approximately 4 years beyond the death of her mother, yet she doesn’t yet see the direct connection of the Shahid story to her grief when she recalls, early in the novel that “In the past few years, I’ve often thought of the Marianne Faithful song (…) and I’ve felt little pricks behind my eyes. (38)” Rather, she attributes the song’s sting to a personal resonance with her own life. Still, within pages, Nora confronts a sad memory of her mother—one that speaks of “hunger,” “torment,” “sorrow,” and “regret”—and wonders, was her mother then having “her own Lucy Jordan moment? (57)” The answer is “of course,” but also that her mother’s whole life is a Lucy Jordan moment, that the only reason the song has sting at all for Nora is because it really is a song about her mother. Therefore, in Nora’s exhilarating moments of validation from the Shahids, and particularly from Sirena, in which she exists within the antithesis of a Lucy Jordan
moment, she tastes rebellion from her mother and sees that another life is possible. This is so regardless of whether her means of getting to that feeling are ultimately authentic or admirable. In shared meals of exotic Lebanese spice, Italian dinners with wine, and cupcakes and coffee on the studio floor, the novel’s pervasive metaphor of hunger and food repeatedly indicates that Nora is starving and that the Shahids feed her, at least through the course of the story itself. Having tasted their validation, she can now imagine being fed, or fulfilled. And, inverting Nora’s own logic of impossibility, if she can imagine it, then it is possible.

Life and Death

The themes of life and death pervade Nora’s story, and this is especially true with respect to the characters of Sirena and Nora’s mother. As Nora’s mother is dead before our story begins, her ghost hovers above the Shahid story-line and also above Nora’s telling of it. Importantly, Bella Eldridge’s ghost, as mediated through Nora’s memory, does not reflect an image of her whole life, but largely of her literal and metaphorical deaths—her creative, emotional disintegration and her physical end. This tells us as much about what Bella Eldridge’s life “really” may have been like as it does about the nature of Nora’s memories, filters, and frames. It also reflects the hopelessness Nora has inherited. Thus the arrival of and attraction to Sirena—Nora’s symbol of life and beacon of hope. Nora states the case simply when she contrasts her style of art with Sirena’s: “Sirena, on the other hand, is engaged with the life force. We all want that, really. It’s what attracts us: someone who opens doors to possibility, to the barely imagined. (152)” In addition to Sirena’s playful style, it is her vital “ruthlessness” that comes to represent what “an artist” is to Nora. Against the selflessness of Bella Eldridge, the stowing away of
disavowed artworks and her duty toward the family, Sirena models a greediness “for the lot of it” which Nora had so craved from her mother. As Nora tells it, “She took on storybook worlds, plundering other people’s imaginations. (152)” Likewise, Sirena’s vitality is at the core of the many eating scenes in which she is featured, and also in her lax parenting style and her messy habit of leaving dirty coffee cups about the studio, hardly changing her clothes or washing her hair while in the midst of creative inspiration—Nora’s “ideal of an artist. (174)” This ideal, the opposite of selflessness, is what Nora achieves in her drunken night as Edie Sedgwick, expressed in the Polaroids she takes of herself and her masturbatory finale. The irony in this scene is that Edie, on a sober day, is the only female artist figure in Nora’s repertoire whom she admires, not for her fierce self-determination, but as a “spectacle” to be stared at and consumed, exploited by Andy Warhol, and alone—not really the ideal artist or artist ideal at all. The tension between the selflessness of Edie and the selfishness of Nora-as-Edie is illuminating: the scene expresses Nora’s attempt to liberate the selfless, “annihilated” parts of herself by proxy; through liberating Edie from the sugar-coated confinement of “the Christmas display at Bloomingdale’s,” she enacts her own liberation from the masks and roles inherited from her mother (174-75).

During the development of Nora’s “friendship” with Sirena, Nora reverts more and more to the behavior of the angel-in-the-house that she has identified with the confinement of her mother. As a female school teacher, she can be seen as a parallel to the governess of Victorian literature. Up until the end of the narrative, Nora is publicly the kind of woman, a “pattern Victorian lady,” who “has no story of her own but gives ‘advice and consolation’ to others, who listens, smiles, sympathizes. (Gilbert and Gubar,
Though Nora first encounters the Shahids when Reza picks up her apple at the grocery store, it is Nora’s active role in caring for Reza when he is bullied on the playground that initiates her involvement with Sirena. Even in taking Sirena up on the offer to share the studio, Nora is doing Sirena a favor. Then Nora takes care of the playground-battered Reza once again, and is eventually asked to be his babysitter, filling the roles of both angel and mother. In addition, she becomes, essentially, Sirena’s assistant, and does not seem to accomplish anything with her own artistic projects. She succumbs to Skandar’s advances, eventually paying with her own anxiety and disappointment. Despite wanting “her own story,” Nora routinely and compulsively denies what is best for her. The objectification of Edie Sedgwick, the perpetual servitude of Nora Eldridge, and the angel-mask of Bella Eldridge are connected in the following description from Gilbert and Gubar:

> Whether she becomes an objet d’art or a saint, however, it is the surrender of her self—of her personal comfort, her personal desires, or both—that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. For to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. (25)

Edie’s existence as “objet d’art” has selflessness—or death—in common with Nora’s sainthood and Bella’s Norman Rockwell face. At the end of the story, Nora’s Edie scene becomes central to her rebellion, which is also when Nora symbolically comes to carry her mother’s rage, suggesting that whatever happens next, Nora may not only be rising from the ranks of the lifeless but also bringing them with her.

Early in the narrative, Nora shares her template for understanding her relationship to her mother alongside her relationship to Sirena. Like her half-formed understanding of how “Lucy Jordan” actually means “Bella Eldridge,” the framework by which she
understands the chronology of losing her mother and encountering the Shahids is too simple to take seriously but too naïve not to dig beneath. Shortly after Nora describes the studio space she shared with Sirena, she remarks, “My mother was only two years dead, that fall,” and continues,

As my wise friend Didi has more than once observed about life’s passages, every departure entails an arrival elsewhere, every arrival implies a departure from afar. My mother left here for an unknown there; and then Reza and Sirena and Skandar came to me. (64)

Willfully understanding the Shahids as having come to her, she not only contradicts her belief that she doesn’t matter to them, but she also refuses to see herself as an active participant in the relationship. By placing her mother and the Shahids in a timeline, she hints at a causal relationship between them, but ultimately, with those words of so-called wisdom, which allude to forces beyond her control, she eliminates any chance that we might recognize the truth: that she needed the Shahids, longed for their approval, and actively inserted herself into their lives, and that all of this was the result of not only losing her mother but watching her die unfulfilled.

In the context of Nora’s entire narrative, and the Shahid story within it, the “wise” template quoted above reveals another aspect of Nora’s nascent awareness, which is that, in the end of the story, Sirena and the Shahids have departed, but the hidden, burning core of her mother is utterly present. In the last lines of the novel, Nora tells us,

I’m angry enough, at last, to stop being afraid of life, and angry enough—finally, God willing, with my mother’s anger also on my shoulders, a great boil of rage like the sun’s fire in me—before I die to fucking well live.
Just watch me. (302)

Where Sirena once stood as the ideal artist and woman, she is now the target of Nora’s rage. Where Bella Eldridge once stood as the representative of a wasted life, she is now
the fuel behind Nora’s will to live. Nora’s mother is also being honored and held symbolically on Nora’s shoulders, which is both an act of compassion towards her deceased mother and a resurrection of those parts of her mother that were stifled, muted, and hidden throughout her life. It may not be the case that what Messud portrays here is an artist who is ready to create art, but that Nora is facing illusions around her and delusions within her, and that telling this story is crucial to Nora’s next step forward. This is precisely the process of self-definition that Gilbert and Gubar explore with regard to the woman writer:

Before the woman writer can journey through the looking glass toward literary autonomy, however, she must come to terms with the images on the surface of the glass, with, that is, those mythic masks male artists have fastened over her human face both to lessen their dread of her “inconstancy” and—by identifying her with the “eternal types” they have themselves invented—to possess her more thoroughly. (Gilbert and Gubar, 16)

To expect this process to be pretty, or to conclude that Nora’s state at the end of the novel is an unsavory one, is to dismiss her (our) duplicity and enforce her (our) complicity. It is to wish a woman back under her masks.

