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Can Women Have It All?: Hesitant Feminism in American Women's Popular Writing

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CAN WOMEN HAVE IT ALL?: HESITANT FEMINISM IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S
POPULAR WRITING

A Thesis Presented

by

ANNE ARAMAND

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies,
University of Massachusetts Boston,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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English Program

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ABSTRACT

CAN WOMEN HAVE IT ALL?: HESITANT FEMINISM IN AMERICAN WOMEN'S POPULAR WRITING

December 2013

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Twilight by Stephenie Meyer and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins are two of the bestselling series of our generation. These series are meeting widespread popularity just as the contemporary feminist debate of: “Can women have it all?” is occurring around the country. Although *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* are not considered overtly feminist texts, they have emerged in a time when women are reexamining the possibility of empowering themselves both in the public and the domestic sphere. Meyer and Collins have introduced female protagonists that deal with precisely this issue.

First, I will be outlining why cultural studies are important to discussions of popular literature, as argued by both Jane Tompkins and Cathy N. Davidson, especially in terms of female readers and writers. I will also be exploring the bestselling works of

Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* and Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* which emerged during the first and second waves of feminism and how they expressed a hesitation to give women a happy ending outside domesticity within their respective historical contexts. Next, I will review the current "lean in" culture of the third wave of feminism. I will also show how both *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* continue the pattern of female protagonists that cannot be empowered unless they are wives and mothers. Finally, I will analyze how my own creative writing has been affected by cultural debates involving women's roles. Popular women's writing that emerges in the context of major feminist moments in American history shows ambivalence towards empowering women outside the home. This ambivalence is also reflected in my own writing through poetry. By first examining the work of best-selling women writers in the last two centuries and then analyzing my own writing in concurrence with the evolution of feminist ideals, I will show that women writers display a hesitant feminism despite emerging alongside progressive cultural moments in American history.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In her landmark work *Sensational Designs*, Jane Tompkins argues that popular literature deserves further examination because of what it reveals about the culture from which it emerges. She writes, “The text that becomes exceptional in the sense of reaching an exceptionally large audience does so not because of its departure from the ordinary and conventional, but through its embrace of what is most widely shared” (Tompkins xvi). The popularity of certain novels shows that they resonate with a large number of people. They are familiar to readers; they reflect current events in a way that is relatable to the masses. Because popular works reach such a large audience, the reasons for their popularity must be considered.

Tompkins also speaks at length about the reasons that popular fiction is sometimes ignored by literary critics. She says, “Popular fiction...has been rigorously excluded from the ranks of ‘serious’ literary works...I think it is morally and politically objectionable, and intellectually obtuse, to have contempt for literary works that appeal to millions of people simply because they are popular” (Tompkins xiv). Thus, it is the appeal of these popular works, and not necessarily their artistic merit, that makes them worth studying. Bestselling novels have been largely overlooked in critical analysis, but

to ignore them is to ignore works that have played a huge role in contemporary culture. Because these works are so popular, we must examine the themes and messages they are relaying to millions of readers all over the country. The fact that these works are so widely read gives power to their voices, and thus their content gains academic merit based on the fact that what they are saying is heard by so many people.

In studying the development of the novel in relation to American culture, Cathy N. Davidson echoes this sentiment while reflecting on the popularity of novels that emerged during the late eighteenth century, just as the country began to develop as an autonomous nation. She says, “Novels, in a sense, were the rough drafts for a range of problems vital to everyday life, both in and out of the public sphere” (Davidson 6). In particular, Davidson is concerned largely with the ways in which early novels portrayed the problems of everyday women of the time. She argues, “Sentimental novelists...allowed women to vicariously participate in a range of relationships with diverse suitors and to imagine what the aftermath of marriage to different men might be like” (Davidson 189). By opening up the discussion of such important social issues, the presence of literature pushed American women to educate themselves, to become literate in order to participate in the discussion that was occurring about them by writers of the era. These novels were popular because their readers saw themselves within the text; the struggles of the protagonists spoke to their current cultural environment. Just as Tompkins argues, the popularity of these novels gave them a voice that reached millions of people, and it is this popularity that makes them worthy of study.

As both Tompkins and Davidson indicate, popular literature can play a considerable role in the culture of its time, which is why studying bestselling works that

emerge during culturally significant moments is critical to understanding how the authors are in dialogue with issues that concern their readers. While Tompkins and Davidson are concerned primarily with the first one hundred years of American literature, the second century of American literature proved to be just as influential in participating in active discussions about our culture. In particular, the role of women writers has proven instrumental in the conversation of feminism throughout its history.

The writers of bestselling works during these time periods suggest a hesitation to portray female characters that are as progressive as the movements from which they emerged. Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, in its portrayal of the lives of everyday young women, inadvertently reflects issues discussed at the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, which sparked the first wave of feminism. Alcott, despite portraying a strong female character, ultimately confines her protagonist to a domestic role, showing ambivalence towards empowering her outside the home. As the second wave of feminism emerged one hundred years later, so did popular novels like *Valley of the Dolls*, which further explored the conflicts arising from women venturing out of the home and into an unfamiliar professional sphere. Finally, in the third wave of feminism, we find best-selling works like *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* which both feature women protagonists struggling to empower themselves outside domesticity. Though the feminist movement has evolved over the decades, the issues with which they are concerned have largely remained the same, thus the portrayal of female protagonists has too reflected a pattern of consistent hesitant feminism. Women writers of the last two centuries continue to express ambivalence over allowing women to thrive outside the domestic sphere. While their characters often begin the novel as challenging the status quo of wife and

mother, they end up settling for the very roles they have combated throughout their young lives. Despite emerging during moments of progressivism in feminist history, these bestselling writers hesitate to realize this progressivism in their novels.

CHAPTER 2
POPULAR WOMEN'S WRITING DURING FIRST AND SECOND WAVE
FEMINISM

Louisa May Alcott's bestselling *Little Women* (1868),¹ portrays the lives of American women coming of age in the mid-nineteenth century, lives that feminists gathering at the Seneca Falls Convention² of 1848 as well as critical writers like Margaret Fuller were determined to advance in the public and private sphere. However, Alcott fails to realize the progressivism for which her predecessors were fighting. Fuller, as a woman who had to provide for her family and who challenged domesticity by editing the Transcendentalist journal *The Dial*,³ emerged as a resonant voice presaging the first wave of feminism. Lydia Maria Child described her as, "a woman of more powerful intellect, comprehensive thought, and thorough education, than any other American authoress" (Child 220). Among fellow women writers, her opinion was widely respected and debated. The ideas portrayed in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) both highlighted the everyday lives of American women as well as challenged them. This

¹*Little Women* was such a hit that, "...she immediately began a second volume" (Rompalske 112). In order to meet the demand of her audience, Alcott continued the series to focus on the lives of her popular characters after the initial novel was published.

² The Seneca Falls Convention was organized by Elizabeth Cady Stanton after she witnessed the inequities of the lives of women around her who were confined to domestic living (Newman 4).

³ Larry J. Reynolds points out that Fuller took on this role with "energy and skill" (ix), thus showing that not only did Fuller refuse to submit to a domestic role, but that she thrived in the public sphere and proved to be an influential voice to readers across the country.

example set the stage for Alcott's *Little Women* to showcase the journey every young woman takes as she progresses into adulthood.

Fuller's voice brought attention to the inequities that women faced,⁴ but she also expressed a changing attitude by both sexes towards domestic roles. She writes in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, "Many women are considering within themselves, what they need that they have not, and what they can have, if they find they need it. Many men are considering whether women are capable of being and having more than they are and have, and, whether, if so, it will be best to consent to improvement in their condition" (Fuller 16). Here, Fuller recognizes that the attitudes of forward thinkers are beginning to evolve in reference to the roles that women should be playing both in and out of the home. Around her, she sees a culture that is questioning how women are allowed to participate in the public sphere.

Ideas like this were realized during the Seneca Falls Convention where speakers raised questions about the everyday inequalities faced by women. James L. Newman says that the women who attended this convention were concerned with "Why...[women] could not vote, had no rights to the estates of their husbands, were denied guardianship of their children, were unable to attend college, and were essentially confined to the roles of housewife and mother" (4). However, even though Alcott's bestselling book followed the Seneca Falls Convention, and despite the fact that she had a similar upbringing to Fuller

⁴ She writes, "In a majority of instances, the man looks upon his wife as an adopted child" (Fuller 42), thus outlining just how much women are often seen as dependent on their husbands. Referring to women as essentially children in marriage proves how far Fuller believes society is from accepting women as equals to men.

in that she had to provide for her family through her writing,⁵ she portrays a female character whose brief appearance within the public sphere ends complacently as she becomes a wife and mother instead of fulfilling her original dream of being a writer.

