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ABSTRACT

For centuries, men dominated academia and defined literary rules by which all scholars operated, and more specifically, *male* scholars. Men dominated in all areas outside of the home, so naturally the realm of scholarship belonged to them as well. As the 20th century approached, a few women did break through this gender-constructed wall, but they wrote under pseudonyms until more and more women found their way into the literary pages. Gradually women began writing under their real names but were heavily scrutinized because of the widely-held consensus that only men, who were presumed to be more inherently intelligent, were capable of writing fiction. Once the feminist movement surfaced and female scholars shattered the literary glass ceiling, however, the feminist voice became clearer and more definable in the works of 20th century writers like Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde and Anne Sexton. In analyzing poetry, stories and essays by these three feminist writers, I found common threads amongst them that allowed me to explore the ways in which they harnessed their creative energies to address women's issues in their works. Since literary critics have not yet unanimously agreed upon a clear definition of the term "a woman's voice," I offer a viable elucidation so that both 20th century feminist literature and future works by women might be investigated and classified not only to provide additional insight but also to lay the foundation for a new categorization of literature.

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Introduction: Feminist History in Life and Literature

Through history, attempts at human communication have always existed in the form of oral transmission between at least two participants. Through sounds, words and nonverbal cues, the act of communication provides an equal-opportunity platform for participants to express and share their emotions and ideas. These stimulating exchanges between men and women have been in existence since the beginning of time, but gender dynamics have always undervalued the abilities of the female in such a way to depict her as lesser or more simple-minded than the male. The belief in female intelligence as inferior directly stems from the unequal gender dynamic in society and is conventionally mistakenly assumed to be an essentialist truth. This conviction was contested by the rise of 20th century feminism, a movement which prompted female independence emotionally, physically and spiritually.

Prior to the 20th century, a woman strived to embody the picture-perfect heroine of the home: seemingly content with completing household chores, she obeyed her husband and cared for the children without any indication of disobedience. Within the socially constructed model of a nuclear family, the father was depicted as the provider by means of his manual labor and services, and the female was subordinated in her role as the suburban housewife upholding the illusion of happiness as she awaited her husband's return from work. The only socially accepted role models these women had ever seen were conventional upstanding women in society who maintained their subordinate position, like every president's wife for example; therefore, more progressive women had no foundation on which to enact change. Some women flourished in

their domestic sphere with no qualms, but others wanted more; these pioneers tried breaking the patriarchal model of domesticity to provide different options for women.

The combined efforts of all women resulted in the launch of the feminist movement—one of the largest social movements in history. Historically noted as having roots in the 18th century, feminism's primary goal is achieving equality between men and women in all aspects of life. Documents show the first wave taking place during the 1800s when suffragists worked toward obtaining equal rights for women by "[campaigning] for both equal rights in terms of laws and regulations, but also equal cultural rights, so as to give women the opportunity to pursue whatever career or life choice they decided on" (Buchanan n.p.). Just as later activists in the Civil Rights movement mobilized for equality, women like Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Abigail Adams rallied for women's rights through the 18th and 19th centuries.

The 19th century was a time of cultural, social and political change for women as feminism took root through the efforts of Anthony, Stanton and Adams; these women used literature and activist rhetoric to incite a sociocultural change to better the lives of women. Notably, Stanton and Anthony "have been praised for their masterful use of the multifaceted English Language, but their obvious reliance on folk speech in general and proverbs and proverbial expression in particular has basically received no attention by linguists, cultural historians, folklorists, and paremiologists (proverb scholars)" (Mieder 2). Stanton and Anthony utilized the same skills, resources and platforms as other later activists like Martin Luther King, but received no attention for their academic efforts. Commonplace beliefs during this time emphasized that women should *not* be taken seriously; for hundreds of years, every attempt a woman made to be like a man was futile. If a female wanted to be published, it had to be under a pen name because men did not believe in the intellectual capabilities of a woman. Because of

these professional, academic and cultural barriers, women didn't have many choices beyond the walls of their home.

If a female wanted to be a writer, she had to balance her role as a housewife with her secret desire to be published. However, the duties of a mother and housewife were incredibly time-consuming, physically and emotionally taxing and personally unfulfilling. Encouragement from the husband would have centered on celebrating her maternal talents, while conversations about her scholarship were quickly dismissed. According to Anita Moss's research in *A Feminist Study of Mythic Structures,* "extreme enclosure, repressed critical intelligence, submission to husbands and diminished eroticism all may result in the insanity of [the] female characters." Preventing women from exploring themselves emotionally, intelligently and sexually contribute to the feminist desire for equal exploration of freedoms and rights because the confinement by walls both literal and figurative could make a woman go mad. Charlotte Perkins Gilman set the groundwork for feminist literature when she exposed this dynamic in her 1892 short story, "The Yellow Wallpaper." Her story depicts Jane, who likes to write but isn't allowed to by her husband. Instead, she writes in secret, suffers from an existential crisis, grows bored and finally becomes insane. Gilman's short story evidences the long-existing battle between the sexes, which led many women to join the feminist movement for the same rights and equalities. Many women confronted the oppressively unjust double standards through activist rhetoric and personal experiences. These standards created tensions between friends, husband and wife and brother and sister, because women, the creators of life, had limited options for how to live.

Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique,* presents a foundational argument to challenge the restrictive role of women. She says that, "all the other things that a woman can do or be are merely pale substitutes for the conception of a child. Femininity becomes more than its

definition by society; it becomes a value which society must protect from the destructive onrush of civilization like the vanishing buffalo" (161). Femininity in its most basic form represents supposedly inherent female qualities, but who decides on these qualities? Who is protecting these qualities? It appears that prior to the 20th century, men preserved these 'female qualities' by describing a woman's intelligence in terms of her abilities as a housewife and mother. This is not to say, however, that the fault lay entirely with the male. Women acceded to this domestic differential and some even choose this life.

Some women flourished in male-dominated culture with no qualms about their position as the caretaker, but pioneering women like Stanton and Anthony wanted more. Being a caretaker requires that a person have someone to look after—usually a child. The mother stayed home with her child and adopted the role of a full-time caregiver. She would perform odd jobs, such as a seamstress, to bring in extra money, but that was the extent of her agency within the home. Socially constructed as the homemaker, she was also its corollary: 'the womb.' Just as African Americans and minorities were historically segregated in American culture, women were similarly segregated in society. They were considered lesser because of their embodiment as the womb: the womb, a functional organ, does not possess intellectual capabilities and exists purely for the reason to reproduce. The concept of woman as womb stems from the 20th century model of existential feminism developed by Simone de Beauvoir, a leading feminist and activist. Existentialist feminism challenges the belief that women are passive subordinated objects, while men are active subjects. Existential feminism argued that the reduction of the female to an inanimate body part was because of their socially enforced function in the home as a homemaker and their purpose as a mother.

The 20th century ‘woman as womb’ construction produced an environment that judged women based upon their appearance, womanhood, femininity and imbalanced emotions; thus losing control over their autonomy, women transition into spectators critiquing themselves, according to John Berger, rather than agents living their lives. Dating back to ancient times, men believed the womb to be a defining biological feature that determined women’s status, as Lana Thompson points out:

> writers believed that the womb or uterus had a life of its own, and a *hystera* (The Greek Term) wanted and needed to be filled (i.e. pregnant). In fact, if a woman was not regularly pregnant, she would suffer from *hysteria,* a catch-all category for somatic symptoms stimulating almost any kind of physical disease or mental condition…Hysteria was therefore something that only females suffered from—not males, who were of course vastly superior in all respects. To make matters worse, women not only gave birth, they also menstruated, another mysterious process that was not fully explained until the third decade of this century. (Thompson 11-12)

Male objectification of a female based off her reproductive abilities became concrete and plausible because doctors at the time didn’t quite understand the biological workings of the female body. As a result, skepticism and incorrect theories surrounding women became commonplace. The mind-body connection allowed for women’s natural bodily functions to be put on display as a means to discredit their academic abilities. If the womb was not full, then the mind was full of emotion and hysteria.

The idea of hysteria as an intellectually debilitating source could be applied to any woman because of her apparent hormonal imbalances; not surprisingly, as a result of this line of thinking, women give way to maternal instincts and overpowering emotions while men remain

steadfastly masculine, a stoic rock supporting the weak female. Additional characteristics associated with female hysteria include depression or obsession, as described by Heather Meek:

> Frightful dreams, drowsiness, nightmares, peevishness, wandering thoughts, impaired memory, groundless fears, and disturbances of the imagination were common manifestations. However, unlike psychosis or depression, victims were almost solely female, and physical symptoms—ranging from headaches, salivation, and trembling to paralysis, chocking, and epileptic-like fits—were central diagnosis criteria. This somatic element is less prominent in women's accounts of hysteria. Rather, they focus on a continuum of psychological states ranging from persistent sorrow, social isolation and depression to paranoia and anxiety…in fact, they often rejected the hysteria diagnosis altogether. (Meek 108-109)

These symptoms may have been reported by more women than men, but this does not mean that men were immune from psychological disturbances. The gender dynamics of the time didn't allow men to show any sign of inner weakness because this admission reduced their masculinity. Because of the assumption of biologically-inevitable hysteria in women, men believed that females are incapable of thinking rationally and academically. Theoretically, if their minds were unstable, how could they possibly be able to think logically and produce great works of literature?

The solution for women? Personal and political liberation.

The woman as a womb is a physical classification, her spiritual or emotional classifications also determined her value as a woman. The value of a woman were contingent upon her innocence because "in an earlier time, the image of woman was also split in two—the

good, pure woman on the pedestal, and the whore of the desires of the flesh," which did nothing to give an intellectual voice to women (Friedan 39). While this classification focused more on the woman's moral character, it includes components of the female as a reproductive organ. The whore "desires the flesh," according to Friedan's definition, which could lend itself to the assumption that a female thinks with her womb. The whore gets impregnated before marriage and commits sinful acts, while the pure girl marries one man and never commits adultery. She is pregnant by his decree.. This archetypal theory of feminism that Friedan describes undercuts the sexual agency of a female, a restrictive condition both Lorde and Sexton speak out against.