Conclusion

When Nora speaks with familiarity of “we Women Upstairs,” and tells her reader—as if over a glass of wine—about how “none of us wants to be that,” the reader is counted among the many Nora sees as making up the population of un-extraordinary women. Nora tells us, without a hint of sarcasm, “Numerous in our twenties and thirties, we’re positively legion in our forties and fifties. (6)” Thus, her narrative is not a confession, as it may seem at times, but an offering of a shared tale, a common personal narrative with which the reader is already familiar. Alternately, Nora’s inclusion of herself among “us” might be seen as a rhetorical device in which she tricks the reader
into thinking she too has felt and faced her own masks through a similar tale of disillusionment. But as Nora herself transforms into Edie Sedgwick, as her character is an inheritance from not only her mother, but from Nora Helmer, Nora includes herself among another “us,” those women that have come before this “us.” While Nora’s experience and the way she tells it may be jarring, the recognition of what she expresses is not shocking in the least. Rather, it eases into a concession that I, she, and we have some lineage of “us” in common—across generations and so-called “waves.”

At the beginning of Nora’s story, she belittles the plainness of her mother’s life when she tells us, “there was nothing foreign about my mother,” and she begins to interrogate the source of her own “delusions of grandeur” when she hypothesizes that “maybe, more likely, they came from my mother, fierce and strange and doomed. (38, 19)” In these early moments of the novel, Nora appears to hold a grudge against her mother, as if she is intentionally—and resentfully—focusing on her mother’s inadequacy, perhaps even as an insecure disclaimer that Nora is aware of her mother’s failings and also that she thinks of herself as different. Her one, brief confession of love is strangely cold, and impersonal: “I loved it. I loved being her child. I remember looking at her and thinking she was the most beautiful thing in the world. (49)” The reason she confronts and addresses the fierce strangeness of her mother, even if in a critical tone initially, is because she has to.

Nora’s ebb and flow of compassion, disdain, and recognition when she touches on the topic of her mother, reveals the messy, painful nature of both grief and the process of self-definition. To struggle against one’s own socialization is difficult, particularly when that also means facing the socialization of your mother and your precursors as women.
While I have not explored it here, one need not look far to see the presence of such tragic “literary mother” figures as Woolf, Neel, and Dickinson have been in the formation of contemporary female artists and writers. When Nora says “I’m angry enough to see why you walk into the water with rocks in your pockets,” she touches on a familiarity with despair among women artists, but also on the particular correlation of that despair with what may be called the “female experience” more broadly (302). By the conclusion of her story, Nora recognizes that indeed, her delusions, as well as her anger, are related to her mother, but that is not all. She also recognizes that avoiding anger by being polite, avoiding her mother’s pain by brushing it off, and avoiding herself by trying to be someone else—these are all forms of death and denial. Throughout the novel, Nora invokes the reader, speaking in her first-person narrative of an “us,” “we,” and “you.” In one of those early invocations, she speaks of how a child dreams of superpowers, and especially of a child’s dreams of flying. She asks, “do you remember those dreams?” and she tells us, as if reminiscing with us, “Flying was everything, once.” By the end of the novel, Nora’s anger demands that we reach into our memories, our conditioning and shame, to remember what it’s like to dream of flying, and to allow ourselves to want that, instead of settling for invisibility as the “quiet woman at the end of the third floor hallways, whose trash is always tidy, who smiles brightly in the stairwell. (6)
Chapter III.

How Should a Person Be?: Confinement and Escape in Genre, Form, and Character

In a recent conversation between the writers Sarah Manguso, Rachel Zucker, and Sheila Heti, hosted on Zucker’s podcast, Commonplace: Conversations with Poets and Other People, Sheila Heti articulates the role of writing in her life, not insignificantly as a response to her interlocutors’ discussion of marriage and children. Zucker describes her attraction to a married, mothering life as possibly rooted in an aversion to or terror of going through life “without a witness. (Zucker)” Zucker thus makes a distinction between the fear of not being witnessed and its salve, motherhood, and a woman’s fear of not fulfilling her desires and its salve, writing. She describes the terror in her pre-marriage life as “this feeling of, like, I’m just not even sure I exist,” but before she can complete the word “exist,” Heti interrupts with the following:

For me, that’s what writing does. Like, it’s my way of witnessing my own life or myself. I also feel like I don’t exist, but somehow books are proof of my existence. Maybe making concrete one’s life in the form of books is the solution to that terror. (Zucker)

The conversation between the three women is often warm, but also intensely sincere; in a discussion that revolves around motherhood, as well as around their mutual friendship and their lives as writers, they are brutally honest, and perhaps none is more so than Heti—the one writer out of three who has opted out of motherhood. Where Zucker insists it was this existential terror that won out in her own life, and led to her choosing wife-and motherhood, Heti insists that, no, this terror is enormous in all our lives, and it is this same terror that leads her, and presumably others, to write. She suggests that if Zucker is
still writing, then she is still ameliorating the terror of non-existence through her words and books, even if she is also doing that with her roles as wife and mother; motherhood is not the only available response to existential dread. In the end, Heti equates the value of the writer with that of the mother and pierces the illusion of either choice being more noble than the other. In this equation of roles, Heti demystifies the choice of wife- and motherhood as somehow more deep, spiritual, and profound that the choice of a writing life and the existential motivations therein.

In exploring the legacy of Madwoman in the Attic in Heti’s work, to stumble upon the author’s definition of a book as a means of being witnessed feels like stumbling upon a treasure map. This is because Heti’s novel, How Should a Person Be?, offers little guidance on the question of what books are and do. On a superficial level, the protagonist’s struggle is to answer the question of how to exist, and we do see her struggling with related quandaries, from how to be an ethical, responsible adult and artist to how to become an admired public personality. But this question—framing, looming, reminding—is nothing if not tongue-and-cheek, and it ironically bumps up against the role of literature, especially as a guiding moral force, an instrument of “shouldness,” a cultural product that ostensibly makes us better, more compassionate people in as much as it attempts to answer this question, which is in reality profoundly personal and complex, if not entirely unanswerable. From the start, the novel asks the reader not to throw out everything they know about literature, but to hold it lightly. While we might read Nabokov or Joyce with an encyclopedia nearby, ready to pounce on the hidden, uber-literary meaning of every surname, to explode subtle biblical references into constellations of sense, Heti’s narrator, “Sheila,” often defies the satisfaction of sense and
disables close-reading practices. The reader finds allusion and reference, but in less austere tones, playfully peppered in and poking out just as figures from the history of culture appear in our own lives. Paris Hilton’s famous sex tape, for example, is featured in Sheila’s own conception of who she is and who she will to be: “Watching her, I felt a kinship; she was just another white girl going through life with her clothes off. (Heti, 105)”

Sheila is not a reference to a character we’ve studied in the great works of literature, but rather an approximation of the author herself—a real person who we can’t know with any degree of certainty, at least not solely from the novel. How Should a Person Be? even goes so far as to prove that, as a book, it’s purpose has little to do with entertainment; it can be boldly un-entertaining, intentionally confusing, and sometimes even nauseating. All of these factors signify less what the novel is than what it is not. And they play into the presence of an unstable, unreliable, and at times unlikeable narrator, one who neither holds our hands through a neatly-tied-up tale nor knows herself what tale told is really about. Sheila is trying to be alone, trying to be an artist, trying to be a friend; she wanders through Toronto and New York and back through Toronto in search of clues of how to be, and the moments that mean something to her are shocking, and they’re never where we expect or want them to be.