Jo March, the protagonist of Alcott's bestselling work, begins *Little Women* as a provider for her family, but ends it with a house full of children and a doting husband, showing Alcott's hesitation to give her power outside of the domestic sphere. Jo experiences surprising success as a writer of sensationalist stories, but still meets blatant resistance and even condemnation from her father for the career path she has chosen. When her writing wins a prize, his reaction is less than positive: "After her father had told her that the language was good, the romance fresh and hearty, and the tragedy quite thrilling, he shook his head, and said in his unworldly way,—'You can do better than this, Jo. Aim at the highest, and never mind the money'" (Alcott 332). Mr. March does not see the merit in Jo earning money for writing. After his reprimanding, Jo continues to support her family by submitting sensationalist stories to popular publications, but keeps it hidden from her parents, fearing that they will not approve of her choices. The fact that Jo must keep her success a secret shows that Alcott is not proud of her breaking into the public sphere. Her professional career is not an instance of empowerment, but one of shame.

Despite allowing Jo success as a professional writer, Alcott ends up confining her to the domestic sphere, confirming her ambivalence towards women as professionals. By the end of the novel, Jo is happiest as a wife and mother. She says, "My greatest wish

⁵ Alcott's character, Jo March, is largely autobiographical in her professional interests, since Alcott too had to provide for her family: "As a teenager, Louisa felt responsible for their welfare...her caring but ineffectual father failed to find work... she began to see writing as a possible source of income" (Rompalske 112).

has been so beautifully gratified...the life I wanted then seems selfish, lonely and cold to me now” (Alcott 601). Here she rejects her old life of writing as “selfish” and claims that motherhood is her “greatest wish.” The once rebellious Jo cannot even relate to the choices she used to make as a young woman supporting her family with sensationalist writing. She has embraced motherhood, ignoring any dreams she used to have of being a writer. By giving Jo a happy ending as a wife and mother, Alcott proves that she is not prepared to allow her strong, female characters power outside of the domestic sphere.

One hundred years later, long after women succeeded in winning themselves the vote, the chance to go to college, and the opportunity to support themselves, Jacqueline Susann wrote the bestselling work, *Valley of the Dolls* (1966),⁶ which reflects the same ambivalence towards women in the public sphere we see in *Little Women*. *Valley of the Dolls* was written just after Betty Friedan launched the second wave of feminism with *The Feminine Mystique* (1963),⁷ but her female characters continue to struggle with success outside of the home. Friedan’s groundbreaking work, though focused on contemporary issues of its time, continues to show concern for the roles women must fight for in the domestic as well as the public sphere. While the issues raised by the second wave of feminism do emerge within the pages of *Valley of the Dolls*, Susann’s ambivalence towards portraying professionally successful characters reflects a continuance of the hesitant feminism we see in Alcott’s work.

⁶ *Valley of the Dolls* was “the country’s top-selling book for 22 weeks” (Johnston).

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* is equally if not more so responsible for launching the second wave of feminism. However, since it is a French text, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* deals more closely with the lives of American women, particularly as housewives, which is a more relevant idea to the cultural study taking place in this thesis.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan brings the dependent role of women in the home to the forefront of the feminist debate. She argues that “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home’” (Friedan 78). Here, she is calling for women to find fulfillment outside of the domestic sphere. She is encouraging women to escape the roles of wife and mother that have come to be expected of them by both themselves and society. Like Fuller and the women of the Seneca Falls Convention, Friedan is calling for change, for women to step into positions of power instead of hiding behind closed doors. Yet despite the progressive attitude that Friedan made so popular through her work in *The Feminine Mystique*, Susann’s bestselling book falls short of giving women the ability to support themselves professionally.

Susann’s three main characters, Anne, Jennifer, and Neely all attempt to break into show business, expressing an initial strength and determination not unlike Jo March’s professional aspirations. However, just as Alcott can only give Jo a happy ending as a wife and mother, Susann expresses a hesitation to allow her characters to be professionally successful. Jennifer in particular struggles with finding happiness in her work. She faces constant pressure to meet Hollywood’s standards for youth and beauty and longs for the day she can end her career. She confides in Anne, “I want to get out of this rat race. I want a man to love me...I want a child” (Susann 317). Despite her successful career, Susann portrays Jennifer as longing for domesticity, not strong enough to handle her success and be a wife and mother simultaneously. And when Jennifer receives the news that she has cancer and must get a hysterectomy and double mastectomy, the fact that she will not be able to have children drives Jennifer to suicide.

Unlike Jo, who is able to find happiness in domesticity, Jennifer is stripped of the chance to realize that dream, and Susann thus strips her of the ability to live at all.

Another of Susann's female protagonists, Anne, is also portrayed as struggling with a strong domestic desire despite initially finding success in her professional career. Although she moves to New York to begin a career away from the small town life she has always dreaded, she quickly finds herself romantically involved with Lyon, who wants her to move back home and settle into a domestic life so that he can support her with his writing: "Lyon...you said you could write here. You probably could, perhaps eight hours a day. But what would I do? Join the women's club?" (Susann 217). Susann portrays Anne's story as an uphill battle in which she constantly struggles to make her husband happy while enjoying her own professional success. Susann's inability to give her characters happiness despite prominent careers shows that she is ambivalent towards allowing them to break out into the public sphere.

The issues raised by the first and second waves of feminism continue to revolve around women finding equality both in the public and domestic sphere. This struggle with progressivism is reflected in *Little Women* and *Valley of the Dolls*; both emerged during times of great cultural significance to the feminist movement, but Alcott and Susann express a hesitation to allow their female protagonists success outside of the home. Jo March is initially allowed to pursue a career as a writer, but she must do so in secret to avoid being chastised by her family. She is also quick to forget her dreams when the opportunity to raise a family is given to her. The female protagonists that Susann portrays meet similar obstacles in creating careers for themselves. While they are all financially successful, they also long to be married with children. Jennifer in particular

desires nothing more than a family, and once she is robbed of that opportunity, she does not want to live anymore. Anne, too, is able to have a successful career but at the price of a happy marriage. The fact that the women in both of these bestselling works struggle with public and private sphere empowerment reflects the feminist discussions from which they emerged. However, Alcott and Susann express hesitation to create characters that are as progressive as leaders like Margaret Fuller and Betty Friedan would have hoped for considering the cultural contexts that they represent. Both the first and second wave of feminism have shown concern with how women can find empowerment in the public sphere, a sphere largely dominated by men. The third wave of feminism continues this pattern of concern, and the struggle for women to empower themselves outside the home still emerges from bestselling works of our era.

CHAPTER 3

TWILIGHT EMPOWERS WOMEN WITHIN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

Although *Twilight* (2005) has emerged during the debate of whether or not women can “have it all,” this bestselling series⁸ hesitates to allow women success in both the public and the domestic sphere. Contemporary culture is obsessed with the idea of women finding balance between their personal lives as wives and mothers and their professional lives, a balance that is never expected of men. This is particularly apparent in Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In* (2013). Sandberg’s main argument is that although women should be encouraged to thrive in the workplace, one of their main obstacles is their own tendency to limit themselves professionally because they plan to have a family. She says, “We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in” (Sandberg 8). According to Sandberg, women are continually expecting less of themselves, thus limiting their potential in the public sphere. This is apparent in *Little Women* and *Valley of the Dolls* but continues in *Twilight*. Although the third wave of feminism pushes women to fulfill themselves outside of domesticity, Stephenie Meyer offers a similar conclusion as her predecessors when she allows her strong, female protagonist happiness

⁸ *Twilight* was the bestselling book of 2008 (Debarros, Cadden, DeRamus, and Schnaars)

only within the domestic sphere despite the fact that she has strived for empowerment elsewhere throughout the entire series.

Estelle B. Freedman echoes Sandberg's concern that women are held back in their careers both by themselves as well as by the expectations of society. She argues, "From the perspective of employers, women may be temporary or inefficient workers, given their household and maternal work...From the perspective of women who may choose to leave the workforce and raise children, entering lower-paying jobs makes sense because these jobs require less training" (Freedman 164). Here, Freedman expresses how difficult it is for women to push themselves into the public sphere, both because they do not see the point of pursuing a career if they plan to raise a family, and because their potential employers do not see the benefit to investing in employees that may have personal goals outside of the workplace. Both Freedman and Sandberg encourage women to ignore these setbacks and push themselves to realize goals that include life outside of domesticity. Although Bella Swan, the protagonist of *Twilight*, at first seems to be seeking empowerment without getting married or having children, she eventually gives into a domestic role. This conclusion shows that Meyer, like women writers before her, cannot give her female protagonist a happy ending unless it is in the domestic sphere.

From the beginning of the *Twilight* series, Stephenie Meyer portrays Bella as a character that is domestically inclined. At first, Meyer places Bella into blatantly stereotypical domestic roles when she moves in with her divorced father. She says, "I requested that I be assigned kitchen detail for the duration of my stay" (Meyer *Twilight* 31), and even finds solace in everyday chores like grocery shopping: "It was nice to be inside the supermarket; it felt normal" (Meyer *Twilight* 32). Not only is Bella given this

role, she goes out of her way to assign herself to domestic bliss. In an unfamiliar town, Bella is comforted by being a matronly caretaker to her father, a role that gives her reign over the kitchen and the cooking but not much else. By portraying Bella in this way, Meyer is beginning to emerge as another popular women's writer that hesitates to imbue her female protagonists with progressive behavior.