Friedan's description of the female exposes the rawness behind what it means to be a pure woman or a whore, two ways society would label and dismiss a woman. A woman could be the "good girl", or the pure woman who thinks only to please her husband and to never defy the rules of the house. This girl obeys her husband's every command and rarely has sexual or selfish thoughts, while the whore embodies the independent career woman who chooses to live and please only herself. She does not answer to a man's commands and does not obey every order a man gives her. Instead, she dives into deep disobedience and explores the unknown of her unconscious fearlessly. Friedan breaks down this model further in terms of one's selfhood being split:

> the split in the new image opens a different fissure—the feminine woman, whose goodness includes the desires of the flesh, and the career woman, whose evil includes every desire of the separate self. The new feminine morality story is the exorcising of the forbidden career dream, the heroine's victory over Mephistopheles: the devil, first in the form of a career woman, who threatens to take away the heroine's husband or child, and finally, the devil inside the heroine herself, the dream of independence, the discontent of

> spirit, and even the feeling of a separate identity that must be exorcised to win or keep the love of husband and child. (Friedan 39)

The newly independent female was a threat to masculinity across the world because of her autonomous power. Historically subordinated, a woman's freedom to express and excel was blocked by male fear and pride. Intellectually, physically, creatively and emotionally, there were limits on women that made them easy targets for criticism. But what else could women do? They all encountered this existentialist crisis: in Friedan's words, this was the 'problem without a name.'

When women tried to speak up after being granted legal equality in 1920, they still faced this 'problem without a name.' Each time they tried to describe what exactly was wrong, they couldn't identify exact point of reference because "when a woman tries to put the problem into words, she often merely describes the daily life she leads" (Friedan 20). Women couldn't accurately describe what bothered them about their daily lives, but they did know that something was missing; they weren't living to their full potential and suffered from a lack of fulfillment. The feminine mystique, or the myth of happy domesticity, set limitations on their choices and prevented them from changing anything about their lives on their own. Stephanie Coontz points out in her review, *The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s* that Friedan didn't complain or challenge women's desire to be wives and mothers, but instead, "argued that beneath the daily routines and surface contentment of most housewives' lives lay a deep well of insecurity, self-doubt, and unhappiness that they could not articulate even to themselves" (18). How do you change something when you can't figure out exactly where the problem is? Women face this problem constantly and some couldn't delve deep enough to

resolve their existentialist conflicts. Friedan does not create a controversy by disagreeing with the way some women chose to live, but points out their need for ontological fulfillment.

To examine this existential problem, a woman must tap into forbidden territory and look deep within her unconscious. As culturally difficult this problem appears to be, it is incredibly psychologically challenging as well. Friedan describes this problem as, "the end of the road, in an almost literal sense, is the disappearance of the heroine altogether, as a separate self and the subject of her own story" (41). Taking cues from Freud's psychoanalytic theory, the feminine mystique in part causes this common problem among women. His theory argues for the need for self-reflection and looking inward. Friedan claims that the mystique "derives its power from Freudian thought…which led women, and those who studied them, to misinterpret their mothers' frustrations, and their fathers' and brothers' and husbands' resentments and inadequacies, and their own emotions and possible life choice" (110). The process of reflection was to free one from their repressed pain and help to lead them to a better life; however, the rift between the unconscious and conscious could distort reality.

The theory of the feminine mystique fabricated an ideal that women should follow; it awards women, not recognized as rational beings, a kind of enigmatic nature and a sense of unpredictability. The feminine mystique outlined the way a woman should live and said that the "root of women troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and untiring maternal love" (36). The women who tried to copy men were heavily scrutinized and severely judged because of one simple fact: they weren't men. Women attempted to write like a man, but if it was under their name, it was already counted as not good. Many women used pseudonyms and decided that to disguise themselves *and* write like a man was the

way toward equality. The Bronte sisters, George Eliot and many other female writers used pseudonyms and published classic works that are read years later all because they first came to success under a male name. Because men have dominated this field for so long, "the poet's pen is in some sense (even more than figuratively) a penis" (Gilbert and Gubar 4). So, in order to speak, women had to write like a man for acceptance and then use their power to imitate the male literary style of writing. These women creative in their efforts and imitative in their production, set the stage for the late 20th century feminist writers..

Women were breaking their social and literary imprisonment because "both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt the pen which is so rigorously kept from them must escape just those male texts which…imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen" (Gilbert and Gubar 13). Their imprisonment served as a rejection of the female intellect possibly due to the fear that women possess similar abilities academically and could potentially be more intelligent than a male scholar of the time. But women were rarely afforded a public platform for their thoughts, until later in the 20th century when feminists like Gayatri Spivak lectured widely about what it means to be a woman. While Audre Lorde, Virginia Woolf and Anne Sexton *wrote* about it, women like Spivak *spoke* about it and said that "my own definition as a woman is very simple: it rests on the word *man* as used in the texts that provide the foundation for the corner of the literary critical establishment I inhabit. You might say at this point, defining the word *woman* as resting on the word *man* is a reactionary position. Should I not carve out an independent definition for myself as a woman" (241). Women like Spivak tried to break through the invisible constraints of the gender created boundaries of what a female can and cannot do through her spoken rhetoric. She creates her own definition of a what a woman should be. Bold enough to present this talk at the University of

Texas at Austin in front of a group of scholars, she let her feminist voice be heard. She not only spoke, but published her talk as well—something very few women prior to the 20th century could do.

The female voice in literature had been muted for years because men dominated the literary field with writers like William Blake, John Milton or William Shakespeare. How could women compete with writers whose work is so universally known and acclaimed? Simple.Both by imitation, and by the spoken word.. Female writers have always struggled to emerge, but their efforts were constantly blocked by male critics whenever they attempted to publish their work. Hugh E. M. Stutfield's in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*¸ writes "It is only lately that a woman has really begun to turn herself inside out, as it were and to put herself into her books. A German authoress, whose interesting work I shall deal with presently, observes that the great feminine intellects of former years simply followed in a man's footsteps, and philosophized and preaches after the manner of the leading male thinkers of the day" (20). Most women who wanted to be writers had to imitate before they could recreate and essentially had to fool the world into thinking that they were men. The rise of feminism inspired women to use their creativity and take a liberal course of action by working within the system to change it.

Women in academia in the 20th century operate within the feminist system and fill the silence with their own voices. Women's writing tends to be autobiographical, concentrating creative energies through affective rhetoric that conveys the nuanced emotions and intensely felt experience in feminist work. In her important assessment of the differences between male and female-centered writing, Mary Gordon argues in her foreword to Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own," that "modern women are frustrated and angry, their experience is limited; modern men are obsessed with the letter "I"; their writing is full of self-conscious indecency, self-

conscious virility. It is essentially sterile" (xii). The male narrative style revolves around the masculinity of the hero and places him at the center of the narrative. Details lack, description is vague and the language is straightforward. Male writers of the past have been self-involved and lacked emotion in comparison to the female authors whose writing is descriptive and centralizes the heroine.

Early feminist writing created an enigmatic and creative energy around women because of the uncertainty over their abilities with a pen. Since then, more feminist writers have emerged and have taken place among the best writers and poets of the 20th century. After years of silence, the content conveys the same themes of oppression, pain, love, empowerment and sexual vigor as the original writings. Additionally, feminist writing can often be confessional. No two women are the same and neither is their interpretation of 'confession' as a mode of interpreting experience. Women choose to harness their creative energies towards different subjects and each female's rhetoric bears the weight of that individual's experience. Virginia Woolf, Audre Lorde and Anne Sexton were prominent feminist writers of the 20th century who spoke up as representatives for their gender by confronting sociocultural issues for women.

Creative energy binds women together despite being silenced in academia for centuries with no creative outlet for the world to witness. However, how do we even define creative energy? Creative energy is an open-mindedness to all things and an encompassing of the unknown and different. Female rhetoric differs from male rhetoric because of its inclusive nature focusing on everyone—not just the individual. Feminist rhetoric reflects creative energies because language provides a voice. Virginia Woolf struggled with mental illness and her work is filled with relatable emotion and pain. Woolf experimented with the unknown, and with uncertainty, gender relations, class hierarchies and war. Her controversial themes dive deeper

into the human psyche. She wrote during her therapy sessions as a mental reprieve from her childhood memories and depression. She broke her silence later in life, after she had experienced love, family life and loss.

Similarly, Audre Lorde composed her works later in life, also after dealing with love, loss, pain and suffering. She explains the importance of breaking one's silence and focusing energy on speaking on behalf of those who can't. Lorde, a poet who focuses primarily on gender, race and sexuality in her writing, was diagnosed with cancer and documents a battle many woman fight. She identifies her work as being revolutionary and a means for change as she writes about sexuality, gender, discrimination, race and oppression. Towards the end of her life, she focused her energy on relating her cancer experience and the oppression she has felt with that disease to situations where other women have felt oppressed or similarly victimized because to her it is never too late to speak out. One must simply speak.

Anne Sexton, much like Lorde, communicates a much different creative energy; a sense of disorientation emanates from her words, conveying the pain and psychological torment she lived with for years. Her therapist encouraged her to write about her thoughts and feelings, which many other people could connect to. Some critics argue her work to be more imaginative and fanciful, rather than autobiographical and factual. However, her use of rich symbolism allows her to reveal meaning through her poetic voice so readers can connect to her poems. She primarily focuses on female identity, madness and suicide, sexual anxiety, meanings of gender, parental relationships, transformations and other themes that serve to help women find a creative fulfillment in their lives. Her poetry is often misinterpreted due because her impressionistic descriptions that could have a plethora of meanings. Her poetry's abstraction makes her words

universally relatable because she confronts the misunderstandings between genders and discusses the nature of female identity explicitly.

All three poets and writers focus their creative energies on speaking out about gender relations and battling victimizations. Anne Sexton and Virginia Woolf battled madness and depression in life, themes which comes through in their poetry, Audre Lorde battled her cancer and refused to give in to the limitations imposed on her by the disease.These women serve as modern feminist models because they target the problem that has no name in their works while battling oppressions in their everyday lives. Poets and writers who have followed in the footsteps of these women can be inspired to refuse to be victimized and instead fight their way to the top for the recognition they deserve as female artists. Women have always written poetry, fiction and nonfiction, but in trying to gain recognition steps had to be taken prior to revealing their artistic gifts.

Lorde, Sexton and Woolf who represent different aspects under the umbrella term of feminism provide a voice to women of color, sexual orientation or mentally ill. They appeal to women who feel trapped and need to escape: “Feminist methodology takes the lives of women as central” and creates the female as the protagonist or center of the story, and directly opposes the traditional male style where the female needs a savior “(Scholz 20). To attempt to write as a woman has always prevented the publications of such fictions, but once the feminist movement began to evolve, women were more willing to move into the public sphere and work for what they desired in literature and life. Such women paved the way for other women writers , all of whom lend their artistry to my overarching definition of an identifiable feminist “voice” in 20th century literature.