Whether drawn to the title’s promise of a profound and potentially life-changing philosophy of being, or tickled by a young writer’s willingness to experiment with such an enormous question, any approach to the novel will come up against some degree of annoyance and irritation. As readers, our predicament of discomfort, can’t be ignored; it is, in fact, part of the book’s work. If Heti’s narrator ever does solve the riddle of the
book title, “How should a person be?”, the solution is surely buried just as well from herself as from the reader, mixed in with the numerous contradictory answers offered and guessed at over the course of the book. Additionally, many characters, including the narrator herself, are drawn from Heti’s own life, thus blurring the lines between fiction and memoir and upsetting our tendencies to either completely conflate author and narrator or cut the author out of our awareness entirely. Heti even uses the names of male artists in her own social circle to poke fun at romantic images of the suffering painter and academic and commercial art institutions. Both Eli Langer and Ted Mineo, for example, are visual artists in Heti’s life who also appear as versions of a male artist archetype in her novel. To further complicate matters, the book is sold as a novel but it incorporates various forms, including lists, scripts (including stage directions), and emails. The form of the novel, and the forms within it, are puzzling, and the narrator’s apparently random flip-flopping on questions of beauty, meaning, and responsibility are disorienting to say the least. Across reviews, the book is identified as “shambling” but also “deadpan,” it is both “performance art” and “pearl[s] of wisdom,” it is both “messy” and “beautifully written,” it is “art theory and comedy and self-help” (The Economist, Harper’s Bazaar, Jezebel, Bomb). Finally, given that the narrator is ostensibly an autobiographical portrait of the author, the unheroic, unglamorous Sheila in How Should a Person Be? complicates our relationship to the very figure of “author” as an admirable if not godly dispenser of truths.

The riddle of what this book is—novel, memoir, play?—is crucial to making sense of Heti’s radical, self-defining approach to historically acceptable literary forms—primarily the drama, the novel, and tropes of the artist’s coming of age tale. In most
novels, such as Messud’s *The Woman Upstairs*, for example, the reader may follow the main character’s own process of deconstruction and self-definition over the course of a narrative presented in a recognizable form. But in Heti’s book, the main character’s process, if it can be called that, is hardly linear and does not march directly forward through her tragedies toward epiphany, rebellion, or resolution. In Sheila’s narrative, it’s harder to see how she might be deconstructing and reconstructing herself as a woman, to locate who her female precursors are and whether they play a role in her own self-authorship. So, instead of the author providing a model of the female experience and liberation or of the artist’s triumph over tradition, we find the author herself enacting her own experience as a female and an artist, offering this book as a sort of artefact from her own attempt at self-definition, a particular instance of creative womanhood in a sea of generalizations. Heti’s intentionally inconsistent and purposefully autobiographical novel suggests that traditional forms and genres are inadequate to describing contemporary female writing and creativity.

Heti’s concept of a literary work as proof that the author exists enables her to attempt new forms and also casts Heti’s readers as witnesses to her life. Writing, for Heti, is personal and at every turn autobiographical, and we are thus allowed to ask questions of authorial intention and psychology—the kinds of questions asked by Gilbert and Gubar in their exploration of the psychologies behind the work of Victorian women writers, the very questions that are off-limits for traditional critics focusing strictly on the text. Putting into practice the notion of the personal as political, which happens to be at the heart of the *Madwoman* project, we are encouraged to draw connections between the writer’s words and her life, between the woman portrayed and the woman-ness.
experienced by the portrayer. We can ask if Heti’s portrayal rings true to our own experience, and we can ask whether it should, examining through the text our own expectations of both a book and an author who is, in other words, a person.

_How Should a Person Be?_ promises the general—a universal truth as one might find across the literary canon, a lesson, judgment, or way forward. It then breaks its promise, not only by undermining universality itself, but by delivering, intensely, the specific—a particular and messy text that invariably refers back to its author, a particular and inevitably messy individual living in the same world inhabited by her readers.

Characters in _How Should a Person Be?_ exhibit markers of the female literary tradition as defined by Gilbert and Gubar (for example, a sense of inadequacy, of loneliness and isolation, a need for a female audience, etc.), but the madwoman can be found haunting Heti’s corner of the landscape of contemporary women writers through the ways in which Heti defiantly approaches the novel form itself. Heti employs conventional forms and tropes to reveal the myriad ways “real personhood” and “creative life” don’t in fact conform to traditional, romantic narratives that rely on resolution, epiphany, liberation, and which dictate the lives of antagonist and protagonist before they even hit the page.

By also using unconventional forms and portraying unsavory and illogical parts of its characters’ lives, the novel also suggests the possibility of something new, clearing space for artists to challenge and redefine existing forms with honesty and ugliness, a similar (if not the same) project as that identified in _Madwoman_. Gilbert and Gubar’s analysis is particularly helpful with regard to how Heti’s novel is itself an attempt at self-authorship, world-making from a particular female perspective and creativity that moves beyond the confines of acceptable forms and narratives. As opposed to Messud’s character making
herself naked for the camera she is not aware of, Sheila in How Should a Person Be? shows us the naked author herself. Heti makes herself naked by trying on forms and showing exactly how restrictive or oddly appropriate they can be, demanding less illusion and more reality, not only from other artists but from her readers and critics as well. Finally, reflecting Gilbert and Gubar’s theory of female self-authorship, Heti’s literary mode not only clears space for new ways of writing, but also for new ways of being and understanding the rules—or lack thereof—of our own existence.

Written in five acts, with scenes and dialogue presented in both script and prose, How Should a Person Be? is Sheila’s first-person account of post-divorce life, marked largely by her friendship with Margaux, her relationship with Israel, and her own struggle to complete a play. Marriage, friendship, sex, and art form the venues in which Sheila explores her question of how to be. While the events portrayed and questions raised in the book can at times appear arbitrary or random, each of the above themes inevitably intersects with the others as issues of form, representations of artists and women, and motifs of idolatry gather minor moments into profound yet grounded constellations of meaning. Beginning with its presentation of issues of form, I’ll expand on the meaning of the novel in terms of its approach to and commentary on convention and “shouldness.”

Good Form: Books and People

Heti’s conception of writing as a way of “making concrete one’s life in the form of books” draws a parallel between a book and the person writing it, a parallel that is also implicit in Heti’s narrator as a version of the author herself. From that parallel, one might expand on the question of Heti’s title (also the book’s first line) regarding a person with one regarding a book: “How should a person be?” becomes “how should a book be?”
How should a novel be? A play? A list, an email, a conversation? So, when the New York Times Book Review, among other publications, calls the book “odd, original, and nearly unclassifiable,” we might, in reverse, assume the same of the person’s life made concrete in said book: odd, original, and nearly unclassifiable. In other words, when “book” is understood as an analog of “person,” the narrator’s questions about how to be and live become doubly rich, revealing the contours of the author’s—or all authors’—own relationship to form, tradition, and being her own kind of writer. One can imagine the narrator’s reflections on being human as easily applicable to an art student’s reflections on how art and artists should be:

I was always watching to see what they were going to do in any situation, so I could do it too. I was always listening to their answers, so if I liked them, I could make them my answers too. (1)

A young artist or writer must have models, and the image of the ideal artist is inevitably tied up in ideals of aesthetic goodness. After all, there have surely been many artists throughout history whose personalities and processes may fit our ideas of the artist type, but only a small few have succeeded in creating work that resonates over time and is praised by critics.

Relevant to any discussion of convention is the fact that a young artist practices “good art” by imitating and does so in hopes of discovering his or her own way of seeing and creating. Harold Bloom’s theory of the anxiety of influence, on which Gilbert and Gubar draw for their own argument, recognizes this fact, but also asserts that the artist or writer’s ultimate struggle will be to invalidate the work of his (male) predecessor, and it is this anxiety, rather than that of beginning to find predecessors, that consumes and drives the (male) artist. But Sheila’s story, and the form it takes, neither invalidates her
predecessors or takes a step in the dialectic toward greater truth and beauty as much as it undercuts modes of criticism and readerly expectation, as well as the standards these modes or perspectives rely on. This is, of course, ironic, as Sheila’s fixation is, superficially, on becoming the ideal person; in the beginning, Sheila is fixated on ideals and standards, but in the end, idols and ideals are laid utterly to waste. The novel’s numerous pokes at art school and beloved male artists, calls into question the earnest emphasis on tradition and beauty at such institutions, of which Bloom and other theorists are undeniably a part, and its psychological effects, particularly in the character of Sholem, whose mere participation in the “ugly painting competition” sends him into existential crisis, disgust, and shame. An unconventional novel written in five conventional acts, however, shows how breaking from tradition requires familiarity with it, and it is this duplicity and interplay of tradition and rule-breaking, in terms of the rules and imperatives of writing, of personhood, and of gender, which lay at the core of Heti’s novel.