Meyer also makes it clear to her readers that Bella is not as strong as the supernatural characters around her. Bella has fallen in love with a vampire, Edward, and is thus constantly reminded of her own weakness. She says, "He held my hands between his. They felt so feeble in his iron strength" (Meyer *Twilight* 278). Bella is always aware of how strong Edward is and how she has become physically dependent on him because of that strength. Because of this initial portrayal of Bella both as a domestically inclined woman and a weak partner to Edward, Meyer at first seems to be regressing from the strong characters that Alcott and Susann portray in their works. Bella is dependent on her partner to keep her happy and safe. She is completely powerless when he is around.⁹ The fact that Bella is so much less than her male counterpart seems to oppose the progressive arguments occurring in contemporary feminist culture.

However, although Meyer begins *Twilight* with a weak female protagonist, her weakness serves the purpose of giving Bella something to desire: power. Carrie Ann Platt reiterates that, "Bella's dominant characteristics are her physical weakness and need to be protected from danger all of the time" (81). Bella as a weak woman, dependent both

⁹ Bella's sudden weakness is particularly notable because she has been previously depicted as playing a dominant role in the life of her mother. After moving in with her father, she expresses concern about how her mother will survive without her: "How could I leave my loving, erratic, harebrained mother to fend for herself? Of course she had Phil now, so the bills would probably get paid, there would be food in the refrigerator, gas in her car, and someone to call when she got lost, but still" (Meyer *Twilight* 4).

physically and emotionally on her male partner is the widely accepted view. However, it is her weakness that inspires Bella to gain power. She is completely aware of her secondary standing in her relationship and insists that she become an equal. Bella says, “A man and woman have to be somewhat equal...as in, one of them can’t always be swooping in and saving the other one. They have to save each other equally...I can’t always be Lois Lane...I want to be Superman, too” (Meyer *Twilight* 474). As soon as she realizes that she needs to be an equal to Edward, she begins insisting that he turn her into a vampire in order to put them on equal ground. Bella does not simply accept that Edward has power and she does not. Instead, she actively pursues her own empowerment. Here, although Meyer is portraying Bella as weak, she is also portraying her as a woman who has the potential to empower herself (although only by literally giving up her humanity).

Like Bella, Sheryl Sandberg realizes the importance of equality in partnership. She says, “As women must be more empowered at work, men must be more empowered at home” (Sandberg 108). Not only is Sandberg calling for women to break into the public sphere; she is also calling for men to take on a more domestic role. This seems to run parallel to Bella’s superhero metaphor. Not only does Bella not want to be “Lois Lane,” she also wants Edward to be put in this role sometimes, saying that she wants to be “Superman.” Bella wants the opportunity to be able to save Edward. As a human, she is dependent on Edward because he has more power than she does. However, if she was a vampire, there is the chance that Edward would also become dependent on Bella. Here, Meyer is discussing the possibility of true equality, of Edward and Bella becoming dependent on each other. Just like Sandberg envisions men taking on a less dominant role

in the public sphere, so does Meyer express the possibility that Edward could come to depend on Bella. Meyer is giving Bella the chance to empower herself outside of the home, in an equal partnership.

Allowing Bella to break out of the domestic sphere recalls Alcott's original portrayal of Jo March as a woman who desires to be able to provide for her family. Bella envisions herself as becoming Edward's "Superman" someday, just like Jo dreams of being able to have a successful career as a writer, becoming the breadwinner for her family in place of her unemployed father. However, just as Alcott's portrayal of Jo shifts drastically by the end of her novel, so does Meyer pull back from showing Bella as a progressive female character.

By the third installment of the *Twilight* series, Meyer's hesitant attitude towards Bella's happiness outside the domestic sphere begins to emerge when Bella reluctantly accepts Edward's marriage proposal. Throughout the series, Bella expresses that she has no desire to get married. Initially, she says, "Marriage isn't exactly that high on my list of priorities" (Meyer *New Moon* 540) and refuses Edward's proposal. This refusal seems to point to a continuance of Meyer molding Bella into a progressive female character. Even though Bella wants to spend the rest of her life with Edward, she does not envision herself as a wife. Bella never wanted marriage, she just wanted to be Edward's equal. However, as soon as she accepts his proposal, Meyer's progressivism begins to wane. Even though Bella still insists that she become a vampire, Edward is only agreeing to transform her if she marries him. Meyer will only give Bella the power of immortality if she first becomes a wife, showing that she is just as hesitant to empower her female character outside of domesticity as Alcott and Susann.

We also see Meyer's ambivalence toward female empowerment in the very nature of the supernatural characters she has created. The female vampires in Meyer's *Twilight* series are rendered sterile as soon as they become immortal, a trait that speaks volumes about Meyer's ability to allow the women in her story to "have it all." Although she can imagine giving female vampires immortality and power, they can only have this after sacrificing their fertility. This same problem is discussed by Sandberg when she says, "Popular culture has long portrayed successful working women as so consumed by their careers that they have no personal life...If a female character divides her time between work and family, she is almost always harried and guilt ridden...And these characters have moved beyond fiction" (22). Sandberg's argument shows women feeling guilty about empowering themselves in the public sphere, but Meyer rids her female vampire characters of this choice. They cannot have power and a family; they must choose between living forever and living finitely with children. This portrayal shows that Meyer does not envision women as being able to have success in both the public and the domestic sphere; Bella must give up her humanity to gain power.

The initial goal of empowerment that Meyer first gives Bella continues to diminish as Bella becomes pregnant with Edward's child while she is still human. Like her reluctance to get married, Bella has also expressed an indifference towards the possibility of being a mother. She says, "Children, in the abstract, had never appealed to me. They seemed to be loud creatures, often dripping some form of goo" (Meyer *Breaking Dawn* 132). Just as she had never seen herself as a wife, Bella had also never considered having a family of her own. Meyer, again, seems to be showing Bella as a progressive woman that has other goals besides raising a family.

Bella's resistance towards motherhood is compounded by the fact that vampire women are sterile, a fact that causes grief to both Edward's mother and sister, but does not even make Bella pause in her journey towards empowerment. She says, "I'd never imagined myself a mother, never wanted that. It had been a piece of cake to promise Edward that I didn't care about giving up children for him, because I truly didn't" (Meyer *Breaking Dawn* 132). Bella would rather be Edward's equal than a mother. Unlike Jennifer in *Valley of the Dolls*, who kills herself once she is faced with infertility, Bella sees her sterility as a means to an end, as a sacrifice she is willing to make in order to gain power.

However, even though Meyer depicts Bella as indifferent towards motherhood, as soon as Bella actually becomes pregnant, she is determined to have the baby, showing that Meyer believes women are supposed to have children, just as her predecessors do. As Danielle Dick McGeough argues, "The text suggests girls should want to have children and, once pregnant, will develop an innate maternal instinct" (96). Meyer begins Bella's journey as a girl who is weak but desires power, who does not want to be a wife but agrees to marriage, and who has no desire for a family but insists on having a baby. Even though she shows Bella as seeking empowerment, she is constantly being forced into domestic roles that she was at first hesitant to take on, roles that put her journey towards empowerment in jeopardy. Bella's very life is in danger by carrying Edward's child. She may die before she ever gains the power she desires, all for the sake of having a baby.

Sandberg is also deeply concerned with the fact that women are holding themselves back in order to become wives and mothers. She argues that, "From an early age, girls get the message that they will have to choose between succeeding at work and

being a good mother” (Sandberg 92). Instead of pursuing a career they will love, Sandberg argues that women hold themselves back in the face of domesticity. Although up to this point, Bella has sought power outside of the domestic sphere, as soon as she is married and pregnant, her family is her first priority. Meyer has undermined Bella’s entire journey towards an equal partnership with Edward by first allowing him to persuade her into a marriage she didn’t want and then by giving her a baby that she never could have envisioned.¹⁰ Although Bella is more progressive than the women Sandberg talks about who hold themselves back from the beginning of their careers, the fact that Meyer portrays her as a suddenly domestically-inclined wife and mother shows that she is unwilling to give Bella power in the same way that her character initially desired. This too reflects the same surprising twist that Alcott gives us in *Little Women*. Both Bella and Jo seek to empower themselves in non-domestic ways, yet both eventually find happiness in the home.

Meyer’s portrayal of Bella’s journey as a domestically-doomed female protagonist is fully realized when Bella is given immortality at the moment of the birth of her daughter. The half-vampire child, Renesmee, has beaten Bella black and blue from the inside out, and ravaged her body to such a point that if she is not transformed into a vampire immediately, she will die. Thus, as soon as Renesmee is born, Edward turns Bella into a vampire. Although Bella has finally gained the power that she wanted from the beginning of the series, Meyer only allows her immortality once she has fulfilled her destiny of marrying Edward and bearing his children. Bella has power, but that power is

¹⁰ Unlike the female characters of the series, Meyer allows her male vampires fertility, thus enforcing even further the choice that women must make between public and private sphere empowerment, a choice that men are never asked to make.

only possible because she gives into the domestic role that is expected of her, a role that she accepts in order to reach her goals.