Chapter 1 : Who is Virginia Woolf?

Understanding Virginia Woolf's feminist voice requires an awareness of her motivations and experiences as they relate to her works. Born Adeline Virginia Stephen in January of 1882 to an enviable family of intellectuals and artists, Virginia Woolf lived a brilliant life of juxtapositions. She grew up with three siblings, Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian, but was the only one who fulfilled her family's legacy of greatness. She believed "she was the heiress to two very different and in fact opposed traditions; indeed, she went further and held that these two rival streams dashed together and flowed confused but not harmonized in her blood (Bell 18). Her father, Leslie Stephen was the first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and migrated in powerful literary circles, while her mother, Julia Jackson, was an artist with influential artistic connections; Woolf's aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, was one of the greatest portrait photographers of the 19th century (Britannica). Having grown up in such an intellectually and artistically wealthy family, it was no surprise that Woolf would one day become one of the most influential writers of the early 20th century.

However, the great feminist writer did not excel immediately with the English language. She communicated with her family through banging objects and various impenetrable noises until she began grasping language at the age of three; once language came to her, "words, when they came, were to be then, and for the rest of her life, her chosen weapons" (Bell 22). Words became a way to amuse herself, as she was often caught writing for fun during childhood. Her mother and sister decided at a young age that Virginia would become a writer one day, and she became known as the storyteller in the family because she would tell tales to her siblings when the lights went out. It also became evident early in her life that she possessed the ability to

"'create an atmosphere,' an atmosphere of thunderous and oppressive gloom, a winter of discontent. It was done without words" (Bell 24). Woolf presented her ability to master the art of communication and manipulation at an early age, which she expertly demonstrates in her writings; through sounds, moods and noises, she created a language of her own. She was educated at home with her other sisters, she read books in their library, while her brothers went on to Cambridge. Mary Gordon, in her foreword to Virginia Woolf's "Room of One's Own" states that "she felt cheated in her education, and felt the cheat for all those who had gone before her—she was angry" (xiii). Since women were rarely afforded the same educational opportunities as men, they weren't provided resources and access to materials. Therefore, women were constantly at a disadvantage intellectually, except when the female was naturally gifted.

Woolf may have been proud of her wits and mastery of the language as grew up, but she felt incredibly ashamed of her womanhood. She had a traumatic experience as a child when she was violated by her brothers Gerald and George Duckworth, events which most likely fueled her shame towards her womanhood—and led to her isolating mind from body. Woolf recalls this moment in great detail as he "explored" her "private parts," and her feelings proved to her "that Virginia Stephen was not born on the 25th of January 1882, but was born many thousands of years ago; and had from the very first encounter instincts already acquired by thousands of ancestresses in the past" (Woolf 69). Woolf was burdened with being a female whose beauty was inherited from her mother, and she had to endure the unwanted attention that so many of her ancestors had been accustomed to. She identified with their feelings because she had no choice in the matter; for centuries women were supposed to obediently endure the male audacity to take

control of the woman without her resisting their advances. Woolf's mental health was greatly affected by this incident, which would haunt her for years.

Woolf often faced illnesses, which she called fits of madness; this kind of madness would most likely have been considered female hysteria prior to the 20th century when the theory of the female as a womb was prevalent. Her mental state was often affected by the memories of her sexual abuse, in part the cause for her depression. Her violations by the Duckworth's lasted for nine years, which Mark Bennett describes as having a deep influence on her psychology. He points out that there are biological alterations as a result of such abuses that change the normal brain functioning of a child; these "are of a type which make it very difficult for the maturing individual to restrain themselves from fits of anxiety and deep depression, particularly when they are confronted by very stressful events" (31). Woolf suffered from four episodes of depression, partly also resulting from the death of her parents. She took to self-harm as a coping mechanism and reportedly threw herself out of a window after one of these episodes. She spent a few years in and out of mental institutions for her 'hysteria.' She documented some of her pain in her 'A Sketch of the Past,' which she wrote in 1939 (Waudby). Her documented memories of sexual abuse by her half-brothers and her lifelong efforts to understand these outrages most likely contributed to her reliance on a specific writing style, the stream of consciousness, which combined everyday events with memory in a single flow of expression.

Woolf often wrote about her feelings towards her physical appearance and non-traditional upbringing in reflective pieces like her posthumously published 1976 memoir, *Moments of Being*. She recalls staring into the looking glass as a child and says she "only did this if [she] was alone. [She] was ashamed of it…the looking-glass shame has lasted all [her] life, long after the tomboy phase was over…[she] must have been ashamed of [her] own body" (Woolf 68). Woolf

and her sister were often referred to as tomboys growing up; Woolf resented all things female—the dress, nose powdering, and every other association connected with being a little girl. The stereotypical makings of a woman, necessitated by men out of their need for difference among the sexes, did not suit Woolf. Her resistance to the invisible bindings of womanhood reflects her disobedience in rejecting the idealized female of the 20th century, thus making her one of the most progressive women of this time.

Her academic achievements began at an early age despite her homeschooling and self-education. In 1891, Woolf published her first newspaper at the age of nine and with the help of her brother Thoby. The *Hyde Park Gate News* ran until 1895; *The Midnight Ride* was Woolf's introductory piece and she reflected in this work in 1927 by saying she could fabricate situations but "cannot make up plots" (Bell 28). Her paper featured her attempts at fiction and were praised by the adults in her area, but "Virginia was always enormously sensitive to criticism and, when her parents came into the drawing-room, her excitement became almost unbearable. For a time, the paper would lie unnoticed; then at last Julia would pick it up and begin to read" (Bell 29). Although she shared a natural sensitivity and tendency toward self-criticism with any young author, she persisted with her writing career. As a child, she focused on academics by choosing to play grown-up—and forever continued to play grownup.

As her education progressed, she chose games about words and language instead of playing with blocks or shapes; when she was young, her father taught her German. By fifteen, her natural curiosity led her to explore her father's library, eventually immersing herself in Greek and Latin classical literature (Waudby). She read many works of literature available to her and concentrated on her writing career as she gained more and more knowledge. After her newspaper ceased publication, she connected with *The Times Literary Supplement* and continued to write

for publication until her death in 1941. She used her imagination and energies from the time she was a young child and into her adulthood, which was:

> one of the difficulties of living with Virginia; her imagination was furnished with an accelerator and no brakes; it flew rapidly ahead, parting company with reality, and, when reality happened to be a human being, the result could be appalling for the person who found himself expected to live up to the character that Virginia had invented. But even when reality happened to be an umbrella it could cause havoc. (Bell 148)

As a small child in a creative literary circle created by her parents, it would be natural for her to grow into a prominent literary figure who used her creative energies to describe her daily life. The chaos existing in her head served her well in her stream-of-consciousness novels. She could form images in her head of people, places and experiences that were so clear that when people didn't live up to her idea of who they were, it was hard for her to come to terms with her disappointment. She gave way to her imagination quite often, channeling her creative energies into descriptive language. Her use of details to embellish the life of a female during the 20th century allowed her to effectively describe her flashes of being and non-being in *Moments of Being*.

Woolf's creative energies aided her in her quest for equality; she parted with the present realities instead of creating characters in her novels and essays to depict the harsh realities of womanhood. Describing the difference between her theory of being and non-being, Woolf claims that a woman understands these early on in life because:

> Every day includes much more non-being than being… These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being…A great part of every day is not lived consciously. One walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done;

> fix a broken vacuum cleaner; ordering dinner; writing orders to Mabel; washing; cooking dinner; bookbinding. When it is a bad day the proportion of non-being is much larger. (Woolf 70)

Woolf claims that these moments of non-being appear daily and within these moments, a person goes through the motions subconsciously as they ignore the significant parts of their daily life. For a woman during the 20th century, daily activities like vacuuming, cleaning and cooking become less and less exciting. Her moments of being occur when she's engaged in caring for the children or completing tasks, but the moments of non-being are as significant in her day. These charged moments characterize a woman's life; the moments of non-being provide an outlet for the female to concentrate her creative energies in a safe space. Limitations on her imagination no longer exist because her mind is not confined to the walls of her home. Rather, she has a psychological outlet for her consciousness to flow back and forth in time without a filter.

Her memoir presents another way of living for women; these alternative moments of non-being produced for her a form of psychological fulfillment. Focus on these moments in her writing, she recalls a moment of pseudo-being in her memoir, a form of being that she describes as something many women experience subconsciously. After the death of her mother, she says "we were made to act parts that we did not feel; to fumble for words that we did not know…yet there was a struggle, for soon we revived, and there was a conflict between what we ought to be and what we were" (Woolf 95). She realizes that many women experience Friedan's 'problem without a name.' This struggle, to 'be' rather than 'seem' represents the existentialist crisis every feminist woman: who am I really? Who do I want to be?

Virginia Woolf's Feminist Voice

Virginia Woolf comes from a world of intellectuals who adopted the male writing style, which was bold and direct in statement – a style characteristic of male scholars at the time. Woof, however, immediately defied this style and created her own. Her intellectual and economically wealthy upbringing made it so she didn't live a traditional life of limitations. She wasn't restricted by constant judgments of her intelligence or abilities because she wasn't ordinary; she also wasn't concerned with the normal, which may have been a result of the way she was raised or conditioned. Instead:

> Woolf is concerned with the fate of women of genius, not with that of ordinary women; her plea is that we create a world in which Shakespeare's sister might survive her gift, not one in which a miner's wife can have her rights to property; her passion is for literature, not for universal justice. (Gordon viii)

Woolf's goal is not to liberate women and stand up for the injustices of oppression, but she chooses to stand up for their intellectual rights instead. "Shakespeare's Sister" is a fictional essay about a woman, Judith, who was capable of the same genius as her brother. However, her gender became her downfall and her genius was silenced forever. Woolf wants intelligence like that of Judith, Shakespeare's sister, to live on and be heard. If these women have something worth saying, then their words are valuable contributions to society.

Her writing focuses on the power of the human mind and its capabilities. She chose to channel her energy into writing because it served her as an outlet for her thoughts, feelings and experiences—aspects of people's life that influence their identity. While Woolf does superficially claim to only care for vocalizing the genius of the educated upper class, whose wealth provides a vessel for free communication, she truly opens the conversation for all women from all backgrounds. In order to understand Woolf's voice, her beliefs need consideration because these moral positions are what her writing develops from and the point from which she identifies her audience. She writes primarily to

middle-to-upper class females, evident in her descriptions. In her short essay, "A Room of One's Own," she says "it is part of the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon and ducklings, as if soup and salmon and ducklings were of no importance whatsoever, as if nobody ever smoked a cigar or drank a glass of wine. Here, however, I shall take the liberty to defy that convention and to tell you that the lunch on this occasion began with soles, sunk in a deep dish…" (Woolf 10). She immediately attacks the traditional writing style of so many academics and scholars by pointing out how they deliberately exclude the details—details characteristic of a privileged life. Her mention of these things as having no importance denotes her tone towards the male literary approach as being extremely negative and thereby identifies the kind of women she hopes to appeal to.