Following the book-person parallel a step further, judgments made of good or bad books also happen to be judgments made of good or bad people. Emphasizing the shared anxiety around how art should be and how people should be, the narrator’s descriptions of the ideal person often mirror traditional definitions of great art: “unchanging, startling, and magnetic”; without a “lack of unity inside”; “consistent, wise, loving, and true” (3, 22). If a person has no unity inside—if she is, like Sheila, filled with “flightiness, confusion, and selfishness”—then she is not as she should be and she should strive to be something else. Likewise, if a novel has no direction or progress, no sense of balance, wholeness, or “organic unity,” if its concerns are only relevant to the author (a critique
made of anything “navel-gazing,” for example), then it is no good to critics and readers—it doesn’t conform to the rules intrinsic to the very idea of form itself and thus is not as it should be. It is the dogma of form, aesthetic goodness as dictated since Plato and Aristotle, that allows critics to offer 4 stars or none—how close does a given work come to greatness? As people, a 4-star rating sounds brutally simplistic, but this is Heti’s point: rather than a guiding principle based in universal truth, as we would believe it to be, “shouldness” is, in all its forms, a tyrant.

Themes of balance, wholeness, unity, and consistency abound in Sheila’s exhaustive self-critique, as well as in her parallel search for models of being. The tension between these concerns and the book of which they are a part, a book described as “shambling” and “messy” (in other words, fragmented and inconsistent), is undeniable. Shortly after her divorce, which takes place prior to the beginning of the narrative, Sheila gets a job at a hair salon because she had taken a career test in high school, of which the results had read “hairdresser.” In other words, she is not only lost and grasping for direction, but her motivation for getting this job is both extrinsic and irrelevant to who she is as an adult. Throughout the book, it is when Sheila is most vulnerable that she is most desperate to fix herself and is most willing to attach herself to the desires and philosophies of the people around her. She tells us that when her new boss told her that in cutting hair, “Balance masks flaws,” she “wanted to write this on [her] arm. *Beauty is balance-yes!* As much in a haircut, as in a work of art, as in a human being. (55)” The theme of person as work of art, as object, icon, and idol, becomes pronounced as Sheila searches for a relationship with her self again. When Sheila later inquires as to the confident character of her boss, his business partner tells her that, at home, “He’s exactly
the same as here. You will never meet a more consistent person than Uri.” And then she writes, “In that moment, I wanted nothing so much as for someone to say of me: She is the most consistent person you have ever met. Even at home, she never changes! I vowed to attend closely to Uri, to learn how he could be this way, so I could become it too. (55)” Not only does this passage illuminate our expectation that both human beings and works of art are without flaw, but it highlights this expectation or need as a response to anxiety about our own lives and imperfections—our humanness as something to deny, fix, cover. Sheila’s insecure relationship to her writing and to herself following the fall-out from her divorce leave her grasping for answers, and she finds comfort in the hope that those answers exist, a hope that is provided by the existence of admirable and famous people. “I admired all the great personalities down through time,” she says, “like Andy Warhol and Oscar Wilde. They seemed so perfectly themselves. (2)” Like the results of her career test, though, the motivation of being admired is purely external, for as we know, both Warhol and Wilde, despite having “big” personalities, struggled with their identities—evident, for example, in Warhol’s obsession with fame and his almost psychopathic need to be liked, and in Wilde’s iconic yet tragic story of hidden homosexuality, exile, and abandonment. Even Sheila’s language of seeming betrays the incongruity of public personality and reality. Further, it’s likely Sheila could achieve the balance and consistency necessary for admiration if only she could either completely abandon or completely fulfill her creative ambitions—not either of which she is capable of doing. Thus the appearance of balance or consistency can only be that—a performance that betrays the underlying dissatisfaction of self-denial. Finally, of all the artists Sheila and Margaux discuss in the novel, none of them are women; early in the novel, with only a hint of
distance in her tone, Sheila says, “It was men I enjoyed talking to at parties, and whose opinions I was interested in hearing. It was men I wanted to grow close to and be influenced by. (32)”

Convention and Ugliness

In intermittent moments of angst, particularly around her inability to complete the play, Sheila takes refuge not only in imagining herself as a kind of idol but in turning herself into a kind of object. Although Sheila moves from anxiety to self-objectification throughout the novel, a significant passage arrives early on to hint that this tendency began much earlier, before her marriage, and is only repeating itself in different forms in this new chapter of her life:

There was something wrong inside me, something ugly, which I didn’t want anyone to see, which would contaminate everything I would ever do. I knew the only way to repair this badness was devotion in love—the promise of my love to a man. Commitment looked so beautiful to me, like everything I wanted to be: consistent, wise, loving, true. I wanted to be an ideal, and believed marrying would make me into the upright, good-inside person I hoped to show the world. Maybe it would correct my flightiness, confusion, and selfishness, which I despised, and which ever revealed my lack of unity inside. (22)

Like a well-balanced haircut, the idol-object, whether it be a consistent person or a devoted wife, serves to mask the messy, imperfect, confused, and fluctuating subject, the badness which ought to be good. Like objects are inanimate, and idols are reliably fixed, Sheila is, as a wife, essentially not alive. For, as Gilbert and Gubar discover in the writings of Victorian women, “it is the surrender of her self [...] that is the beautiful angel-woman’s key act, while it is precisely this sacrifice which dooms her both to death and to heaven. (Gilbert and Gubar, 25)” Further, it is the satisfaction of a prescribed role that lures and comforts Sheila, an instance of the ways in which women across cultures
and centuries are persuaded, and persuade themselves, to see their own masks and object-status as something they authentically desire. Gilbert and Gubar remark on Austen’s critique of Victorian women as “fully socialized into believing that their subordinate status in society is precisely the fulfillment they crave. (Gilbert and Gubar, 13)” Like Heti, “Austen is centrally concerned with the impossibility of women escaping the conventions and categories that, in every sense, belittle them. (Gilbert and Gubar, 113)”

Rather than create her own story, or in other words, “self-authorize” her life, she adopts the life of an ideal. Despite her continued attempts to embody both female and artistic ideals, on some level she understands her missteps when she admits that it was not really she who was at the altar on her wedding day, but a replica of an ideal: “As I said for richer or for poorer, that bride came up in me. Tears welled in my eyes, just as they welled up in hers. My voice cracked with the same emotion that had cracked her voice, but I felt none of it. It was a copy, a possession; canned. (Heti, 23)” Because Sheila’s self and her identity as a writer are bound, her challenge is to uncover herself and thereby liberate the writer, warts and all; in Gilbert and Gubar’s words, which strike on the parallel complaint of women and texts as “inconstant” or inconsistent and echo Heti’s critique of “copy”-as-convention, if Sheila “is to be a poet she must deconstruct the dead self that is a male-‘opus’ and discover a living, ‘inconstant’ self. She must, in other words, replace the ‘copy’ with the ‘individuality.’ (Gilbert and Gubar, 19)” When Sheila tells us that marriage gave her a “suffocating feeling of leading a life that was not her own,” and that “no amount of work could compensate for what [she] had lost since her decision to marry—a feeling of ease, of having some direction in the world”—she expresses a concern that she is not the author of her own story but a wedding-cake
replica, cracking and crumbling from the inside (Heti; 39, 41). As Gilbert and Gubar identify the concerns abundantly expressed in nineteenth century writing by women, concerns which arise in Heti’s work as well, the shared plot concealed among Victorian writers is that of “the woman writer’s quest for her own story, in other words, of the woman’s quest for self-definition. (Gilbert and Gubar, 76)” Rather than the question of how a person should be, or even how Sheila should be, Sheila discovers the question of how she wants to be, how she wants to ask and answer and hold that question on her own terms.