Freedman also touches upon the expectation of women to make sacrifices in their career in order to raise a family. She says, “When women participate in paid labor, they continue to care for others in their homes, particularly husbands and children [which] masks women’s full economic contributions...creates the double day for women workers, and...leads to perceptions that women are not dedicated to their jobs” (Freedman 146). Even if women seek successful careers, they are still expected to take care of their families. The responsibility of a happy home falls to them, not their husbands. As Freedman points out, since they are expected to fill both these roles, they are portrayed as not being “dedicated to their jobs.” Just as Bella’s priorities shift as soon as she is expecting a baby, so do women lose the chance to empower themselves professionally because they need to take care of their families. Bella gives into marriage and motherhood, and only then does Meyer give her the power she has wanted throughout the series, a power stemming from her domestic role as wife and mother.

Bella is rewarded in the series by being the most powerful vampire in her entire family. Her power as a vampire surpasses everyone else because she is the only one that is completely fulfilled domestically. She is even given the opportunity to save Edward by the end of the series, to which he responds, ““Try to be satisfied with being the superhero of the day”” (Meyer *Breaking Dawn* 747). Edward is admitting that Bella is finally the “Superman,” she always wanted to be, no longer the “Lois Lane” that she was in the first three books of the series. She is able to save Edward, displaying the power she has gained by becoming immortal, thus fulfilling her goal of becoming an equal in their relationship.

Meyer has created a character that embraces a traditional marriage and motherhood, and thus she is rewarded with power. If Bella had been unwilling to marry Edward, or if she had become a sterile immortal without first giving birth, she would not have found her happy ending.

Meyer shows that despite the fact that Bella seeks power outside of a domestic sphere, she will ultimately only be fulfilled as a wife and mother. While Bella is given power, and some may argue even “has it all,” she is only empowered within the home. When she is fighting against marriage and parenthood, Bella is just a weak human who wants more but does not have the ability to give herself what she wants. Only when she accepts her fate does Meyer give her power, showing that Meyer only believes Bella can have a happy ending with a husband and a daughter in tow. Just like Alcott portrays Jo March as fulfilling her dreams of domesticity, and just as Susann shows Jennifer committing suicide when she loses the ability to have children, Meyer empowers Bella through a domesticity that she never wanted. The issues being raised by contemporary writers like Sandberg are similar to those from earlier generations of feminists. Women concerned with progressive attitudes within all three waves of feminism bring to light arguments that call for equality for women in the public sphere as well as the domestic one. The continuance of these arguments is reflected in the pattern of hesitant feminism that has emerged since the beginning of the feminist movement in popular women’s writing.

CHAPTER 4

THE HUNGER GAMES PUNISHES ITS EMPOWERED FEMALE PROTAGONIST

Another bestselling series that intersects with the “lean in” movement is Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008).¹¹ Like *Twilight*, its female protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, seeks to empower herself outside the domestic sphere. However, just like Bella finds happiness as a wife and mother, so too does Katniss, despite being the leader of a revolution for her entire country. One of Sandberg’s main points is that even when women do break into the professional world, they end up limiting themselves for the sake of their roles in the domestic sphere. This argument will become particularly relevant in reviewing how Collins expresses the same ambivalence towards feminine power in the public sphere as women writers that came before her.

From the beginning of the series, Katniss is seeking to empower herself in the face of insurmountable obstacles. Like Jo March, she is a provider for her family and readily accepts the role after the death of her father. In this portrayal, Collins seems to at first show a female protagonist that is stronger than Meyer’s Bella. Unlike Bella, who fits herself comfortably within the confines of the kitchen, Katniss does not hesitate to be a leader to her family. After the death of her father, she says, “The district had given us a small amount of money as compensation for his death, enough to cover one month of grieving at which time my mother would be expected to get a job. Only she didn’t...At eleven years old, with Prim just seven, I took over as head of the family” (Collins *The*

¹¹ In 2012 *The Hunger Games* trilogy sold over 27 million copies (Roback).

Hunger Games 26-27). Collins here is expressing some ambivalence in that Katniss's mother is not strong enough to provide for her family as she grieves over the loss of her husband. Her family is on the brink of starvation, yet she cannot help them survive. However, this weakness is counterbalanced by Katniss's obvious strength and willingness to do whatever it takes in order to feed her mother and sister. Collins begins *The Hunger Games* with a female protagonist that is strong and able, thus seeming to endorse her character's empowerment in the public sphere.

Katniss is even portrayed by Collins as being willing to give her life to save those that she loves. She sacrifices herself to save her sister, Prim, from participating in the Hunger Games, a compulsory fight to the death with twenty-three other elected children from around the country. Unlike Bella, who begins the series as a weak human seeking power, Katniss is portrayed as already being independently powerful. There is no man in her life that she is reliant on and she is already self-sufficient as a hunter and fighter. At first, Katniss does not see herself as having the ability to provide for her family beyond this skill set. She says, "I protect Prim in every way I can, but I'm powerless against the reaping" (Collins *The Hunger Games* 15). Here, she expresses doubt in her own abilities, but this doubt is negated as soon as she sacrifices her life for her sister by taking her place in the Games. The only power she has in the face of her tyrannical government is the power to give up her life, but she is still willing to do so, showing that she initially is more able than Bella, who is merely willing to make her father an edible dinner every night. Katniss has a more urgent goal of survival. However, this determination to live in order to protect her family is something that Collins almost immediately undermines by placing it in the hands of a romantic partnership.

Katniss begins a staged relationship with Peeta, another competitor from her district that was selected to participate in the Hunger Games, and it is this romance that keeps Katniss alive, not her strength as a hunter or her independence as a young woman. Since the Hunger Games are televised, the audience becomes invested in their relationship and begins providing food and medical aid to Katniss and Peeta as they fight for survival. Katniss admits that the only way she will survive the Hunger Games is to continue their romance. She says, “I’ve got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together” (Collins *The Hunger Games* 261). Even though Collins gives Katniss the power to hunt, to provide for her family, and to fight off competitors, she is giving readers a story in which none of these factors are enough to keep her alive. She must depend on the love of a man, a domestic role forced on her by a television audience, in order to survive.

The risk of women being dependent on a relationship is another issue that often arises in contemporary feminist arguments. As Katha Pollitt and Jennifer Baumgardner argue, “It may look like freedom when you quit your boring, stressful, meaningless job, but ten years later you can find yourself in deep trouble: dumped with no money or stuck in a bad or okay-but unequal marriage” (317). Here, Pollitt and Baumgardner debate how women becoming dependent on a relationship can threaten their self-sufficiency. Katniss is giving up her autonomy as a hunter who is accustomed to providing for her family for the sake of appeasing an audience that wants her to fulfill a feminine role within the context of a relationship. Although their relationship is allowing her to survive, Collins is making Katniss dependent on a man, which seems to contradict her portrayal of Katniss

as independently successful in the public sphere. Such a sacrifice foreshadows Collins' propensity to undermine Katniss's ability to take care of herself outside of the home.

However, just as Bella resists domesticity throughout *Twilight*, so does Katniss throughout *The Hunger Games*. She says, "I know I'll never marry, never risk bringing a child into the world. Because if there's one thing being a victor doesn't guarantee, it's your children's safety. My kids' names would go right into the reaping balls like everyone else's. And I swear I'll never let that happen" (Collins *The Hunger Games* 311). Although Collins is forcing her into a romantic relationship she is not interested in, Katniss does not plan on continuing her relationship with Peeta outside of the Hunger Games if she survives. She sees it merely as strategy to overcome the obstacles in her path.

Katniss's hesitancy to accept a romantic relationship is expressed by contemporary feminists who struggle with finding a balance between leading progressive lives and finding love. Merri Lisa Johnson writes, "The women of my generation hesitate to own up to the romantic binds we find ourselves in, the emotional entanglements that compromise our principles as we shuttle back and forth between feminist and girlfriend, scholar and sex partner" (14). Just as Katniss cannot accept the repercussions of being in a relationship because she must fight to survive against a tyrannical government, contemporary feminists do not want to "own up" to their desire to find love. The ideas of progressing one's personal goals and being tied down to a heterosexual partner do not seem cohesive in the minds of feminist thinkers of our generation. This conflict of interests is comparable to Katniss ignoring the possibility of marriage and family. Just as Meyer previously could not allow her female characters to be empowered and lead

successful domestic lives, Collins eliminates Katniss's ability to consider domesticity while she tries to survive the Hunger Games.