Woolf's voice is characterized by high culture and the lavish details she incorporates into her texts, making her work abundant with images for the reader. *Shakespeare's Sister* was composed in a stream of consciousness style, as Woolf ponders the implications of womanhood during the Elizabethan era and contrasts those past days with present moments. She uses Judith, Shakespeare's sister, as a communicative vessel for women to realize their capabilities and intellectual power. As Judith's gender leads to her sad fate, Woolf' tone grows into curiosity and disappointment. Rather than protest the societal injustices Judith faces, she investigates the reasons behind her demise. Woolf seeks an understanding of the phenomena relating to a woman's experiences, which is central to determining her individual feminist voice. This essay creates a scenario that illustrates what would happen to a woman if she used her genius like a man did. Consequently, women began authoring under male pen names to reach audiences. Woolf's exploration of historical female authorship and her woman writer's limitations as a result of the essentialist theory that denied her literary talents demonstrates her voice: investigative, curious and psychologically explorative.

Her investigative voice seeps through in another short fiction, "Street Haunting." Here Woolf engages in a psychological exploration of essentialism; she uses the motif of "the eye" as a means to demonstrate social hypocrisy. The people on the street become targets of scrutiny for their external

appearance, which is how women were viewed prior to the 20th century. Women are internally conflicted, unsure whether to present the façade or their true self. Her short fiction centers her gaze on society. She uses several different characters as a way to find herself through their experiences. Her characters, like the dwarf, stand out for their extreme boldness and differences; these attributes make them targets for examination, much like a woman is 'gazed' upon when attempting independence by publishing her works. Like Judith, in Shakespeare's sister, these characters are gazed upon closely. Her details provide a glimpse into her own psychological understanding of her identity. Within this short fiction, her voice is curious and reflective, assessing both women and society. She observes the world as it is and describes it tenderly, taking care to focus on the small details of ordinary life.

"The Mark on the Wall" and "The Lady in the Looking Glass," are very similar these two pieces concentrate primarily upon the psyche of the female. In "The Lady in the Looking Glass," Sexton employs the use of mirrors to depict the existentialist battle of the internal soul versus the superficial externality of one's vanity. The mirrors entice the reader to examine their experiences with the split-self: she divides beliefs and ideologies about oneself into good and bad and focuses upon attributes of each category individually. This concept of "splitting" is a defense used by people, where they think in extremes. For instance, when Isabella stares into the mirror for a long period of time, her mind plays tricks on her sense of reality and she begins thinking in binaries. She ponders her death as the light hits it and contemplates her own fragile sense of self. Woolf's intention with this short fiction is for a person to understand the power of feminine intellect and women's internal psychological struggle. There are different ways of looking at the world, and her writing argues that the less we embrace our true selves, the more it clamors to be released. We can see the world in black and white, or we can choose to accept everything as a whole. Until that point arises, this struggle will continue. She vocalizes this claim through a cautionary but deeply investigative and reflective voice.

In "The Mark on the Wall," Woolf speaks in a similar voice. She considers a person's sovereignty over their minds and the power a female's genius harnesses. The narrator is extremely curious about the

origin of the mark. Her mind appears to wander but also returns to the root of her investigation. A woman was rarely considered to be as intelligent as a man, and Woolf disproves this theory. The narrator proves her intelligence by imagining multiple possibilities as to what created the mark on the wall. She explores every attainable possibility within her brain and then moves into her own considerations about life. Her intellectual freedoms are exercised in abundance within this piece, which is what Woolf strives for in her feminist writing. With her creative energies, she is deeply interested in the psychological aspects of life. Thus, her voice reflects as much.

Her existentialist themes evident in her literary efforts describe the opportunity for people to free their consciousness and explore the sovereignty of their being beyond a superficial level of autonomy over one's self; Woolf's literary style impressed upon the details, concentrates upon the small particulars surrounding the main events through her stream of consciousness. Peter Barry suggests in his book that sentences written by a female are "linked in looser sequences, rather than carefully balanced and patterned as in male prose…generally the female writer is seen as suffering the handicap of having to use a medium (prose writing) which is essentially a male instrument fashioned for male purposes" (121-124). Woolf's own voice and style does include loser writing but does not suffer a handicap in any way; her writing flows freely and elaborates on minor or abstract details rather than boldly states concrete events in the text. She carefully constructs her writing to appeal to the female audiences and those looking for more than what the male style provides. She has taken the male instrument and fashioned it to fit her own voice and in doing so, demonstrates her own agency in literature. Her work heavily concerns itself existentialist ways of being in the world. Woolf's style is experimental in nature because she investigates phenomena psychologically and tests the limits of the human psyche. She presents controversial theories of psychology that would explain a woman's desires and would also provide a possible understanding of women's yearning for independence and liberation.

For a woman to find liberation in the home, she must possess her own sovereignty, in which she resolves her internal conflict and understands the truth of her being. From there on, women can figure out

how to use their agency and speak for themselves because a major problem is that "women having found their voices have something to say which is naturally of supreme interest and meaning to women, but the value of which we cannot yet determine" (*The Essays of Virginia Woolf* 16). Woolf vocalizes the need for problems that must be solved before a woman is able to truly explain her situation and desires. Her voice follows a stream of associative thought as she speaks, her ideas seemingly unfiltered. However, Woolf uses extreme consideration and caution in her writing and gives meaning to each word used. She writes with a purpose and by lending her voice to women through her existentialist works, she contributes to defining the feminist voice as a reckoning with the division within one's self.

"Shakespeare's Sister" by Virginia Woolf

In 1929, Virginia Woolf published an essay, "A Room of One's Own," which was based on her lectures at Cambridge University from the previous year. In "A Room of One's Own" she describes the need for independent space and intellectual freedom for a woman; in her compilation of essays, she fabricated a sibling to William Shakespeare to depict the inability of a woman to succeed because of her gender. Titled "Shakespeare's Sister," Woolf centers her argument in Elizabethan times and describes Shakespeare's sister, Judith, as a person with the same wits and intelligence. Her heroine attempts to write plays for publication but is rejected and subsequently laughed at for even attempting the pen because "for a woman artist is, after all, a woman—that is her "problem" –and 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 an Gubar 66). Woolf's creation of a fictional strong female establishes her opinions about the actual lack of female equality in scholarship. Judith serves as the hypothetical embodiment of *what if a*

female tried to be a great playwright like Shakespeare. Her question of *what if* was answered by Judith's inevitable suicide—her only form of noticeable agency. Her genius was constantly ignored, which was something Woolf focused on for several of her works, like "The Mark on the Wall." Woolf was deeply invested in the psychological freedoms that writing produced, and her essay reinforces her belief in social attempts to silence female creativity. This piece represents Woolf's voice by documenting her need to challenge the status quo in female authorship and creative freedoms.

In comparison to a life like Shakespeare's, women lived a non-literary lifestyle, meaning that their abilities and potential as an author were never understood. The attempt at the pen was seldom made, but they lived in a literary world. Their dreams were fictitious, while their imaginations ran wild. Woolf describes fiction as a web, intending that fiction has a hand in all aspects of life—especially in the lives of women. Literature was largely composed by male authors in their traditionally bold style. According to Peter Barry, Author of *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literacy and Cultural Theory,* "the thesis that language is masculine in this sense is developed by Dale Spender in the early 1980s in her book *Man Made Language* (1981) which also argues that language is not a neutral medium but one which contains many features which reflect its role as the instrument through which the patriarchy finds its expression" (124). Since language was dominated by primarily all men for so long, it became a tool for the patriarchy to use in their everyday lives and to prevent women from attempting. It was a way for the male literary figures to demonstrate their intellect.

Her essay compares a plethora of women to Judith, the Shakespearean literary figure of the middle 16th century and early 17th century, to depict their inability to live up to their

potential. Women were only present in literature as a background character or as the damsel in distress, waiting for their hero to save them. In all of Shakespeare's plays, the woman were depicted as strong, controlling women—but were not in real life:

> Not being a historian, one might go even further and say that women have burnt like beacons in all the works of all the poets from the beginning of time—Clytemnestra, Antigone, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Phedre, Cressida, Rosalind, Desdemona, and the Duchess of Malfi, among the dramatists; then among the writers: Millamant, Clarissa, Becky Sharp, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovery, Madame de Geurmantes—the names flock to mind, nor do they recall women 'lacking in personality and character.' Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact, as Professor Trevelyan points out, she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room. (43)

Unlike their literary counterparts women in history were weak, women were depicted as weak, resembling a toy to: they were easily manipulated out of fear, they were too emotional and men could control them as a result and they were always in need of help. Woolf aptly names a host of characters whose personality and characters are strong in the works—with limitations for actual women in real life. Their male counterparts were famous and in fact, men even played the female roles on stage. She describes the possibility of women as being of the "utmost importance" within fiction, because men authored the story; the unfortunate reality is the truth in Woolf's argument because these female characters named could not have been independent

living women. Her point resounds with the fact that women *are* present in literature, but that attention is controlled by the male because the narrative is created by him.

Woolf proposes the possibility in life of an important female in Judith, for example, outlining her presence in literature as a possibility in life. Unless one actively searches for her, though, she will be hidden. Woolf claims "imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant…She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction…Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband" (45). Woolf's describes women as central characters making important contributions to literature; she showcases the contributions of the female often dismissed. In reality, though, she was perceived as an object of property to be at the disposal of her husband; from the limited information about women during the time, it can be gathered that "one knows nothing detailed, nothing perfectly true and substantial about her. History scarcely mentions her, as Woolf argues (45). Because literature neglected to document female history, only general information is known about women today. This information is then used to reconstruct the female position in the web of life, touching the four corners, as Woolf refers to it.