Despite it’s formal and temporal distances from the great works by women of the nineteenth century, Heti’s novel proves not only the persistence of these gender-based concerns and struggles but their centrality, inevitability, and profound significance at the core of art and literature by women in general. Sheila is not the only female character in How Should a Person Be? for whom issues of self-definition arise. Sheila’s best friend Margaux, who is more ambitious in her creative career and serves as a kind of precursor for Sheila, struggles with her own ideas of “shouldness”—namely that she should be doing something good for the world and that painting is a selfish occupation. While Sheila says her own “first thought every morning was about wanting to marry,” Margaux’s “first feeling every morning was shame about all the things wrong in the world that she wasn’t trying to fix. And it embarrassed her when people remarked on her distinctive brushstrokes, or when people called her work beautiful (...). (Heti, 17)” Where Sheila collapses from ugliness and confusion into an idol/object state, Margaux reverts to apathy, idly knitting in bed after she returns from her showcase at Art Basel and repeatedly telling Sheila “who cares” when questions of right and wrong overwhelm her.
While Sheila admires Margaux’s “who cares” approach, Margaux in fact cares very much, as in the scene in which Sheila finds her planting a “baby tree” for a friend who’s father had just died. It is only when Margaux’s artist and compassionate selves are fractured that “who cares” becomes her, when reconciling parts of herself and being present for Sheila is too much to ask. Anjali, a peripheral New York character to whom Sheila is drawn as a friend during her desperate quest to become “an important artist,” presumably by the relief of this woman’s Margaux-esque “whatever” attitude, can be found expressing a hodgepodge of solutions to her own identity issues:

I needed to build myself up—enjoy my own company without sacrificing myself for someone else. I just wanted to have fun and be frivolous and air-headed and light, and just enjoy life and drink and go out and whatever, fuck. (199)

It is ironic to hear a character speak earnestly of building oneself up and “whatever,” fucking, in the same breath—but the passage speaks to contradictory messages about how to be and how to relate to oneself: there is self-care but there is also recklessness, there is a focus on the self but also a willingness to give it away, messages of puritan isolation and messages of nihilistic surrender. Anjali expresses mindlessness, “frivolous and air-headed and light” as a refuge from caring too much, taking herself too seriously, which happens to be the precise complaint leveled at Gilbert and Gubar’s women of the nineteenth century who dared “attempt the pen. (Gilbert and Gubar, 13)” Simultaneously, Anjali embodies the woman who chooses the male-devised mask of passive female being, convinced this is a role she genuinely wants to play. These polar opposite instincts of self-care and self-abandonment do not just reflect contradictory messages about empowerment and self-definition, messages broadcast to modern women from every corner of our patriarchal, capitalist culture, but they also reflect the source of the
“inconstant” or inconsistent and duplicitous female self, which seems to challenge all of the women in this novel and many that have come before it.

While a blazing, furious madwoman figure is not explicitly present in Heti’s novel, the doubled nature of the female psyche is; as Gilbert and Gubar write, “much of poetry and fiction written by women conjures up this mad creature so that female authors can come to terms with their own uniquely female feelings of fragmentation, their own keen sense of the discrepancies between who they are and what they are supposed to be. (Gilbert and Gubar, 78)” Even though Margaux is a genuinely empathetic person, it is the judgment of an artist’s life as selfish that throws her compassionate impulses into question, casting her own desires farther and farther away from her—she wants to reject her own compassion in order to invest in her art, and then wants to reject art in order to practice compassion, always feeling like some part of her will be lost if she takes either path. As both artist and woman, she is in a way fractured, even schizophrenic. Margaux does come into moments of balance, though, where her genuine empathy and creativity do work together; perhaps because of her consistent, almost relentless reflection on the value of both goodness and art, or because of her lack of consideration for what others think of her, Margaux effectively tends to and saves her friendship with Sheila while also enabling Sheila to get serious about her own creative work.

The Blow-Job Artist Gets Free

At the beginning of the novel, Sheila tells us of an ex-boyfriend who, out of anger and jealousy, wrote a play about her in which she winds up loveless and alone, kneeling in a dumpster, “weakly giving a Nazi a blow job, the final bit of love [she] could squeeze from the world. (Heti, 25)” The play ends, she says, when she asks the Nazi, “Are you
mine? To which he replied, *Sure, baby,* then turned around and, using his hand, cruelly stuck my nose in his hairy ass and shat.” Of the play, the man who wrote it, and her own response to it, she writes:

The conviction in its every line haunted me. I was sure he could see my insides, as he was the first man who had loved me. I was determined to act in such a way as to erase the fate of the play, to bury far from my heart the rotting seed he had discovered—or planted—there. (25)

While it could be simple to write the play off as the product of immaturity, just the cruel kind of thing humans in relationship to do each other, this would be not only an easy and unkind reading, but one which ignores the history of women in literature and art as it is produced in misogynistic cultures, and the psychologies such history produces. As the subject of her ex-boyfriend’s play, Sheila’s life is after that moment authored, to some degree, by him, and her self is defined by him—as ugly, as a cautionary tale, like *Madame Bovary,* levelled at unsatisfied women who seek attention and need love, women who can’t be controlled.

Not only does her ex-boyfriend portray her viciously as a response to his inability to own her (he writes the play because Sheila has just spoken to an old lover on the phone), but he does so on Sheila’s laptop so that the next time she works on her play, she sees his play first, thereby colonizing Sheila’s own creative space with a brutal yet transparently insecure warning about female freedom. As Gilbert and Gubar write, “the female writer’s battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor’s reading of the world but against his reading of her. (Gilbert and Gubar, 49)” It is precisely her boyfriend’s pre-authored tale against which Sheila ultimately rebels, a tale designed to make Sheila despise and fear herself, and her rebellion or revision lies in her adaptation of the ugliness and humiliation
of the tale itself.

Sheila’s transformations into and out of self-objectification nearly fill her story, but perhaps no tendency away from “something ugly” to something solid is more involved and exhausting than her self-objectification for Israel, an attractive but unremarkable man she meets at an art opening. He’s an artist, but exactly zero of their conversations pertain to art—every interaction revolves around sex. This is where the sex-object as a refuge from artistic anxiety becomes clear; the short chapter in which they meet and ultimately wind up in bed together ironically, but appropriately, begins as follows:

That night, after spending several hours staring at my miserable play, I shut down my computer in frustration and left my apartment. I went to a party to celebrate the appearance of three more books of poetry in the world. (Heti, 75)

Sheila’s apathy toward the poetry world is apparent here, as is her habit of striking out away from art and toward her own annihilation. In her first conversation with Israel, Sheila blurts out that she’s celibate (as a defense against getting involved with men when she should be focusing on art, a way of holding herself accountable), but by the end of the night Israel asserts that “[he’ll] decide if [she’s] celibate or not,” thus writing Sheila’s story for her, a story in which her will is not supported but mocked. As we know, this is not the first time Sheila has been written into a man’s text about her. The chapter ends abruptly with this statement of male authority, leaving the “love” scene cut out of frame in a strategy that is erotic despite the fact that our narrator has just been overtaken or, worse, raped. And, not surprisingly, Sheila apparently surrenders her agency for the comfort of having a role, like “wife,” defined and opened up for her to fulfill (78). On her first encounter with him, “the sexiest guy in the city,” she even reminds herself that “the
flower of love soon fades, but the flower of art is immortal,” consciously preparing herself to abandon her will-to-create, for now, in favor of love’s ephemeral satisfactions (75, 77).