Despite the dependency that Collins gives Katniss, she also shows her as having some power over her tyrannical leader, President Snow, who is forcing her to fight for her life in the Hunger Games. The first hint of her empowerment is her self-sacrifice for her sister, which takes away Snow's ability to kill whomever he desires in order to incite fear in his people. Katniss proves herself to be beyond his reach when she sacrifices herself. However, her power is limited in that she still has to give up her life in order to save Prim. Just like Bella realizes by the end of the first book that she can empower herself by becoming a vampire, so does Katniss realize she has the power to defy President Snow. Since there can only be one victor of the Hunger Games, Katniss threatens to kill herself and Peeta with poison berries in order to deny the country a victor. At the last moment, President Snow decides to keep them both alive, allowing Katniss a brief victory. Collins is showing here that Katniss has the ability to overcome President Snow's rule over her, but the limitations of her self-empowerment soon become clear when she is forced into a domestic role similar to Bella in *Twilight*.

Although Katniss has succeeded in both surviving the Hunger Games and undermining President Snow's authority, Collins does not allow her success to be a solely empowering experience. When Katniss defies President Snow, she becomes a symbol of resistance for the people of her country who are tired of suffering under his tyrannical rule. However, President Snow decides to use her face to his own advantage, forcing Katniss to become engaged to Peeta as a means of overruling her initial act of rebellion. What was first a means of survival has become an unwanted domestic role. Unlike Bella,

who is fully willing to embrace a role of power, Katniss proves to be more resistant towards it. She tells President Snow, “I didn’t mean to start any uprisings” (Collins *Catching Fire* 23) but the damage is done, and she must now bend to his will. While Collins allows Katniss power as a symbolic leader of her people, she simultaneously strips her of power by continuing a false romance with Peeta, a romance that is once again keeping her alive and at the mercy of President Snow.

Interestingly, this resistance against power without the involvement of men runs parallel with some of Sandberg’s ideas that blame society for holding women back. Although she clearly blames women for limiting themselves, Sandberg is quick to point an accusing finger both at a male-dominated culture as well as at the men that play significant roles in the lives of women.¹² She says, “I am hoping that each man will do his part to support women in the workplace and in the home” (Sandberg 171). Not only is Sandberg encouraging women to step up into positions of power; she is also encouraging men to support them in these roles. This alludes to the fact that women cannot break into the professional sphere on equal footing unless they are supported by their significant others. Just as Katniss cannot survive the Hunger Games without relying on her relationship with Peeta, neither can women in general survive in the public sphere without the help of their husbands.¹³

¹² Sandberg argues that numerous societal factors are at play in preventing women from pursuing empowering leadership roles in the professional sphere. She says, “Women face real obstacles in the professional world, including blatant and subtle sexism, discrimination, and sexual harassment. Too few workplaces offer the flexibility and access to child care and parental leave that are necessary for pursuing a career while raising children” (8). Because the responsibility of child-rearing often falls to women, they are pressured to sacrifice their careers to raise a family since most jobs do not offer enough accommodations for working mothers.

¹³ Throughout the series, Peeta is described as being the charismatic, likeable character. He does not need Katniss to get the audience to support his victory, but Katniss sees herself as needing him in order to get sponsorship and survive the Games.

Although Katniss is being forced into a marriage she is not interested in, she begins to fully realize the opportunity she has created for herself as a leader, and Collins portrays her as forgoing any romantic relationships in order to lead the resistance. She says, “I really can’t think about kissing when I’ve got a rebellion to incite” (Collins *Catching Fire* 126). Unlike Bella, who still counts on a relationship with Edward in her future, Katniss is not concerned with romance whatsoever. She has recognized that she has the power to lead her people in a revolution and she sees romance as getting in the way of that goal. Despite putting Katniss’s fate in the hands of President Snow and engaging her to Peeta, Collins shows here that she is willing to allow Katniss to realize her full potential in the public sphere.

One of Sandberg’s main concerns is getting more women to take on leadership roles. She says, “A truly equal world would be one where women ran half our countries and companies” (Sandberg 7). She brings to our attention just how much women are vastly underrepresented in the public sphere¹⁴ and she argues that society must begin making strides towards women in leadership roles. The fact that Collins makes her female protagonist the face of an entire revolution shows that she is concerned with women in the public sphere. She could have just as easily made Peeta the face of the rebellion, since he too survives the Hunger Games and maintains a heartfelt romance with Katniss. Yet Collins makes Katniss the strong one, the character determined to effect change in a government that continues to make her people suffer.

¹⁴ Sandberg reflects on the precise inequality of women represented in leadership roles: She says, “A meager twenty-one of the Fortune 500 CEOs are women. Women hold about 14 percent of the executive officer positions, 17 percent of board seats, and constitute 18 percent of our elected congressional officials” (5). Clearly, despite the progress that women have made in the public sphere, they still represent a small number of professionals as compared to men.

However, despite Katniss's resolve to lead her people, Collins shows her as leading them to a victorious revolution by sacrificing the safety of her family. This sacrifice shows Collins answering whether or not she believes women can "have it all." Katniss has succeeded in leading her people to victory over President Snow, just in time to see her sister killed in battle. While Katniss was preoccupied with the resistance, she let her family's needs become secondary, despite the fact that it is the needs of her sister which inspire her to rebel against President Snow in the first place. Collins here is almost punishing Katniss for putting her success as a leader before her family. This reflects both Freedman's point that women are responsible for the happiness of their families as well as Sandberg's argument that women are pressured to sacrifice their success in order to take care of their children.

At the death of her sister, Katniss expresses a total loss of willpower to fulfill her role as leader. She says, "I'm forced to accept who I am. A badly burned girl with no wings. With no fire. And no sister" (Collins *Mockingjay* 350). Here, she labels herself as merely a "girl," not a leader of a revolution. Katniss as a leader is successful, but only at the price of her family, and Collins is quick to strip Katniss of all her power outside the domestic sphere. The final blow comes at the end of the war when Katniss has succeeded in eliminating any threat of a tyrannical dictatorship from emerging again. The threat is gone, but instead of rebuilding her country, Katniss returns to the ruins of her old district, marries Peeta, and has two children. Finally, Collins gives Katniss a happy ending, but only after she removes her from the public sphere. Katniss is not allowed to be a leader. She can only be a wife and mother.

Like Bella, Katniss always resisted the idea of domesticity, and the conclusion that Collins gives us shows the ambivalence she feels towards women finding success in the public sphere. Just as Sandberg puts partial blame on women for not having as much professional success as men, both Bella and Katniss decide to give up a life of empowerment outside the home in order to raise a family. Although Bella just wanted to be equally strong, wealthy, and attractive as her partner, Meyer makes that ending impossible unless it comes with marriage and a baby. Likewise, Collins hints at Katniss's inability to succeed without marriage when she strips Katniss of power in the arena through her romance with Peeta. However, Collins' hesitant feminism is fully realized when Katniss gives up the chance to restore her country and instead takes an unexpectedly fulfilling role within the home.

The conflicting ideals that both female protagonists seem to give into are not unique to these series, and are present in the works of other popular fiction written by women. Imelda Whelehan argues, "The bestselling genre loosely known as chick lit [is] in dialogue with feminism...by the way its heroines often seem to be wrestling with a nascent feminist consciousness set against their quest for The One" (5). As Whelehan points out, female protagonists that may at first appear progressive still often end up on a "quest for The One." Just as Bella and Katniss ignore initial pressure to conform to the domestic roles expected of them by others, so too do women in other popular literature express a combative attitude towards settling down as a wife and mother. At the same time, these popular female characters eventually find happy endings within the confines of the home. Just as writers from previous generations of feminist thinkers, women

creating bestselling fiction continue to express an ambivalence against empowering women in the public sphere.

The conflicting ideals of progressive and conservative femininity that both Meyer and Collins use in their series can also be traced back to the tradition of the Female Gothic that Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock addresses. These sensationalist stories, written by women writers like Louisa May Alcott (and her fictional counterpart, Jo March), were extremely popular during the nineteenth and early twentieth century and featured the supernatural in plots that gripped American readers and proved lucrative for their authors. Just as they share supernatural and popular roots with *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, so too do these stories express a hesitant feminism. Weinstock says, “The literature on the Female Gothic has developed into two camps: The first...reads Gothic literature by women as generally conservative and expressive of internal female division. The second...reads Female Gothic literature as revolutionary in its critique of the oppressiveness of patriarchal constraints” (11). Just like I have shown the ambivalence of popular women writers of our generation, critics that have examined similar texts from the nineteenth and early twentieth century show that women writers focusing on the popular Gothic genre struggled with the portrayal of their female characters, a portrayal that can be interpreted as simultaneously progressive and conservative.

Both Meyer and Collins are bestselling authors that emerged during the third wave of feminism. They both show interest with the progressive argument regarding whether or not women can “have it all” and find success both in and out of the home. Bella as a character is often analyzed as more traditionally feminine compared to Katniss. As Amanda Firestone argues, “Drawing from tenuous similarities between the two

characters, popular opinion has elevated Katniss to a modern feminist heroine. Bella, on the other hand, has been derided as Katniss's antithetical representation of traditional femininity" (209). However, as I have argued, both protagonists follow a similar path in which they initially seek power and fulfillment outside of the private sphere before reverting to domestic roles. Critical thinkers like Fuller, Friedan, and Sandberg have all expressed concern over women trying to break out of the domestic sphere. However, both Stephenie Meyer and Susanne Collins eventually offer characters that ultimately are only allowed a happy ending once they are married with children, showing the same hesitant feminism by popular women writers that we have seen through all three waves of the feminist movement.