In writing her own history, Woolf makes it clear that a woman had rarely if ever documented her own life; if she had, every piece of evidence was lost. She claims that the woman "never writes her own life and scarcely keeps a diary; there are only a handful of her letters in existence. She left no plays or poems by which we can judge her. What one wants, I thought…is a mass of information; at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house life, had she a room to herself…" (45). If a woman had a room to herself, which is the entire premise for the essay, it would denote the independent agency and

sovereignty she exercises in writing fiction. The only way a woman would have a room to herself was if she came from wealth and thus had an education that would provide her the literacy necessary to author her own life. However, as Woolf figured out, “it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare. Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say” (46). Woolf fabricates a scenario in which she compares Shakespeare to his fictitious sister who possessed the same capabilities as her brother but was never allowed the opportunity to express them. Through Judith, Woolf searches for the answers to all of her questions about the female presence in literature at this time.

She then ponders the idea of the female’s voice in literature, especially in the Elizabethan age. She considers the prevalence of the male voice, but wants to understand *why* a female wasn’t published; to test her claim, she creates a non-existent sister. She writes, “for it is a perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of song or sonnet” (Woolf 40). Her essay sets the foundation for feminist writing by demonstrating the injustices many women can connect to. Very few women published recognizable songs or sonnets during this time, and even fewer women created pieces that men liked. To this point, Woolf composed this essay to illustrate the possible agency of a female author by describing Judith, who possesses “a goddess’s power of maternal creativity, the sexual/ artistic strength that is the female equivalent of the male potential for literary paternity” (Gilbert & Gibar 97). For a woman like Judith, the worst pain could have been not using her genius; she is created with such abilities but cannot use them. Her genius is rejected and therefore she is rejected as a part of academic conversation.

According to Woolf, "Genius needs freedom; it cannot flower if it is encumbered by fear, or rancor, or dependency, and without money freedom is impossible. And the money cannot be earned; it must come to the writer in the form of a windfall or a legacy, or it will bring with it attachments, obligations" (Gordon viii). For a woman, earning money proves incredibly difficult, especially in the Elizabethan era. Her primary obligation was inside the home, not with a career outside the home. She situates "Shakespeare's Sister" within the larger context of "A Room of One's Own" to describe the need for independent space and intellectual freedom for a woman, all of which something Judith lacked. If she had an intellectual space of her own and the financial means to publish her own material, she would have been historically known for her genius. However, that is not the case. Instead, Judith exemplifies the inequalities between men and women as a result of social bias.

Woolf explores her unanswered subconscious questions about feminist literature with the creation of Judith because she can channel her creative energies on a possible reality for women. In "Shakespeare's Sister," she dissects the role of women in this literary period, taking the stance that women are celebrated in men's literature; but in life, their intelligence and abilities have been undermined, so she illuminates their contributions and the possibilities of the female as the heroine. Judith can be considered "the imaginary woman invented by Woolf who killed herself because of the frustration of unexpressed genius," a situation which is something Woolf strives to explore psychologically (Gordon xiii). She uses this essay as an outlet to investigate the problem of the male domination in literature and describes what it takes for an intelligent woman to succeed.

Woolf reverses the attitude towards the male author and uses her language to depict how publishers felt towards women. It's important to notice Woolf's style when describing a woman,

such as her abundant descriptions as the narrator in "The Mark on the Wall" and to compare it to her flat style in this essay. She describes Shakespeare's history briefly and without any emotion:

> He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighborhood…He had, it seemed, a taste for the theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practicing his art on the boards, exercising hit wits in the streets and even getting access to the palace of the queen. (Woolf 47)

She appears to describe him impersonally and does not embellish any of his accomplishments. She writes about him coldly, as if mimicking the male's traditional "objective" and "rational" style. Woolf writes about Shakespeare as if she were a man writing an account of Judith's life. There's no emotion, no feelings and no connection. Since Woolf grew up in a literary family whose literary styles all imitated the male tradition, it would be logical that she could do so as well. The male style was straightforward, bold and lacked any embellished detail. It was structured and did not waste time with superfluous sentences.

When describing Judith, however, Woolf's style immediately alters. She adopts her feminist voice of detailed attention, an empowerment for the female genius. She spends more time on the description of Judith's background for two reasons: she documents a female's life and she uses her creative energy to construct a life in an era she had never experienced. She focuses on Judith's relationships and her education when she says:

> Her extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic…her parents came in and told

> her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not to moon about books or papers. ...Perhaps she scribbled some pages in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them. (47)

When she describes Shakespeare, she does not concentrate on his intelligence or wit. She focuses on his activities and describes him as wild. Judith, however, is “extraordinarily gifted,” “adventurous,” “imaginative” and “agog.” She was not provided the same education but took control of her agency by secretly writing. As a woman, she takes great care to hide her genius and prevent her parents from discovering her desire to write or educate herself. She, must like Woolf, chooses not to follow the stereotyped path that most women succumb to. She resents the pressure to become a wife and mother by fighting her father over her approaching wedding to a neighboring wool-stapler. Consequently, she ran from home and attempted to act; after her arrival to the theater, she announced she wanted to be an actress. The men rejected her and laughed in her face.

However, after this devastating rejection, she finds Nick Greene, a manager who took pity upon her. She and Greene grew close and she became pregnant with his child. It was this news coupled with rejection that made suicide the only viable option for her to demonstrate her autonomy. Thus, the story of Judith ends abruptly with her failure to make something of herself aside from being a mother; she was a poet and fiction writer at heart but was never given the proper opportunity to shine. Woolf declares in her essay that it would have been impossible for any female or anyone else really to possess Shakespeare’s genius as they were born among common people. There are so many impossibilities present in Woolf’s story and she consciously works out each flaw. She says, “but what is true in it, so it seemed to me, reviewing the story of Shakespeare’s sister as I had made it, is that any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth

century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside he village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at" (49). Judith ultimately kills herself in the end because Woolf realizes that this would have been realistic for a woman with Shakespeare's intelligence, who was restricted from using her brain to its full potential. She would have lost all sanity and caved under the repression. The earliest women writers were ostracized and harshly criticized for their attempts at competing with the male literary style, so when Judith showed up to the stage door or had she completed a piece of fiction or poetry to be published, she would have received a positive reaction. Men did not understand how a woman could possess the same abilities for centuries, so rejection and criticism were the natural reaction whenever there was the threat of literary competition.

Woolf looked at what little was known about women from the Elizabethan period to the 19th century and found that "it was fairly evident in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist... again we come within range of that very interesting and obscure masculine complex which has had so much influence upon the woman's movement; that deep seated desire, not so much that *she* shall be inferior but that *he* should be superior, which plants him wherever one looks, not only in front of the arts, but barring the way to politics too" (55). Woolf points out that the societal hierarchy did not intend to place women second, but instead focused on the male as the most important gender. Thus, women were secondary by default. Since there were few women who could have been classified as "artists" prior to the nineteenth century, male hierarchy was reinforced. Woolf channeled her creative energies into searching for female literary figures prior to the nineteenth century and essentially came up empty; but her fictionalized character presents a reality for aspiring females among male critics. Judith

represents the desires all women possess and the best outcome for showing their intelligence: independence, freedom and an understanding of one's being.

"Street Haunting" by Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's greatness succeeded far beyond being a novelist but she could also be considered a great feminist existentialist because she ponders the questions of self and being in her works. In "Street Haunting," written in 1930, Woolf evokes the existentialist perspective by concentrating on one's being: she identifies the layers of selfhood and the two kinds of being in the world. Woolf begins with the image of a pencil, literally writing in her themes intellectual independence and freedom to create, evident in "A Room of One's Own," and reinforced by Gilbert and Gubar's theory of the power of the pen in literature. She says that "there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one" (Woolf 1). The pen serves as a motif for the entirety of the short story, playing a literal role in the writing but also hinting at the desire for documentation and immersion. Throughout the story, the narrator walks the streets of London on this adventure; through Woolf's feminist lens, we might view her narrator's actions to be symbolic of the relationship and representation of women and society.

Woolf obsesses over the details of the setting with the concept of 'the Eye," a motif representative of the superficial gaze of society as it judges a person. Woolf describes the eye in terms of what is it not: "the eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks" (2). The miner, the driver and the treasure hunter all dip beneath the literal surfaces, digging deeper and

swimming deeper in search of something; the eye cannot do that and only sees the person for their outward appearance. One's looks can be manipulated into a false image unrepresentative of their actual character, and women face the implications of interacting with the eye daily as they are unable to dive deep into the unconscious to find the true self should be fronting, as suggested by Donald Winnicott, an English psychoanalyst. The eye's interest parallels the male's interest in the female figure as "it only rests on beauty; like a butterfly it seeks colour and basks in warmth," which raises the question of the definition of beauty (3). Do men and women have the same concepts? What defines beauty outwardly and inwardly? Subjective definitions of beauty rely in the perspective of the beholder, which contrasts with the societal model that sets conventional standards. Woolf's "Street Haunting" explores the idea of physical beauty through the eye motif, to challenge standards of what society would consider "ugly" in people, or in those physically unappealing to the eye. But what does beauty contribute to one's being in the 20th century?

Everything.

The dwarf character, who physically defies societal views of the 'normal' woman, could symbolize the internal struggle between the façade and subconscious levels of one's being. A woman in society could feel small and trapped in her relationship because of her trained or inherent sense of subservience and obedience, which the dwarf exposes; she goes into a shoe store to try on shoes and suddenly finds normalcy in a pair of shoes as she brashly sticks her foot out to draw attention. This attention-seeking is uncharacteristic for women beyond the confinement of the picket fence because it is a form of independent agency and she has gone into a space that she can be whoever she wants to be. It's a fairytale setting for this dwarf, where

people observe the parts of her she wants attention drawn to. The narrator points out the sad reality for a woman, that "this was the only occasion upon which she was not afraid of being looked at but positively craved attention, she was ready to use any device to prolong the choosing and fitting" (3). Seldom were women given the attention they wanted and desired; more often than not, they were given attention based upon their looks and their efforts in the home. As de Beauvoir argues, "it is not women's inferiority that has determined their historical insignificance: it is their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority" (151). Female history has been defined by men and their view of themselves has been deeply influenced by the male perception of beauty. This dwarf evidences not only the inferiority of women but also depicts the female conception of beauty. The dwarf's feet are the only things that are noticed in the room, while the rest of her appearance as well as her being is completely ignored; the male traditionally ignores the 'true' beauty within the soul of a woman because her appearance draws him in.