While she never makes it explicit in her narrative, the dynamic of commitment to and abandonment from Sheila’s own self, embodied in her fluctuations between art and Israel, repeats itself over the course of the novel. After Margaux and Sheila have a fight, Sheila first commits to using the solitude of time apart to focus intensely on her play but is quick to shift her focus toward being-for-Israel. “All right, Israel, cum in my mouth,” she begins, in one of many lengthy, breathless sections of the book in which Sheila almost seems to pray to Israel, his penis, and her own devotion to it (120). “Even when you hear me gagging you don’t stop. It’s your unconcern that makes me want to do whatever you want with my body, which can be for you, while yours cannot be for me,” she writes, and continues later, “I won’t ask you for babies or tell you I’m not ready. Shoot it in me when you think the time is due. You know my legs are always open for whatever you want from me. (...) Impregnate me like an animal that can take it ‘cause I am. (120, 125)” Finally, in the last event before Sheila decides to abandon her dreams of Importance in New York, Sheila is dutifully writing a sordid letter to Israel when she realizes, from within herself, what a poor refuge “Israel’s cock” really is:

I was about three pages into a detailed explanation of how his cock had changed my life, when an odd sensation began creeping through me, an awareness of how sick it was that all this time I had been having so much trouble writing my play, yet instead of laboring away at it, here I was writing this fucking letter—this cock-sucking letter of flattery for Israel! (226)

Sheila’s life does indeed change after becoming involved with Israel, but only for the worse, and the consequences of her devotion to him are impossible to disentangle from
the consequences of her abandonment of her own play—at this moment, her vagina is not only exposed to strangers (per Israel’s letter-writing instructions), but she is near homeless, wandering the streets of New York and Atlantic City, far away from her friends, all in the hopes not of completing her play but of becoming “Important,” the “one thing that would justify the ugliness inside her. (189)” Just as precisely separating Israel’s blame from Sheila’s is impossible to do, and perhaps a useless exercise in itself, we can only infer that Sheila’s craving for “Importance” comes in part from her long-held need for admiration, and in part from living as a receptacle for Israel’s semen, and ultimately in how these two things together carry Sheila further away from “having some direction in the world,” from authoring her own story (41). In the spiral away from herself, she identifies giving blow-jobs as an art, becomes mesmerized and inspired by a video of Paris Hilton giving her boyfriend a hand job, tells us she’s been “working on [her] blow jobs,” justifying her own self-objectification to escape the nagging guilt of not having worked on her play instead. Heti even seems to reference the work of Victorian writers, and the gap between art as a strategy for self-authorization and sex as the same, when Sheila writes, “We live in an age of some really great blow-job artists. Every era has its art form. The nineteenth century, I know, was tops for the novel. (3)” Like Sheila vacillates between art and blow jobs, she frequently finds ways to self-deprecate herself as an artist, alternately and strategically worshipping great art and undercutting its significance when she either needs or fears it.

What if, rather than surrendering to the fragile comfort of object status, Sheila instead dared to be the “something wrong” inside her? In her moment of rebellion, which comes at the exact opposite end of the book from her ex’s dumpster story, rather than
turn away from the Nazi’s ass, she chooses to bury her face in it. Just before this event, Margaux has told Sheila that she thinks of her as “an invariable” in her life, a statement that carries profound meaning for Sheila, who writes, “very deep inside, something began to vibrate. I was an invariable. An invariable. No word had ever sounded to me more like love. (266)” Sheila’s revolutionary event, which follows this tender exchange, is then so shocking, bizarre, and ugly that it almost hides itself within the larger story—one wants to hurry along or read over it as an anomaly, just another peculiar moment in Sheila’s peculiar life, one wants to believe in an alternate tale where Margaux’s love buoys Sheila up over herself—and yet it is a harsh, loveless, hard-to-watch moment which really liberates Sheila. These ugly moments require our attention. Friendship between women, and artists, matter; unconditional love matters, but what matters more is the action Sheila takes to reclaim her life and story. Again, the relevant chapter, titled “Destiny is the Smashing of the Idols,” begins with Sheila torn between writing and blowjobs: “I should have spent the night inside writing, figuring out how a person should be, like I meant to, but I was afraid. I wasn’t ready. Instead I went out. I went to meet Israel. (270)” After a boring conversation at a bar, Sheila and Israel head back to his place, where they hook up; she “makes out with his penis,” uninspired (271). “We lay silently in bed,” she writes, “and then my body felt it, deep and calm: what I wanted to do—something I had never done before.” And then she shuffles her body beneath the covers, pretending she wants “to sleep beside his cock” and refusing his requests for her to move, and seizes this one moment as her own. She writes,

I felt so alert as I felt his dick shrink away, disgusted or ashamed. A few minutes passed. Then he turned his back on me. My nose went into his ass, and I felt its tiny hairs on my skin. A heat blanched my cheeks and my soul, but I remained there, stoic.
[...] What I had done in the night—it felt like the first choice I had ever made not in the hopes of being admired. I had not done it to please him. It was not to win someone’s regard. Then, from inside of me came a real happiness, a clarity and an opening up, like I was floating upward to the heavens. (272).

Sheila thus willingly betrays ideals of selflessness in order to free herself from them, reclaiming her ex-boyfriend’s narrative as her own and abandoning the confinement of how one should be. She never sees Israel again, and Act V begins: “Now it was time to write.” Armed with Margaux’s unconditional love—for “invariable” (unconditional) is different from “consistent” (one-dimensional)—Sheila’s sudden confrontation with ugliness, is the last thing she needs before she can return to and express herself. In both of these crucial moments, of love and ugliness, Sheila simply notes the origin of her feelings of freedom as “something” inside her—suggesting that, in the end, the answer to her question won’t come from logic, from books or works of art, from men or role-play or “great personalities.” Only Sheila can be the authority on how Sheila should love, make art, and be.

**Throwing Shit and Sand**

Throughout the novel, one wonders if Sheila will ever listen to Margaux’s advice about the value of humor, about not giving up, about working without thinking of the audience or market for one’s art. But Margaux has her own turbulent relationship to her work, and is only able to confidently define her own creative process and vision very late in the narrative. Crystallizing into words just as Sheila accepts herself as a constant in Margaux’s life, Margaux’s creative vision allows Sheila to understand her own process and way forward. Margaux articulates her plan to make a movie:

I’m going to make a movie using everything I have! (...) I don’t know what it’s going to look like in the end, but I have faith that at the center of the film there’ll
be like, this invisible castle, and each of the scenes will be like throwing sand on the castle. Wherever the sand touches, those different parts of the castle light up. At the end you’ll have a sense of the entire castle. But you never actually see the entire castle. (266)

And just after Sheila’s confrontation with ugliness under Israel’s sheets, Sheila shows how she absorbs Margaux’s self-defined, unruly approach to making art. While her initial response to Margaux’s movie-making plan is a simple “Right,” once Sheila embodies her ugliness and rescues her own story from Israel and her ex-boyfriend she is able, like Margaux, to see “everything” she has as valid. She leaves Israel’s apartment and gets to work; she writes, “I went straight into my studio and thought about everything I had, all the trash and the shit inside me. And I started throwing the trash and throwing the shit and the castle began to emerge. (277)”

Margaux and Sheila’s shared strategy is remarkably similar to what Heti has done in the novel itself; Heti takes everything she has—friends, various literary forms, insecurities, a love of art, anger, vulnerability, and more—and mixes it all together into a narrative that is only apparently a mess, for every object, character, moment, and reference has its purpose: to create the outline of a particular person, a castle. In the Commonplace podcast mentioned at the start of this chapter, Heti mentions that when she turned over the manuscript for this book, she didn’t know what the publisher was going to call the book; they wound up calling it a novel, but Heti didn’t start the work with “novel,” “play,” or “memoir” in mind—it’s simply what emerged (Zucker). The podcast, and the obvious intimacy between the three poets, also illuminates Heti’s appreciation of collaboration and inspiration among women artists and in her own work; when Heti shows Sheila adopting Margaux’s vision, she’s not belittling her narrator or criticizing her lack of originality. Rather, she’s representing the value of creative friendship. Gilbert
and Gubar would agree, for they not only write that the woman writer can only approach the struggle of self-definition with other women, by “actively seeking a female precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal authority is possible,” but also for the fact that the two scholars wrote Madwoman and other works of literary theory together, and crucially did so with the support of other women in their academic, literary communities (Gilbert and Gubar, 49).

One of the ways it is possible to claim that Heti, like Sheila and Margaux, is herself throwing “the shit and the trash and the sand” is that sand itself is one of the novel’s most pronounced motifs. It is scattered through the narrative as if Sheila doesn’t know it’s there, but it follows her: getting stuck in the binding of a book of “important artists,” being brushed off seats, washing down a drain, on a beach when Sheila is happy, on a beach when Sheila is sad. A function of the sand motif, aside from being a nod to Heti’s own process, and of Sheila’s mentions of brushing it off and washing it away, is to show Sheila’s relationship with maintaining a cleanly an conventional appearance, or in other words Sheila’s fear of her “ugliness [being] out there for everyone to see. (Heti, 262)” Grains of sand haunt her, just like the male-authored stories that limit her freedom and the ideals and idols that make false promises of her redemption. But as Margaux holds her accountable for finishing the play and shares her own artistic vision, she also pushes Sheila to start making use of those grains of sand rather than forcing them down the drain. For, as the haunting, omnipresent nature of the motif suggests, wiping away the bothersome grains only guarantees they’ll return again.