CHAPTER 5

EXAMINING THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MY OWN CREATIVE WRITING

Being immersed in feminist studies for the past year has had a huge impact on my own creative writing. When I returned to earn a graduate degree in English, I was not aware that I would be so closely examining the role of contemporary women in America, nor did I realize that once I began studying feminism, it would take center stage in my poetry. As my education began to focus on writers like Margaret Fuller, Betty Friedan, and Sheryl Sandberg, the issues that they write about began to emerge in the stories and characters I was portraying. Despite the progressive writing of these feminist thinkers, the popular women writers emerging from their respective movements showed a frustrating ambivalence to empowering their female protagonists, an ambivalence that I sought to overcome in my own writing. Later, studying women poets, who do not share the wide readership of Stephenie Meyer or Suzanne Collins, offered a solution to this hesitant feminism since poetry usually does not have to cater to a large audience. Reading writers like Fanny Howe and Carolyn Forché shaped my poetry in ways that I could not have imagined at the beginning of my graduate work.

While popular fiction writers like Stephenie Meyer and Suzanne Collins convey young women struggling with empowerment outside of the domestic sphere, my own writing deals with similar issues. Studying women's writing throughout the centuries has

revealed that despite progressive ideas being portrayed by feminist writers, fiction writers continue to convey ambivalence in the face of empowering women in the public sphere. As my studies in feminism developed, my writing also began to struggle with this issue. The first stage of my writing focused largely on dependency in a relationship and ambivalence about escape. It quickly developed into a second stage reflecting an inner struggle regarding how to best portray romantic relationships while maintaining a progressive attitude towards the portrayal of female characters. Finally, my writing began to confront other women and the roles they were taking on outside of the home. By reviewing key pieces of my writing from the last year, I will show how studying the development of feminism from its conception in the 19th century to its contemporary arguments in the 21st century has molded my creative writing into the unique shape it has taken today.

At the beginning of my graduate studies, while I was not overtly concerned with feminism, my creative writing had already begun to reflect a concern with feminist ideals. One of the first pieces I wrote, “Barbara Turns Thirteen,” is inspired by Denise Duhamel’s “Kinky,” which features the iconic Barbie personified as a self-aware being trying to relate to her lover Ken, with whom she can only feign a meaningful relationship. “Barbara Turns Thirteen” reimagines this scene from the perspective of a girl who, as a newly realized teenager, is only just beginning to discover her own sexuality. Barbara lifts the lid to her forgotten toy chest to bear witness to the horror of her dolls come to life, attempting to embrace one another. As a girl, she is discovering what it means for the first time to be in a relationship, but this discovery is perverted by the fact that it is played out through two inanimate objects that are supposed to be representative of

innocence. The theme of discovering sexuality is one of the first hints that my writing reflects feminist issues despite the fact that I had not begun to study feminism at this point in my graduate career.

Feminism continues to take center stage throughout this piece. Barbara slams the lid down in horror after her discovery and spends a sleepless night reflecting on what she has seen, not fully understanding it and at the same time, fearing it. In the morning, she runs to a church and prays to an idol, desperate to confide in someone what she has seen. She is searching for answers, trying to find meaning in the exchange she has witnessed. The last line is one that reflects an instance of foreshadowing for future pieces of feminist writing in that the idol is “witness to the emptiness of the world.” Barbara does not realize the full extent of what she has seen, but even after explaining it through prayer, it is revealed that the relationship is “empty.” Again, the references to feminism are vague, undefined. However, pieces like this plague the writing from my first semester. The female characters I wrote about were powerless, dependent on their male counterparts, and to what end, they could not explain. Barbara is one of the youngest characters in my entire portfolio, and she also reflects the beginning of a journey for women in my writing that are trying to empower themselves in a world that resists such empowerment.

A similar uneasiness from “Barbara Turns Thirteen” is also reflected in pieces like, “You’ve Always Been an Advocate for Open Caskets.” In this piece, the character is immediately displaced in the opening line. She admits, “Today, I got on the wrong train” and continues to reflect confusion and a feeling of loss throughout the piece. Just as Barbara cannot make sense of the sexually-explicit scene she has witnessed, the character in this piece cannot come to terms with the place in which she finds herself. She looks to

strangers “hoping for direction,” and does not know where to turn. While Barbara is barely a teenager in the previous piece, this character possesses more age and experience, but just as much fear and an inability to cope with her situation. Interestingly, this piece also alludes to later interest in how a woman can be given a happy ending. While the previously discussed popular fiction writers insist on domesticity to conclude their novels, the character in this poem shows both a resistance and a longing for this ideal. She says, “Not everyone wants a happy ending,” seemingly resisting the idea of the conclusion other writers might give their female characters. Yet, she also says, “...the last page/comes too soon,” which alludes to regret in not pursuing a happy ending. Just like “Barbara Turns Thirteen” shows an interest in the arguments raised by feminist thinkers, so does “You’ve Always Been an Advocate for Open Caskets.” My early writing, though slightly unfocused on specifically progressive feminist thoughts, persists in its portrayal of female characters searching for answers to their own femininity.

As the second semester of my graduate studies began, my interest in feminism became more focused, and thus, so did my creative writing project. In order to properly grasp the evolution of feminism, I began studying writers from all three feminist movements. Margaret Fuller, Betty Friedan, and Sheryl Sandberg span over one hundred fifty years of progressive discussion, yet they are all fundamentally concerned with how to find equality for women both in and out of the home. These ideals began seeping into my writing as I struggled to find a balance between the romantic lives of my female characters and the methods through which they give themselves a voice both within their relationships as well as in their everyday lives.

One of the pieces that confronts this issue most powerfully is “Stouffer’s Lasagna Dinner Hallucinations,” which, like “Barbara Turns Thirteen,” is inspired by another writer that is concerned with feminist issues, Adrienne Rich, and her piece “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law.” The character in this poem has had her larynx literally cut out of her, thus rendering her voiceless. The character’s partner, upon discovering her without a voice and covered in blood simply shrugs his shoulders, appearing indifferent to her inability to express herself. No matter how much this character wants to empower herself, she now finds that she cannot speak, thus she has completely lost the ability of self-representation. Just as Fuller, Friedan, and Sandberg express concern over women’s roles in the public sphere, this character has lost her position in society and her partner will not rise to the occasion to help her. She is dependent on a partner that appears dismissive about the dire situation in which she has been placed.

“Stouffer’s Lasagna Dinner Hallucinations” also expresses an interest in how repressed women relate to each other. At the end of the piece, the character’s grandmother calls, and the call is coming from 1929. The grandmother says to her voiceless progeny, “Thinking women sleep with monsters,” directly quoting Rich and offering advice that provides more questions than answers. Can the character still be a “thinking” woman even without a voice? Is the man she is sleeping with the monster, or are her own, self-inflicted demons (like the hallucinated mermaid) the monster? Just like her grandmother, the character is in a relationship with a man on whom she is now completely dependent. She is also without a voice, unable to represent herself in the public sphere. While Fuller, Friedan, and Sandberg stress the importance of progressivism and the need for women to stand up and stand together in order to effect

change, the character in this piece is facing a seemingly impossible uphill battle. The issues that these critical thinkers are dealing with are clearly represented in this, as well as other, poems I wrote while studying them.

Another piece that reflects the problems of women empowering themselves is “Sweet Tooth.” The character in this piece has been assigned grocery duty by her significant other, and she is reluctant to accept this role without putting up a fight, no matter how small that fight may be. The poem begins with the character fantasizing about Patrick Dempsey crying in an elevator. She is imagining an iconic male actor in a position of weakness, weakness being displayed in public. However, she is broken out of her reverie into her current location, which is the grocery store she has been asked to visit. Despite the menial task to which she has been assigned, the character empowers herself by defying the request of her partner: “I was recruited for chunky tomato sauce but got marinara/instead, knowing the infraction is enough to make you frown.” Even though this character is in some ways accepting a domestic role, she is also passive-aggressively rebelling against it, imposing her own desires by disregarding what her partner wants her to buy and buying something else instead. Like the popular fiction writers already discussed, I too found myself struggling at this point in my project to empower women outside of their fixed domestic roles. Yet the character in this piece succeeds in a small victory over her partner, reflecting the critical feminist thinkers that I was reading at the time.