Woolf opens her story with the pretense that the woman desires a pencil, a seemingly irrelevant moment as the story progresses; however, the mere mention of a pencil lends itself to Woolf's existentialist themes, and more importantly to the feminist need for independence. Gilbert and Gubar, argue that "lacking the pen/ penis which would enable them similarly to restructure one fiction by another, women in patriarchal societies have historically been reduced to *mere* properties, to characters and images imprisoned in male texts because generated solely, as Anne Elliot and Anne Finch observe, by male expectations and designs" (12). Woolf demonstrates that her subject refuses imprisonment by the male literary style. Instead, her subject wants to adventure into freedom to be her own person. The character is not defined by male expectations for the pure fact that her deformities are very present and often reflected upon in the

story. The woman goes out to find the pen and therefore desires to find her independence and her own being. The pencil allows her freedom, because its "as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure to town life in winter—rambling the streets of London" (Sexton 1). A female finds liberation in the pen because there lies the freedom to physically, mentally and spiritual free oneself from not only the Angel's oppression, which is the internalized form of male oppression. She wants to walk the streets without any obligations, just as women want to be free from routine and unrelenting oppression from varying domestic sources. To free herself, she must fabricate a metaphorical excuse for taking control of her own life; and ironically, she chooses not to get the pencil until she has pondered who she is. The pencil was insignificant in the narrative, but served instead as a way to establish the narrator's agency after existentialist reflection.

Woolf's periodic mention of purchasing a pencil forces her to disengage from the events of the story for a period of existential self-reflection—a move characteristic of her style. She channels Gilbert and Gubar's explanation of the relationship between pen and author in her private moment of self-understanding:

> One must, one always must, do something or other; it is not allowed one simply to enjoy oneself. Was it not for this reason that, some time ago, we fabricated the excuse, and invented the necessity of buying something? But what was it? Ah, we remember, it was a pencil. Let us go then and buy this pencil. But just as we are turning to obey the command, another self disputes the right of the tyrant to insist. The usual conflict comes about…Let us put off buying the pencil; let us go in search of this person—and soon it becomes apparent that this person is ourselves. (8)

Women have agency and must use it for their own good; without it, they confine themselves to their superficial being. She mentions obeying the command, which directly references the command from one's superficial self, where conflict arises. This adventure was meant to fulfill the quest of finding oneself, a theme echoed in nearly all of Woolf's feminist existential works.

Centered around her themes of existentialism, Wools probing and fluid language is filled with imagistic detail. She describes the expressions of people in great depth and includes an account of everything the narrator sees and experiences. "The eye" is present in everyone's life, a constant image of hypocritical societal judgment; women become the targets of scrutiny for their appearance, their intellect and their emotional state. A woman cannot find herself if society requires that she conform to what she should be. Woolf 's narrator is Woolf herself, looking to find her true being through her characters. She intentionally contrasts the traditional with the present, and searches the inner workings of a female's mind and body to find the buried self. Her feminist voice allows her to manifest her agency within bold and psychological works such as this essay, and in "Shakespeare's Sister," "Lady in the Looking Glass" and "the Mark on the Wall." Her work not only psychoanalytically depicts female struggles, but also provides hope and expression for their escape.

'"The Mark on the Wall" by Virginia Woolf

Woolf wrote "the Mark on the Wall" in 1917, in a stream-of-consciousness mode to understand the sovereignty we have over our own mind; while her intended audience was the upper-class female with the means for intellectual freedom from dependency on her husband, this short story applies to anyone who feels mentally trapped. Woolf never names this classless

female narrator, an absence that allows every woman of any class to relate to her experience. Her story appeals to any woman who has evinced curiosity for the unknown in life and in ultimately understanding for the purpose of life. Woolf uses her stream of consciousness style to psychologically explore the feminine struggles by incorporating themes of sovereignty, power and existentialism in the plot. Her experimentation with existentialism defies traditional standards for women because they were forbidden to have thoughts beyond the domestic sphere. Woolf's essay serves as a vocal form of disobedience as she uses her creative energies to establish her position in the feminist conversation. Her energies produce a voice that is defiant, curious and bold as she narrates her story from the point of view of a housewife.

The story begins with her narrator noticing a mark on the wall and obsessing over it for quite some time. She demonstrates the power of memory by exacting the moment she first saw the mark in great detail. The use of abundant descriptions, Woolf's signature style, is meant to impress on us the narrator's strong memory and Woolf's ability to manipulate language. Instead of pointing out the mark, Woolf begins with a roundabout description of her thoughts but immediately returns to the mark; as she does this, it would appear as though she is taunting the male literary critics who challenge her credibility. A woman was given no credit for concentrating upon the important details, and was thought to never have any serious thoughts that could be beneficial. However, Woolf demonstrates that she can do both in the opening paragraph of her story:

> I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of the crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came to my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sights of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old

> fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantel piece. (Woolf 4).

Initially, it appears the narrator's mind is preoccupied with the details of her cigarette and stereotypical 'female' fantasy, but she dismisses her fantasy as belonging to her childhood. She focuses on the mark instead of on the dream she had of being rescued as a young girl. Woolf does this to make the point that women think beyond fantastical scenarios requiring a man to rescue them. This specific fantasy is assumed to be one of the most common dreams of young girls and Woolf has her narrator mature beyond stereotypes. Instead, the narrator sees what a man would see—a disturbance. She identifies a margin of how high the mark was above the mantel piece, where pictures, something to be admired, are typically placed. However, there is only a mark.

The mark symbolizes the center of the female's gaze and the center of her life: unfulfilling emptiness; this mark could represent Betty Friedan's "problem without a name" as typically females could not understand the need for change but realized that there was something missing in their lives. The problem with no name left them with a sense of emptiness and confusion as to what was wrong and the narrator cannot identify the origin of the mark, even though she begins to propose different possibilities. Her concentration upon this mark leads her to thinking about people. She begins chronologically by trying to understand the cause of the indentation and moves beyond the literal to decide that:

> if that mark was made by a nail, it can't have been for a picture, it must have been for a miniature—the miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations. A fraud of course, for the people who had this house before us would have chosen pictures in that way—an old picture for an old room. (17).

What appears to be chaos in the female psyche is a sequence of coherent thoughts to find the answer to where the mark came from; she realizes that a picture would not possess the weight or power to make such a mark and is therefore a miniature. A picture is two-dimensional and has no depth to it, whereas a miniature does—it has weight, it has physical depth and it has presence in a room. Could Woolf be representing women with these thoughts? A woman believed to have no depth or ability to "leave her mark" on society. However, Woolf's narrator has been able to do just that. She represents the "miniature type" of woman with depth and the capacity for lasting impressions in this scenario. Alternatively, she calls the homeowners a fraud for including a woman with makeup and curls in the old room because it's an old picture. Women aren't required to look like that or have their hair and makeup perfected in the 20th century, so she calls them out for setting up the picture there -- just because it fit in with the prevailing aesthetic. It's as though she calls society out for judging a woman based off her looks, rather than on her intellectual abilities.

The mark becomes an obsession for the narrator, as she examines the relationship between the husband and wife who owned the house; she soon decides that the mark may not have been made by a nail because "it's too big, too round for that" and says "I shouldn't be able to say for certain; because once a thing's done, no one ever knows how it happened. O dear me, the mystery of life…the ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have—what an accidental affair this living is after our civilization" (Woolf 17). She refers to the "problem without a name" when she says that no one knows how it happened because women look back at their life and often ask themselves that question. Society has created such a dependence on the male that a female's possessions are minimal in comparison to his, so Woolf could be making a joke by mentioning the lack of control over one's possessions.

That would only apply to a man prior to and even in the early 20th century and the most interesting thing about this inclusion is that Woolf does not include a dominant male character in this story. It's purely about the female heroine who is in a room of her own; the room allows her to freely think on her own, a condition Woolf advocates for in her essay "A Room of One's Own."

The narrator has the freedom to think about her life and reflect on it, which has stemmed from this dark mark on the wall. This mark could be representative not just of the space a woman is trying to fill but of the depth of a female's unconscious as the narrator thinks long and hard about this fact. She says, "if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tub at fifty miles an hour…Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office…Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair all so casual, all so haphazard" (Woolf 28). Her comparison of her life to being blown through a vacuum would not have been uncommon for women. A vacuum restricts movements and doesn't allow one to use their own agency, much like the family model that places the male as the head. It is only later in life when a woman realizes the inequality in this relationship and desires a change that the vacuum slows down. A woman lives in a whirlwind until suddenly life slows down at some point—death. For some women, death is her only form of agency because they have the choice of when they die. While it is inevitable, a female can assume agency over her own death by taking her own life at the time of her choosing. The alternative is waiting for her body to waste away as a result of a natural death, which she has no control over. These thoughts of female agency are hidden within the dark abyss of the unconscious, a place the female is not supposed to explore.

A female's unconscious is a mysterious place and the narrator disobeys traditional boundaries as she explores some its depths. She introduces a metaphorical looking glass: a reflective surface in which we can look at ourselves. It's a way of perceiving one's being based upon superficiality, but Woolf says:

> suppose the looking glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people—what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror that accounts for vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes.

When the looking glass smashes, a person can no longer see their exterior or physical presence in the world. Their place in reality is no longer visible the way they have just witnessed it. A mirror allows you to be a voyeur in your own world, and without this ability there is only the world outside the looking-glass. They can't see the glaze over their eyes or the disconnection with their reality. They are only the outer and superficial persona that people parade around in while hiding their unconscious -- and therefore hiding their being. When that image smashes, what is left? Only the raw person beneath the skin. She argues that the world is shallow because it only views people in terms of their exterior or their appearance. Rather than judge a person based off actions, she is only seen for what she looks like. The superficiality of society doesn't allow people to live free from judgment, so it classifies them according to certain standards of beauty.

Woolf herself as a novelist and short fiction writer does not abide by societal restrictions and constructions; through her characters, she found a way to centralize her creative energies and

concentrate on the existentialist part of her being. This narrator stares at the mark on the wall as if she is trying to understand herself and others as well. She addresses men reading her thoughts and hopes they will do the same for women:

> Men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency, which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and Landseer prints, Gods and Devils, Hell and so forth, leaving us all with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom—if freedom exists. (79).

She makes fun of this English reference book that explains cultural views, societal shifts and other subjects of importance in England. The narrator hopes this book disappears because she finds it outdated in its standards set for women; she believes this will aid in feminine freedom. Perhaps this would even help dissolve the mark on the wall that draws her attention to it constantly. This would provide that illegitimate freedom she desires, even though she realizes the possibility of not being liberated.