Another angle of the sand motif concerns the themes of wandering and
Jewishness that also run through the narrative. Just as the Jews wandered the desert, worshipping false idols while in exile from the city of Jerusalem, Heti has said that Sheila and her friends are also stuck, directionless on the outskirts of their own individual promised lands, worshipping false idols as the Jews did in the desert (Heti, email correspondence). Sheila tells us of her literal wandering in New York and Toronto, including her drug-fueled meanderings around the city with Margaux, and her friends Ben and Andrew go on and on about their travels to Africa in which they worship their own sense of white morality. They wander through art fairs and galleries. They wander through commercial and academic art institutions, Sheila herself wanders into typing school and clown college and hair salons. For false idols, they worship celebrities, and they are especially keen on famous male artists and writers. From Warhol and Wilde to Lynch, Herzog, Nietzsche, and Rothko, dozens of artist—a conspicuously male bunch—are framed as idols and icons throughout the novel. Sheila even has a way of worshipping herself as an icon. While she and Margaux are in Miami, it becomes clear that Sheila isn’t engaged so much in the moment as with the image of it:

SHEILA

I’m so happy with how we were making everyone jealous with how happy we were in the pool!

MARGAUX

What? That’s crazy! In my mind, we were making ourselves happy. I had no idea anyone was looking at us. (Heti, 112)

But, finally, the combination of Margaux’s love and Sheila’s willful collision with ugliness allows her to break through to greater degrees of authenticity. In herself and in her friend Margaux, Sheila finds the thing that will end her wandering, worshipping ways, and the motif of sand is transformed in act five from a nuisance to a tool, a part of
her story. While we know that abandoning ideals, idols, and male-authored narratives has much to do with Sheila’s acceptance “everything” that restrictive ideals obliterate and with finally listening to that “something” inside of her, it’s crucial to recognize that Heti is vague in identifying exactly what that inner “something” is which Sheila discovers. In fact, neither Sheila or Heti herself has an obligation to give an answer, and especially not to transform Sheila’s unique story into yet another moral and idol-izing tale of the tyrannical “should.” This is why Margaux’s castle is itself invisible and not tangible, and why her scenes of “everything” will only reveal an outline of truth.

Conclusion

A book is not only proof that a person exists, but an invisible castle only that person has the power to create, which can only be created with all the ugly and pretty, miserable and sad, ambitious and lazy “everything” which that particular person possesses. While women writers of the nineteenth century may have guided their “everything” into symbols of the madwoman and the angel, as well as into images of confinement and escape, and some contemporary writers have found new symbols and have begun to experiment with form as a means of self-authoring their “everything,” the duplicity of female experience persists over these not-so-distant generations. Where Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre are dual expressions of Bronte’s own rage and rebellion, conformity and compliance, Sheila’s many sides, and the flux between them, similarly represent Heti and her own negotiation of who she is, who she is supposed to be, and how she feels about it. The “supposed to be” part of the portrait, the invisible castle lighting up, is the shit and sand necessary to telling a true story, for we can’t express who we are without acknowledging our experience of living and creating as a person, but specifically
a woman, in this world. And as women writers adopted the madwoman motif not in order to foil the heroine but as a double of their own selves, simultaneously sneaking in her self-expression and her societal critique, so Heti’s narrative takes on conventional forms, subverts expectation, and shocks us with a sense of sincere tenderness where we least expect it. Of the writers they cover, from Emily Dickinson to Margaret Fuller to the Bronte sisters, Gilbert and Gubar write, “these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards,” and it is clear that with her convention-challenging content and form, Heti falls well within the bounds of this lineage.

Finally, Heti’s approach to literature as making oneself concrete in the form of books supports Gilbert and Gubar’s theory of women’s writing as a form of “self-authoring” or “self-assertion,” the natural result of one’s own process of self-definition against the male-authored version of her female self. And, crucially, to read works of self-assertion is to witness or acknowledge the experiences of women and women writers, to take women’s words seriously. While many will claim that literature should be read as literature alone, that works of art should address the human condition rather than the condition of being a woman, it is arguably impossible for a woman to reflect and represent reality without also reflecting the enormous effects of her socialization as a woman. To write without being informed of her gendered experience would be the equivalent of writing without words. As Gilbert and Gubar write, “if she denies her own gender she inevitably confronts an identity crisis as severe as the anxiety of authorship she is trying to surmount. (Gilbert and Gubar, 66)” Additionally, to gloss over the unconventional form of Heti’s novel would be the equivalent of glossing over
the madwomen in literature of the nineteenth century—neither Heti’s form nor the
trapped woman in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge’s “The Woman on the Other Side of the
Mirror” are designed for the sake of style or spectacle (15). Rather, the origins of these
radical forms and themes lie in the hearts and minds of real women, in their silence and
their desire to speak and be heard, their confinement in the narrow terms of how a woman
should be; these are not merely works of fancy.
“Why does so much of feminist activism and scholarship spurn the work and ideas of the generation that came before? (Faludi, 29)” This is the question Susan Faludi asks in her essay, “American Electra: Feminism’s Ritual Matricide,” which explores the history of feminism, particularly in the US, and focuses sharply on different feminist waves or generations and how they position themselves in relation to one another.

*Madwoman in the Attic* is a great example, among others, of feminist work produced by a previous generation—the second wave of the 60s and 70s to be precise—but which is dismissed by contemporary theorists as a relic of times past. In Diana Fuss’s 1989 exploration of the essentialist/anti-essentialism debate, she grapples with the tension between apparently disparate feminist modes, locating the essentialism debate as a key source of the then-current, and still-current, “impasse in feminism. (667)” Twenty years after Fuss’s piece, Faludi’s essay captures the sustained real-life implications of the essentialism debate, and does so with the same urgency with which I believe *Madwoman* must be rescued from erasure by its post-structuralist critics. Expressing concern over the replacement of “feminism” and “women’s studies” with “gender theory,” and with recent forms of feminism that urge women to “unbecome” women in deconstructive identity practices, Faludi writes,

That academic mother lode (women’s studies) is in danger of being decommissioned by the increasing disconnect between practical, political feminism and academic feminist theory, and by the rise of post-structuralist
philosophy in gender studies that prefers the deconstructing of female experience to the linkages and legacies of women’s history and regards generational dynamics, and even the categories of “woman” and “man” as artifices to perform and discard. (Faludi, 40)

Like Faludi, Gilbert and Gubar do not think that deconstructing female experience and questioning the stability of the “woman” necessitates writing off such first- and second-wave concerns as a woman’s right to an education, equal pay, and reproductive freedom. Gender theory and practical, political feminism need not be mutually exclusive. In fact, as indicated by Gilbert and Gubar’s insistence that the woman artist must first remove or deconstruct her masks before she is to author herself out of male texts and into work of her own, Madwoman may serve as a model of both the deconstructive and political practices Faludi speaks of.

Like Madwoman, Faludi’s piece argues for attention to women’s shared oppression and to the strategies that have been and continue to be born of frustration with the historical, oppressive policing and maintenance of gender constructs. Faludi writes, “When I first began writing about feminism nearly two decades ago, I liked to say that feminism was the simply worded sign hoisted by a little girl in the 1970’s Women’s Strike for Equality: I AM NOT A BARBIE DOLL. Now I’m not so sure. (30)” Faludi quotes a young feminist scholar who echoes Monique Wittig’s call for the “destruction of the class of women” when she tells the author, “Instead of becoming women, we should be unbecoming women. (Wittig, 366; Faludi, 41)” Contrary to the messages of such academic and activist feminism, however, the novels I have explored here not only write as women, but intentionally engage with the experience of “women,” and they do so in ways that challenge patriarchal systems of oppression. These novels, and their writers, do seem to echo that little girl from the 70’s, insisting with the messiness and visibility of a
hand-painted sign, *I am not the noble feminine, I am not the figure atop a wedding cake, I am not a school marm, I am not an angel in the house, I am an artist, I am myself.*

Without destroying the category of “woman,” they undermine what the category means and confront the ways those meanings have been, and are, used against them.