Finally, as my feminist studies continued into my final semester, I began reading women poets concerned with many of the same issues that critical feminist writers have come to confront as well as the issues I was struggling with in my own writing. Poets like

Fanny Howe and Carolyn Forché became staples on my bookshelf, and their voices began to impact my own. I was especially interested in Carolyn Forché's first collection of poetry, *Gathering the Tribes* (1976), which seemed to be riding the exact wavelength of the influential women that had been bouncing around my head for the last year. The very idea of interacting with fellow women writers in my poems became a running theme in the final stage of my creative writing for this project. I became interested in the idea of how women relate to each other, how they view one another's roles within the domestic sphere as well as in the public one. As I reflected on the earlier stages of my writing, which at first merely touched upon feminist concerns of sexuality and relationships before moving into a more focused concern about women's roles within society, I began to become critical both of myself as a woman as well as of the women around me, and the female characters I created reflected this transition.

One piece that deals specifically with frustration in the stagnancy of feminist progressivism is "Larry the Goldfish." The character in this piece, a stripper, reflects on her dream of being the plastic skeleton at the bottom of her goldfish's bowl. The skeleton is obviously dead and stuck underwater, yet he is grinning, "...happy about the sword/sticking out of [its] side." The character's identification with the skeleton, as well as the apparent pleasure she takes in being dead with nowhere to go, reflects the lack of evolution that women writers portray in their work. Despite hundreds of years of progressive arguments by those like Fuller, Friedan, and Sandberg, women writers continue to portray women as happy within the confines of domesticity. The character in this piece is not entirely domestic as a stripper, but still uses her body in a degrading way in order to get ahead. The fact that she identifies with the skeleton in her dreams alludes

to the fact that she does not plan on making any changes in order to more effectively empower herself in the public sphere.

Another piece that reflects frustration with other women is “How to Walk Safely Down the Strip.” This poem features a character that is walking down the Las Vegas Strip, witnessing firsthand a series of vendors that offer her handfuls of strip club fliers featuring naked women. The fliers are so abundant that they are scattered all over the sidewalk and the character finds herself stepping on them, disregarding the bodies of the women she is walking on, ignoring their struggle to support themselves. The images of these women are also being taken for granted by the children, who collect the fliers for their scrapbooks, an act of nostalgia that they are completely misinterpreting. Just as the character ignores the powerlessness of these women, the children are recording that powerlessness for posterity. By the end of the poem, however, the character begins to become one with the women portrayed on these fliers. She says, “My skin fuses with breasts. I become indistinguishable from their smooth skin,/their Braille areolas.” By ignoring the naked, powerless strippers, the character in this piece is slowly becoming one of them. This piece continues the theme of frustration with other women in contemporary society and also highlights the dangers of continuing a pattern of disregard for their inability to empower themselves in the public sphere.

In the last year, my creative writing has evolved immensely through the exposure of all three waves of feminism in America. In the beginning of my graduate studies, my writing had only just begun to concern itself with progressive feminist ideals. I had previously come across women writers like Denise Duhamel and Adrienne Rich who sparked my interest in portraying female characters in my own poetry. I struggled with

my conveyance of women in relationships who seemed lost in their roles as women as well as dependent on their male partners. As my studies progressed, I began reading critical thinkers like Margaret Fuller, Betty Friedan, and Sheryl Sandberg. Although these women come from different generations of feminism, they are all concerned specifically with finding equality for women both within the domestic and the public sphere. Finally, my studies led me to other creative writers like Fanny Howe and Carolyn Forché, who often express concern over how to empower women through their writing. The introduction of these poets deeply influenced my own writing as I began to question the role of women in contemporary feminist culture. While my studies of the development of feminism and its impact on popular women writers show an ambivalence of these writers to empower their female characters in the public sphere, this same ambivalence has become a focal point in my own writing. The following collection of poems, titled “Below Her in the Waves,” is presented in the chronological order in which they were written to reflect the changes my poetry has made through the study of feminist thinkers. Though I did not expect that my studies of an evolving feminist culture would so explicitly affect my own writing, the examination of progressive women thinkers as well as culturally significant popular women writers played a pivotal role in the evolution of my poetry.

BELOW HER IN THE WAVES

There is No Redemption for Woodland Creatures

Last night, I drew a bath of warm milk,
heated on the stove in buckets.
I sank in, head first, until my skin wrinkled
like leaves in mud.

When I tried to stand,
hair fell in clumps,
clogged the drain and clung
to the sides of the tub.

Its tangled strands held me
until I stopped breathing, but the echo of a lute
bounced off the ceramic and I opened my eyes. Light
dulled through white fog.

A faun sat in the corner. He threw me a top hat as a lifesaver.
It filled with milk and sank with a *thunk*.
A rabbit from inside swam to the surface
and gave him a scornful look.

The faun pined for an ax
which would help his self-esteem
but do me no good.
After all, I'm dead.

Barbara Turns Thirteen
after Denise Duhamel's *Kinky*

Barbara heard laughter echoing through her room. It came from her toy chest—an abandoned relic, covered in dust, peanut butter, glitter fallen from crumbling art projects, sitting at the foot of her bed.

Before she lifted the lid, she knew it was Barbie. She knew it was Ken. Her heart throbbed like an open wound as she crawled across her comforter, arms shaking, breath catching in her throat.

The laughter, louder, invited her to look. The hinges creaked in pain and she saw them: two gender confused dolls desperate for companionship and unable to move, their heads swapped and wobbling at unpleasant angles, their smiles painted on Band-Aid skin. Barbara stifled a scream and slammed the lid shut, sure that their mismatched heads had turned to gaze at her.

That morning, after a night of sleepless dreams, Barbara ran down the street, desperate to tell *someone, someone*. In church, the plastic idol would suffice as it stared down from its pedestal, naked and frowning, witness to the emptiness of the world.

Tasked with PB&Js

The white, tiled aisles greet me with a grimy smile.
The peanut butter display offers more chunky jars than usual
with the possibility of buy three, get one free.
I search endlessly for Fruit Loops,
which fell out of fashion before I stopped watching television.

Later, I guess the age of a passenger on the train, forced to stand as I sit,
arms filled with environmentally-friendly bags.
He's had a hard life; his face is deceptive as it stares, serene,
at his reflection in the window.
I haven't had a hard life and my face is deceptive.
I look forward to sales on Skippy but will settle for Jif.
And they've stopped selling my favorite cereal.

Unresolved Passion in Rm 34

My desk longs to be a chair.
a longing born two weeks ago
when a janitor leaned against it during lunch
eating his tuna on rye.
The janitor's pulse pumped heat
into cold plastic
and my desk ached for more.
"This is the way to die,"
thought the desk,
"With the warmth of a stranger
soaking into my body,
not just the occasional caress of a finger;
the brush of an arm;
a pen, circling back and forth on a scantron."
Ever since, it has willed its pencil groove
into a sturdy back,
its long, smooth surface into a seat,
prayed for legs closer to the ground,
meant for leaving scratches on the floor.
But for now it must settle
for its own stoic stillness,
cold hands that take notes
without a second thought.

In a Town Where Kisses are Hiccup Cures

I can tell that the leaves want to turn yellow and fall,
even though it's only August
and they know we enjoy their healthy green glow
when the sun filters through at the perfect angle
revealing golden rays
and eerie patterns on the cracked pavement.

They long for the closeness of raked companions
stuffed into bags on the street,
wet from the rain but not alone.

After I hurt you, I miss your smile,
I lose my arms, I lose my legs,
I grow tired of rocking on the floor.

The persistent rug burn and splinters that plague me
from nose to navel
make you laugh as you step over me
with shoes that squeak against wooden tiles,
encouraging me to roll onto my side
and stare.

The Kind of Lover that Wears Socks to Bed

When we first met, he admitted to counting chickens instead of sheep,
to seeing faces instead of doorknobs,
to writing, "Walrus was here," in doorways and back alleys.

He dreamt of placing a chair in the middle of a clearing
next to a big maple whose bark scattered
across grass like crackling mines.

Summer days meant open-window nights.
His body shook, too hot against mine.
So I took a bottle of wine from the fridge
and placed it between us
to calm his nerves
and to celebrate our last night in one bed.

You Have Not Written for Me in a While

I miss the rain.

I miss the taste of hand sanitizer on my tongue,
a tangy miracle sliding down my throat,
churning my stomach and purifying dark thoughts.

Yesterday, I pulled out
my entire left eyebrow,
giving my face a lopsided look
which I now prefer to symmetry.

We used to watch made-for-tv movies every Friday night.
Now, here I am on a Tuesday,
lying in the middle of the bed,
cold sheets on either side.

A Revelation During Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

Gary Oldman grimaces in the other room,
wooing Winona Ryder with promises of immortality.
You and I are dying in the light of the open window.

Rats scurry in from behind the blinds,
crawling on the floor, over our feet, which point at odd angles
and cannot face each other.

"I hate the way you microwave mashed potatoes,"
you say with a smile and a kiss.
I've grown addicted to the smell of your shirt off my back.

Keanu Reeves looks with awe into the camera.
He cannot believe what he is seeing.
I like destroying things.

You've Always Been an Advocate for Open Caskets

Today, I got on the wrong train.
For two hours, I passed trees
that looked familiar. But my stomach squirmed.

I got off in Buffalo.
Winds pushed by me like they had somewhere to go
and I watched the feet of strangers
hoping for direction.