Because of this contradiction, she feels less inclined to speculate on the cause of the mark; there is nothing tangible to gain from the knowledge of what caused the mark for this narrator. Instead, she realizes that her quest for answers has caused her to consider the act of nature upon humanity. She says, "I understand Nature's game—her prompting to take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or to pain. Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action—men, we assume, who don't think. Still, there's no harm in putting a full stop to one's disagreeable thoughts by looking at a mark on the wall" (119). Nature takes on feminine traits in this moment, as the narrator genders it. This implies that she is speaking of

woman *as* nature when they use their agency to alter their lives as ways to prevent pain or suffering. She does not want to give in to any feelings that would alter her view of her reality, and it is that reality that produces the contempt for men. She finds this mark on the wall a soothing way to put those thoughts aside for the moment and indulge in a moment of non-being to think a while. There's no harm in being absent from reality for a short period to time to consider one's reality and reflect on how tone's life came to be what it is in the present moment.

Woolf's story is essentially about a woman staring at a mark on the wall, but she draws meaning from a simple image. We live within the female narrator's mind as she philosophically confronts her existentialist worries about how her life became what it is. The connection between the everyday moment and psychological exploration is typical of Woolf's stream of consciousness style and presents her feminist voice as a force that is psychologically astute, methodical and detailed Woolf doesn't focus on the tangible reality explicitly but concerns herself with a woman's need for intellectual freedom to dive into the depths of the unconscious, to stop women from living in the looking-glass for the rest of their lives. Her creative energies focus on female experiences and the perceptions women have of the outside world, which is also the case for her other works, like "Shakespeare's Sister."

"The Lady in the Looking Glass" by Virginia Woolf

A looking glass has two definitions: it's a mirror, but it's also a way to describe something opposing the norm. The upper class would typically refer to a mirror as a looking-glass, but some would also use the term as if to say something is "looking glass", meaning it

appears different than what is expected. By titling this short essay “the lady in the looking glass,” published in 1929, we can assume that Woolf is referring to the mirror definition, but is that all she means? Through her stream of consciousness led thoughts, she ponders the life of the narrator. Woolf uses her creative energies and her detailed style to explore themes of the split-self, self-realization and mirrors. These themes help Woolf share her feminist voice with her traditional audience of the British upper-middle to high class societies, where the women feel the most bound by their circumstances. It is through her language and words that she demonstrates her part in the feminist conversation.

Her story begins very directly with a caution for people, which would imply that this fiction is not just a story about a woman looking in the mirror—it’s much more than that. The opening line warns us by saying “people should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms any more than they should leave open cheque books or letters confessing some hideous crime. One could not help looking, that summer afternoon, in the long glass that hung outside in the hall” (Woolf 40). She uses a check book and implicating letters as examples of how dangerous staring into a looking glass can be. People tend to look at things that would define their lives, like a check book that displays every purchase a person has ever made, or by reading a letter about a crime someone has committed. By looking at these things, there is much to discover about a person. A mirror notices imperfections, worry lines, bags under one’s eyes from lack of sleep and can even reveal a soul if the person staring is looking deep enough. This narrator is alone in a room with a looking glass and notices everything around her, both inside and outside. The mirror works as a one-dimensional vessel by which a person sees their internal and external self; they look into the mirror and see the superficial beauty staring back at them, but the deeper into the eyes they look, the more they will see of their true being and their unconscious. The mind

begins to open and thoughts begin to flow as they picture and think forbidden thoughts deep within their subconscious mind.

She notices the world around her, looking outside of the mirror as she realizes she is alone. There is no one home but her, as there is no one inside her head but her. Only she is capable of diving down into her being, but first she must get past the external. She says "the room that afternoon was full of such shy creatures, lights and shadows, curtains blowing, petals falling—things that never happen, so it seems, if someone is looking…the room had its passions and rages and envies and sorrows coming over it and touting it, like a human being. Nothing stayed the same for two seconds together" (41). Chaos ensues around the narrator, who has been describing the order of the garden, the fixedness of the mirror and the way the room is neatly set up. The disorder around her is the instability within her unconscious as she is staring into the mirror, watching herself dive deeper into the dark abyss of the unknown. Her thoughts surround her as she begins to realize the struggle between the internal and external realms. Isabella has a life with friends, while her subconscious is isolated in thoughts and ideas.

She sees the mail man as a dark figure looming in the room; however, he delivers the mail and her mind recreates the man as a dark being that delivers letters to her. She believed the letters to contain exposing information that she would rather keep private, so she "would tear the envelopes to little bits and tie the letters together and lock the cabinet drawer to conceal what she did not wish to be known" (43). Locking the letters into a cabinet amounts to repressing one's forbidden thoughts and pushing them back into the unconscious, which women needed to do for their survival and the survival of the family unit. Isabella stands transfixed in front of this mirror while chaos fills her mind. Externally, nothing changes. However, the longer she stares into the mirror, the more apparent her self-splitting becomes. By splitting oneself, the superficial

separates from one's true identity. This image reinforces Woolf's desire to kill the Angel in the House, an action that would allow her freedom and sovereignty over her life. The pseudo-self that Isabella fronts, the one with her friends and the plans needs to disappear in order for her to become the person she is deep down. However, what is left if there is nothing superficial?

Isabella realizes that she must destroy the outer being, but finds consequences in this action because the internal struggle is necessary. It's impossible to completely eradicate the conscious being from the unconscious. In Isabella's case, she felt "some light [come] in too, surely one could penetrate farther into her being…the fall of the branch would suggest to her how she must die herself and all the futility and evanescence of things" (44). After cutting the flower and letting it fall to the ground, Isabella realizes the pointlessness to materialistic things and in how frequently things disappear. These things would die with her because they are in themselves superficial and without meaningful depth. She allows light to penetrate her mind, and entrance her being to further take her deeper into forbidden territory. She demonstrates such agency, as Woolf does herself, and wants to reveal the person she is. Her existence prior to the looking glass appeared fixed until the interruption of reality she has. While staring transfixedly into the mirror, "she became larger and larger in the looking-glass, more and more completely the person into whose mind one has been trying to penetrate" (44). There is an invisible wall in a woman's mind that stands between the ego and the super-ego of a woman's being. The wall, or ego, prevents the two parts from clashing and destroying the person all together. However, when the id, or the instinctual being, penetrates the wall, it overtakes the super-ego. Isabella's ego had been penetrated and left in shambles as her instincts take over.

Woolf's psychological insights run deeply through her works, a form of exploration she borrowed and adapted from Sigmund Freud's philosophies. She demonstrates her method in Isabella's dilemma, the internal struggle within a person's psyche because "at once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth. It was an enthralling spectacle…here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody" (50). The true instincts and desires of the psyche influence Isabella to reveal the truth of her being—nothing. She only has impulses and has no artificiality to her being anymore. The inessentials of her being left her and as she stares into the looking glass, she gazes upon the innermost part of her being. She was truly naked, without any filters or covers to shield her from the outside world.

Woolf's psychological influences and her existentialist voice correlate to produce work that forces a person to ponder their internal struggle; her work forces a person to engage in their own form of self-realization in which they attempt to understand their being. Her allusion to self-awareness and embodiment gives a woman power and strength against the world that has repressed her for centuries. Woolf's creative energies are channeled to influence the feminist in each woman, and to promote awareness to the realities of one's being. By doing this, women speak out and could possibly seek liberation from their oppressions in life. Woolf weaves femininity with existentialist thought to promote women's empowerment; and by building her argument through her searching and analytical stream of consciousness, she provides a vessel for women to connect. Her language is a nexus for all women to begin from a place like Isabella, or

the dwarf in “Street Haunting,” with the hopes that she will come to the same realizations as the narrator in “The Mark on the Wall,” and not self-destruct as Judith did.

Chapter 2 : Who is Audre Lorde?

As the youngest of three daughters born to Caribbean immigrant parents, Audrey Geraldine Lorde displayed a certain type of independence that women cautioned against for fear of repercussion and loneliness , that instantly identified her as "special;" Her uniqueness was not limited to her individuality but was also due to physical ailments that alienated her from her sisters because Audre was considered legally blind as a result of being so nearsighted and her parents considered her "tongue-tied." It could be implied that learning and reading would have been more difficult for Audre than the normative child whose eyesight was perfect or only slightly off-kilter. However, she possessed this natural rhetoric and natural ability to engage her creative imagination to produce works with impact. Seemingly from birth, Audre developed a creative lens in which she viewed the world with a different perspective that allowed her to express her individuality and independence so much so that she was known for rejecting authority. Because her parents had demanding careers, her elder sisters, Phyllis and Helen, often times would watch over and care for her, causing resentment between the siblings because of the dependence and desire to create loving relationships that were simply not there. Her sisters would resent Audre for undermining their authority, which was the birth of their fragmented relationships and the cause of her sister's loathing towards her. To spite Audre, her sisters would omit her from conversations and activities, leaving her to envy their relationship. She wrongly believed her sisters were extremely close, even though they all grew up in a household of forbidden affection.

The structure Lorde was used to mimics the traditional feminist "house" by means of the forbidden; her family did not talk or display their feelings because of the cold environment

created by her strict parents. The only love and affection she received would have been from Helen because she assumed the matronly role in her life while her mother was at work. Helen was tasked with washing Audre's socks and caring for her primarily but even then, there was a fabricated wall between the two sisters, just as there was in the family structure. Lorde often felt "fearful of both her parents, she believed they did not love her;" because of this "she was sensitive and creative, but she was reared by hardened realists with a pragmatic approach to life" (De Veaux 19). Shaped by her situation and circumstances, Audre never truly fit into a mold with her family or with other members of the community, but she did find a home within all of the other women of the 20th century who never quite felt free.

From a young age, Lorde felt like an outsider, identifying with her mother's "deep sense of feeling out of place, of not belonging to the home she lived in, and with her desire to reify an imagined home." Lorde was born in a primarily African-American neighborhood in Harlem,

New York, listening to her mother's stories and creative words, which most likely had a strong influence on Lorde's love of poetry. She never experienced things like everyone around her, instead she experienced as though she were always watching from a window as "partly a voyeur, a voyeurism coded within her parents' voyeurism as black immigrants who—by racial and social condition and personal choices they made—would never fully enter American society" (De Veaux 22). Lorde was never truly present in the moment when she was younger, but instead observed and engaged her imagination to create a world she liked and appreciated. Lorde's childhood boldly embodies the female in Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" because of the restrictions holding her in and her desire to reach out and speak up from the time she was little, looking out her window in Harlem.

She grew up in the "Negro capital of the world" and it was "the most vibrant urban community of its time," because black Harlem was a symbol of "Negro" success. It had birthed the Harlem Renaissance, which brought to its neighborhoods writers, artists, and cultural pawnbrokers," giving her a creative lens to view the world around her (5 Warrior Poet). Her surroundings were full of life and energy, which without a doubt influenced Lorde as a young girl when she began to write poetry about enjoying the everyday life and appreciating each day.