While everyday sexism persists, and ideals of femininity continue to take up space in our lives and minds, theory-based understandings of gender, as valuable as they are and as liberating as they can be, must not discard the lineage from which they hail. Parallel with the project of *Madwoman*, contemporary female novelists do not appear to understand “woman” as a thing to be destroyed, but rather a category of lived experience that not only needs to be represented and explored, but one that is naturally expressed in literary works as a condition of the author’s social reality. In their depiction of the female artist as doubled and fraught with inadequacy, as vacillating between authenticity and performance, between self-aware anxiety and utter self-abandon, the contemporary novels I’ve explored herein support the work of many feminist scholars, including Fuss and Faludi, and their arguments for a middle ground between shared female experience and utter genderless-ness and in their call for a reconciliation of so-called and ostensibly divergent approaches. For even while they confirm *Madwoman*’s theories, offering up uncanny examples of the anxiety of authorship and images of confinement and asserting their perspectives as specifically related to womanhood, these novels are nonetheless capable of containing different feminist modes and perspectives. In fact, it may be through the madwoman-esque duplicity of selves captured in these novels that they are able to represent and engage with varieties of women’s experience.
While Sheila in *How Can a Person Be?* flails between a deep and tender willingness to discover a true home in herself and an irreverent, “who cares” attitude, paralleling the character of the second and post-second waves of feminism, the art-making process she and Margaux ultimately end up most comfortable with is one which reflects their lives in all of their extremes. Key to their strategy is the fact that they both aim to say something true about their own lives, and not about the female experience, feminism, or life itself. As their friend Sholem tells Margaux of her work at the end of their “ugly painting competition,” “Your mark is there in everything you do. (Heti, 294)” This statement, sincere because of its spontaneity, not only reflects the authenticity of Margaux’s process but confirms the inevitable presence of one’s identity—whatever that looks or feels like—in one’s own work, be it painting, writing, or otherwise. Like the feminist scholar Faludi cites in her essay, neither Heti nor her characters is willing to pay homage to an ideal “woman,” and yet Heti’s characters *are* women—their experiences as women are everywhere in the “shit” and the “sand” they use to form their stories and light up their “castles.”

All along Sheila’s seemingly infinite journey are obstacles shaped by her experience of gender—the memory of the bride she inhabits on her wedding day, the fear of becoming the character written by her ex-boyfriend, the compulsion to “be fucked” when her work isn’t working. It’s hard to imagine what a post-gender account of reality would look like without the experiences of gender included, or with the experiences of gender neutralized into mere things that happen to mere “people.” In such an account, Sheila might gravitate toward a male precursor, instead of Margaux; her recollections of marriage and of her own sense of loss in that role might not come across with such
— or maybe she’d just get over it all; there might be less of a “shock of recognition” experienced by the novel’s women readers, especially in Sheila’s involvement with bad boy Israel, if such a dynamic could even be captured in terms of post-gender relationship. With her messy narrative and her inconsistent and contradictory characters, Heti’s novel takes aim at the rules of gender and also at the rules of literary form. But in Sheila’s specifically female existence and in the novel’s intentional use of form, Heti does not abandon the concept of gender or the function of form itself, perhaps because there is no hope of addressing the limiting conventions of gender and genre without also employing them.

While more formally conventional, Messud’s novel also resists the contemporary movement away from gender; it is explicitly concerned with two generations of women and their experience of ideal femininity. Repeatedly, the novel draws our attention to the imperative of selflessness in the lives of women, and through Nora’s mother and in the book’s core literary reference to *A Doll’s House*, it insists on drawing a thread between the feminist concerns of previous generations and those of today. The novel refuses to buy into a naïve alternate reality in which Nora finds fulfillment and peace in romantic relationship or motherhood, demanding that such apparent solutions or happy endings be interrogated, now as in the past. Crucially, in taking on the project of deconstructing one’s own conditioning as a woman, Nora illustrates how *being* a woman and experiencing one’s life through the lens (yes, a socially constructed one) of a woman, necessarily creates the motivation for such deconstruction or “unbecoming” practices, while the task of then writing one’s own life after that point will, of course, involve shadows of that very particular and personal process. For Nora, gender doesn’t go away.
through these processes but rises to the surface as the framework that was there from the beginning of one’s life in the social world. Further, and speaking to Faludi’s concern with bridging the gap between generations of feminists, both Nora’s experience and her narrative express the frustration with the limits of feminism while refusing to abandon it. When Nora asks how we have ended up where we are, despite “all that revolutionary talk of the seventies,” she captures the force of civilization and the survival of the species mentioned by Simone de Beauvoir when she writes, “it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature. (Messud, 21; De Beauvoir, 301)” It will take more than a mere half-century of post-structuralist thought to kill civilization and the creatures it creates.

Annette Federico has written that “the image of the madwoman, no longer cabin’d cribbed, confined’ […] has taken on a cultural and critical life of her own.” It would seem as though at least these two novels do illustrate how the concerns of 19th-century women writers, as channeled through the madwoman figure, have both persisted and adjusted to the circumstances and challenges of 21st-century women’s experience. What is most striking is how the madwoman’s persistence challenges the idea of an “angry feminism” as a uniquely 70s concept. Both of these novels, coming from women writers of different generations, not only capture the oppressive and relentless nature of “ideal femininity,” but they dive into, lacerate, and explode these ideals, and they do so angrily. They confront noble selflessness with assertive selfishness; by virtue of existing as women within any literary tradition, they carry the anger of every feminist wave in their DNA. Importantly, to unleash this anger is a choice, and a political one, for the anger is not born into these women writers; anger is not reflective of their essence, but of their existence.
While it is true that many women writers would prefer to be seen just as writers and do attempt to say something about reality without saying anything about gender, this is a strategy that can reveal itself as avoidance. For example, the novelist Rachel Kushner who has said of her novel, *The Flamethrowers*, “Gosh I don’t know, I’m interested in men and women both,” and “I don’t think I meant to say anything explicit about gender conflicts,” also represents in that novel a woman artist who “has a quality of floating above what she witnesses, above her own experience of being handed from man to man. (Frere-Jones)” Inevitably, such a strategy is only apparently not concerned with gender conflicts, unless of course Kushner herself wouldn’t mind being handed from man to man or thinks any other woman should be. Even where the author tries to brush off or bracket the madwoman in the attic and the angel in the house, these female doubles are there lurking between the lines of fiction just as she does in life.

Considering Heti and Messud’s novels alongside Faludi’s reluctance to continue defining feminism as the little girl holding an “I AM NOT A BARBIE DOLL” sign, we might ask what the signs of today might be. Certainly, one might read “I CAN BE A BARBIE DOLL IF I WANT TO BE” while another might even read “I AM A KEN DOLL” and another “I AM BLACK BARBIE.” The shift Faludi is concerned with is one she perceives as moving away from a collectively agreed upon target—patriarchy and its definitions of womanhood—to a concern from the individualistic assertion of one’s subjective experience of identity or one’s “truth,” even if that truth is sexy, girly, trans, ethnic, religious, and so on. Regardless of the precise content of these signs, though, what seems to matter in the claims of *Madwoman*, as well as in these contemporary novels, is the motivation behind showing up with a hand-lettered sign at
all—a will to author and determine one’s own life—and the ongoing demand for the freedom to do so. In such self-assertion, there is, of course, joy, but there is anger, too. And perhaps Faludi fails to acknowledge this in her critique of post-structuralist gender studies, which is to say that even the current wave or moment in feminism is still motivated by a will to confront oppression and liberate the will of all people. In *How Should a Person Be?* and in *The Woman Upstairs*, there is a clear association with the little girl’s Barbie doll sign, but neither character’s narrative stops at a denial of the feminine ideal. Rather, both move forward in the process of self-authorship to claim selfhood, all the while taking the value and usefulness of the deconstructive process with them. In this way, the novels, their authors, and the characters they depict are engaging, with Faludi and Fuss, in the project of closing the so-called gap between feminist modes—they engage in the collective and acknowledge their feminist lineage, all the while asserting their subjective, sometimes unlikeable, truths. Alongside the madwoman, they are, in a sense, individuals in community.
References