I passed ducks hanging in a window.
Staring at them made me feel at home.
The flies on their skin were cold.

Not everyone wants a happy ending,
we used to proclaim from low rooftops
and porch stoops.
Then we realized that the last page

comes too soon.

After You Left, I Ran to the Window and Waited for the Comfort of Your Shadow

Nose presses against the screen,
I can still see you walk along the sidewalk, the pavement bouncing
off your shoes to a steady rhythm. Your shoulders invite owls to perch and tomatoes
to splatter. Yet, you continue on, past our neighbor's door. He refuses to wear pants
unless they're hemmed at odd angles and will not hold conversations
away from his porch steps. Years ago, he stopped buying clock batteries.

A grid pattern criss-crosses my nose but I can't pull away, can't turn to the sink which
mice have made their home, to the fridge
which is eighty percent beer, eighteen percent provolone and two percent celery.
You wanted me to make potato salad, which calls for two stalks
but QuickStop sells bags by the pound.
There's glass in the carpet. There's a cockroach scurrying between the toilet
and the claw foot tub which won me over. The floor is sticky. The laundry calls
in a low drone. I see faces instead of doorknobs and can't distinguish
between your shadow and the asphalt anymore.

Villanelle

My grandpa sits at the piano, playing
songs for which he has no tune.
He's forgetting how to use his fingers.

Sometimes he forgets what he was saying.
He wanders through his house from dusk till noon.
My grandpa sits at the piano, playing

love songs for his wife, lying
in her grave fifteen years, too soon.
He's forgetting how to use his fingers

but still drives to see her every Sunday, weighing
the pros and cons of violets for June.
My grandpa sits at the piano, playing

for no one, playing for his nurse who is spraying
his coats with Febreze, feeding him eggs with a spoon.
He's forgetting how to use his fingers.

I saw him last week, swaying
on the stairs, the last proud stance of an old ruin.
My grandpa sits at the piano, playing
nothing. He's forgotten how to use his fingers.

Ink

He draws tic-tac-toe on her hip bone.
She revels in the pen on her skin.

She has goosebumps
(but he wore socks to bed).

She's the X.
He's the O.

He slaughters her with a diagonal victory.
Please. "That tickles." Stop.

He never touches her
with his fingers anymore.

Imagining Brood II in a One Bedroom Apartment

When cicadas come
the summer streetlights hum but
don't illuminate.

Yellow air vibrates
in playgrounds, skeleton-filled
and laughter-wanting.

I hide, "scared," inside
eating ice cubes and pretzels.
You go for Chinese.

Dining on pillows,
we shout sweet nothings, secrets
over candlelight.

Then we try sleeping,
no touching, no covers, hair
sticking to foreheads.

Morning brings hazy
skies. New skin shivers in the
unfamiliar cold.

Stouffer's Lasagna Dinner Hallucinations
After Adrienne Rich's *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*

A mermaid stole my voice last night.
With surgical precision she slit open my throat,
removed my larynx and swallowed it whole

digesting it among shrimp cocktails,
blueberry mojitos,
license plates from Louisiana.

She didn't want it for herself.
But you can't have it.

I wake up choking on blood.
You stare down at me with raised eyebrows,
shrug your shoulders.

The phone rings.
Grandma calling from 1929 offers,
"A thinking woman sleeps with monsters."

Growth

A ferocious bear head sprouted
from my shoulder. It whispered
instructions to me, drooled
pools in my ear and growled
at you every morning.

Then fur burgeoned from my arm
in tufts. Claws grew in,
black, curved, and cruel.
They left scratches on my legs
and blood on the sheets.

The bear head never smiles.
The claws never apologize.
The fur never sheds—it grows
thicker as it begins
to spread across my back.

Sweet Tooth

Patrick Dempsey is crying in an elevator.

Starting on the 4th floor, he grabbed my hand, ignoring
the shuffle of strangers, the vibrations of a phone
in his pocket, the lack of available tissues. His red nose is about to

drip when he disappears in a supermarket's abrupt
announcement for half-price English muffins.
I wander into the Entenmann's aisle.

I was recruited for chunky tomato sauce but got marinara
instead, knowing the infraction is enough to make you frown
all night, ignoring me, hungry,

at the window.

Thirsty

Palm trees follow me down Q St.
Their shallow roots shake free of dirt
and tip toe past Toyotas
hot in the sun.

The pavement burns
my bare feet. California is cruel.
Salt and pepper shakers are my confidants,
emptying their minds over Eggs Benedict.

Their shiny hats reflect a sea of ceiling fans
persistent in the quest for goosebumps,
cold puddles of coffee, and sugar spraying
from torn Splenda bags.

The palm trees scrape against the glass
luring me from Formica
into the desert
where no water is waiting.

Sand seethes
against my bare skin
as I follow the tracks of their dragging bark
into a glaring Sunday afternoon.

Larry the Goldfish

My goldfish doesn't send faxes
but he likes picking out my nipple tassels.
The sequins keep his attention.

The green ones are his favorite—
I'll hold them up to the light and his eyes bulge,
his mouth gapes.

They remind him of the algae
growing on the skeleton in his tank, half-buried in blue rocks,
endlessly smiling.

I've dreamt I was that skeleton,
drowned long ago and happy about the sword
sticking out of my side.

I'm plastic. I'm asleep.
The treasure chest I lean against
holds no currency I can use.

Vegas

A man with three cards calls out as we pass.
You stop, a smile on your face. No one gets the better of you.
“Where’s the queen? Where’s the queen?”
the mantra as he shows her smirk
and then shuffles her into a blur. Confident, you point
to the middle card. But the man shows you a joker.

On the plane home, a woman rocks her baby up and down the aisle.
It screams for four hours straight. Grandmas offer suggestions,
condolences. The rest of us offer knives in our eyes,
whisper about how rude it is to travel with small children.
I take a sip of orange juice and nod off to the sound of tears
which lull me like mother’s milk.

Chaos Makes Me Smile

I line up a battalion of spoons in even rows
and fire Cheerios across the hardwood floor.
Hardwood because vacuums scare me.
Cheerios for a healthy heart.

This self-imposed booby trap will crunch
under my stilettos in the morning as I stumble
to the door. Crumbs will plague my toes for days
and you'll go through your whole collection of socks.

Laundry will overwhelm us. We'll run out
of generic-brand detergent. Cockroaches will feast,
bold, in the light of our fading bulbs.
You'll have to eat toast for breakfast.

I've had to borrow spoons from our neighbors.
They thought I'd want to borrow sugar. Or maybe an egg.
When they're asleep, I'll play hockey down the hall
with their bloody eyeballs and a broom.

Control

Mom's lost control of the car.
Matthew McConaughey whispers
directions in her ear—
his sultry voice makes her giggle.

Lips brush her earlobe as we fly
over a speed bump.
He urges her to ease her foot—slow—onto the brake.
One inch. Two inches.

We continue to blur past pedestrians juggling
Easy-Bake Ovens and Polly Pockets through the parking lot.
My car seat wobbles back and forth
as I practice with Barbie—

her head is shaved. She explores her own body in jerking, plastic
movements that make my mind tingle. Mom quivers behind the wheel.

Execution at Sea

My sister walks the plank. Behind her, pirates brandish swords,
their eye patches menacing and mismatched.
Some have no eyes at all.

I circle below her in the waves, choreographer to sharks
and an idling sea monster
that brushes her ankles with its suction cups. Caressing.

She smiles down at me, her hands tied behind her back, wearing the striped socks
I gave her for Christmas.
A hole exposes her little toe.

One impatient buccaneer shakes the plank. She stumbles but stands firm,
laughing at his joke.
Expectant seagulls squawk a garbled funeral march.

Finally, she bends her knees and jumps, her blonde curls billowing.
I open my mouth
and swallow her whole.

Achilles Whispers a Promise

He says he'll forget my name if I remember his.

I dance onstage because I want to, not because I have to,
not because my shoes are duct taped to my soles.

I refuse to wear curls, even though I have them,
even though the man in the cigar shop, smoking his Black and Mild like a candy cane,
told me I'm pretty, told me girls are funny, a piece of worn-out wisdom

which brings a razor to my head.
I swim in the sea of blonde waves
scattered on the floor
until my oxygen runs out.

Just as I begin to get dizzy I hear someone whisper to me.
But the sound has no meaning. Black dots form in my eyes.
It's like diving into a basket of raspberries at midnight,
that same tangy taste, that same danger.
My body is a bag of wet sand.

How to Walk Safely Down the Strip

The pavement is not safe, but breasts are. They stare up from the ground on discarded strip club fliers, round, pink, full.

I can play lava. I can skip from one breast to the next to get from Aria to New York, New York. From the Venetian to Paris.

Vendors smack a pile of paper breasts against their hands, hold them out for passersby. Children collect breasts to make a scrapbook of their travels.

If I stand on breasts too long, I imagine them sinking into the sidewalk. My feet burn in magma puddles.

My skin fuses with breasts. I become indistinguishable from their smooth skin, their Braille areolas.

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