For her, Harlem was "simultaneously real and imagined, solid and fluid" (Conversations with Audre Lorde 15). While she lived in a vibrant and creatively free neighborhood, she attended Catholic school and was "recalcitrant, reusing to fit the mold" according to a nun at her school (Conversations with Audre Lorde 17). She would find poems relevant to her life and memorize them until she undertook writing on her own instead of playing outside with all of the other little children. She identified with stories and language unfamiliar to her, and by the age of 12 she had filled her head with poems she'd memorized because "words had an energy and power and I came to respect that power early" (Conversations with Audre Lorde (22). By the end of her high school career and ready to move on to the next chapter of her life, she composed fewer poems and submitted one of her poems to *Angus*, a magazine. Unfortunately, she was rejected for publications because she "should not aspire to become 'a sensualist poet'" (De Veaux 32). The rejection underscores love for the Romantics, as whose works influences her poetry, and the criticism against her poem created in her an extreme sense of rejection that injured but did not defeat her; instead, she sent the poem, titled "Spring," to *Seventeen* magazine, which paid her for her work, and in 1951 published her poem.

In the 1950s, when "Spring" was published, the second wave of feminism was evolving, instigating in women a belief that they could incite change by working *within* an establishment

and by working *within* a person's constraints. Her first published poem "vindicated Audre, confirming the political commercial value of her 'sensuous' literary style" (De Veaux 32) While it was a monumental moment for women, Lorde refused to document her individual successes because of her awareness of the natural limitations on women in society; her successes would have shown the challenge of being a woman during this time and she thought it would highlight inherent social injustices instead of the value of her work. Her first published attempt at engaging the creative imagination and channeling her energies succeeded in drawing a modicum of fame, of which she could be proud but never truly appreciate because of her initial rejection and the constraints placed on her as an academic female. Poetry became her outlet to voice her frustrations because she had already started to make that change from within—the first step of acceptance into the literary field was over.

Poetry gave her an escape from the concrete reality into which she never fit. As a writer, she "wrote extensively about herself in "mixed" genres, Lorde would emerge as an "expert on her own life and as the maker of a life on paper"' (De Veaux 13). Writing in mixed genres, she blurred lines between reality and fiction in such a way that they blended together to create "self-conscious literary performances; an excavation, and synthesis, of memory, imagination, and truth" (13). Her erotic and bold themes of sexuality, oppression and pain are deployed from her intensely bold rhetoric, creating an individuality that arose from her upbringing and crystalized in her advocacy and poetry. Lorde's style aligned with the feminist conversation because she dared to be different, even though growing up, "the Lordes discouraged individuality and self-expression, except when those qualities were indications of their own success as good parents" (De Veaux 21). Lorde's style, confessional and emotional, developed most likely as a result of her emotionally-repressed upbringing. However, she did have an innate curiosity inherited from

her mother, Linda, who used "romance magazines she'd peruse in her spare time, musing over stories rife with fantasies of true love, fictional sex, images of dashing men and beautiful but sexually submissive women" as a form of relaxation and for leisurely reading (De Veaux 10). Linda undoubtedly passed her innate curiosity, the "unconsciously forbidden,' in her desire to break norms by embracing these tabooed topics for women. It was in Mexico in 1951 where Lorde was inspired by an epiphanic moment when she noticed "[she'd] always had the feeling [she] was strange, different, and that there was something wrong with [her]" and "in Mexico [she] learned to walk upright, to say things [she] felt. [She] became conscious that [she] hadn't the courage to speak up" (Encyclopedia.com). She commuted from Mexico City and she could see Popocatepetl and Ixtacuhuatl, two volcanoes visible from her room. She describes the landscape in her interview with Adrienne Rich in *Sister Outsider,* and specifically remarks upon her experience on a hill where she was overtaken by the beauty of the surroundings. She says "I hadn't been writing all the time I was in Mexico. And poetry was the thing I had with words, that was so important…and on that hill, I had the first intimation that I could bring those two together. I could infuse words directly with what I was feeling. I didn't have to create the world I wrote about. I realized that words could tell. That there was such a thing as an emotional sentence" (Lorde 85). This was one of the defining moments for Lorde; now instead of fictionalizing a story to tell through poetry, she could base her stories on real life situations. Such epiphanic moments also give way for her poetry to fall within the confessional frameworks of poetic construction, one that defines emotion as a woman's realm. A sense of beauty experienced through epiphany gave her the conditions to speak out about the harsher realities of life.

Having experienced her fair share of isolation, prejudice and inequality, Lorde continued to speak through her poems and her activism. Through language, a tool to vocalize our thoughts

and opinions, we aim to creatively describe a solution that will make a bold and memorable impact. Often, we find this desire to integrate a sense of creative energy within multiple projects in our lives, and Lorde decided to become a librarian, an activist, a mother and a poet, which all require different forms of imaginative spirit. Initially, she gave poetry readings and published her poems in the 1960s, at the tail end of the Liberal Feminist movement when she was an insider in academia; and much like Anne Sexton and her confessional poetry, Lorde spoke freely about a variety of topics like lesbianism, women's rights and bigotry (Encyclopedia.com). In order to do so, she had to find the right forums to be heard; fortunately, she found a venue in Black American Letters, an organization allowing minority poets to passionately articulate issues and explore racism and empowerment (encyclopedia.com). Lorde was among those poets who gave voice to their anger, and she published her first complete work, The First Cities, in 1968 and in 1970 published

Cables to Rage, which she used to deploy her fury at societal injustices (Encyclopedia Britannica). With these two complete works, Lorde channeled her inner creative energies and explored her creative possibilities as a black, lesbian poet.

After 1978, Lorde published some of her most inspiring and insightful pieces, the same year she learned the life-shattering news that she had breast cancer. As she began, what is referred to as the "second part" of her life, she experienced pain, denial and eventually an acceptance of her situation. The emotional rollercoaster Lorde felt can be equated to the emotional experiences women prior to and during the early 20th century felt as they were oppressed not by cancer but by an invisible force imposed on them without a choice. She documented her journey in her *Cancer Journals* and published for the world to read about her internal battle with this infection as she felt the weight of the oppressive disease confining her at

times like when she wrote, "I don't feel like being strong, but do I have a choice...I am defined as other in every group…" (Lorde 11). Her journals featured the positive moments and some of the darkest moments of her life, exemplifying the inner strength of the 20th century female whose goal was to 'kill the angel" in her house. For Lorde, her cancer and society were her Angel that she had to command and kill. She was a prisoner, locked both by race and sexual orientation until she decided to use her words to shatter her invisible bindings. She was a true feminist writer creating a conversation that depicted her forbidden experiences and emotions. It was through her cancer journey that she "began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gave me strength" (Lorde 41). Women for centuries lived in fear of themselves and of their male counterparts, afraid to find strength in numbers and afraid to be left alone in a world where they have nothing. Another motivating factor was her relationship with her father and with men. She does not confess anything about men in her works, but there is something to be said for that conscious omission.

Growing up, she grew to hate her father because of his coldness, his authoritative aura, and his absence in her life. She isolated herself from her family and eventually broke off an affair with her long-time lover Gerry Levine because she was incapable of giving herself over to her sexuality completely. This hesitance probably stems from her lack of affection from her father because she grew to prefer women, was unforgiving: "she was still ambivalent towards her father, fearful of his rejection and of his lingering authority over her" (De Veaux 35). Lorde was not one for authority, so her independence fragmented her relationships with men; she refused to be submissive or objectified, and broke away from her family and Gerry. Neither allowed her the independence and freedom she craved. She considered herself a virgin because of her lack of

knowledge about sex, even after experiencing it. The fear of the unknown, sexually or otherwise, played a role in her reach for independence. She shifted her gaze towards women because women saw one another as knew as a child. Furthermore, Gerry's 'gaze' seemed to define her primarily in sexual terms: "she wanted him to love her, but his interest in her seemed more sexual than anything else. Audre blamed herself, citing her emotional demands and inability to perform according to sexual expectation as the reasons for their problems. She continued to see him, but remained ambivalent about their sexual relationship…indicate a general distaste for sex with men but rather an ambivalent sexual curiosity" (De Veaux 36). Her curiosity and distaste for sex would eventually come through in her writings and talks. Her distance from her father and from Levine in her early life played a crucial role in developing who she became as a writer, mainly in her works like *The Power of the Erotic.*

The reality of sex in Lorde's life began to represent something slightly different as all of her emotions began to take hold of her. Her associations with sexuality grew increasingly negative and her "relationship with Levine steadily unraveled. Symbolic of both her sexual and personal freedom, it illuminated a consistent, nightmarish loneliness. She became even more depressed. 'I was alone,' she wrote in her journal, 'more alone than I ever thought possible. So alone that I felt mad. If I continue like this I'll be a psycho within a year" (Lorde 36). Lorde needed to take control of her own life and she used her journals as a sounding board for all of her pain, troubles and fears. Lorde felt the need for freedom from this relationship that began to steadily decline and affect her emotionally. She realized that she would be overcome with madness had she continued to be a part of that relationship. So, she did something about it. She documented her feelings and organized the Harlem Writers Guild, to provide a space for minorities to speak their minds without being heard. "The weekly meetings of the Harlem

Writers Guild put Audre in touch with an organized black consciousness afforded her an opportunity to have her poems heard, and was where the writer and scholar of African Studies,

John Henrik Clarke, mentored her…He became a father figure, admiring and encouraging her poetry" (De Veaux 39). By providing a platform for her creative energies, he allowed her to speak out as a black feminist. Lorde pushed boundaries and confronted both her gender and ethnic struggles by using her poetic voice. Her poetic activism would allow her to relentlessly engage in the intellectual debates of female literary scholars.

Lorde's works mirror that of the great Virginia Woolf in terms of their shared creative energies, but they each diverge in their subject matter and in their stylistic details such as tone. Lorde created three telling and historically important pieces of literature and poetry during her life in the early 20th century: *Uses of the Erotic,* "The Black Unicorn." *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* in *the Cancer Journal* and *Poetry is Not a Luxury*; she moved between genres to amass a literary following and freed herself from the indiscernible chains binding her body, her society and by her mind. Lorde's works push the boundaries of what can be considered feminist activism because her themes go beyond questions of gender equality and center the woman's concerns -- her desires, hopes and freedoms. She channels the erotic through self-definition and identification, motherhood and her Black femininity in her writing, which she uses to help construct the feminist web Woolf describes in "A Room of One's Own." As women, these intellectuals are all a part of the web, the feminist wave and the movement for feminine equality. Their efforts to empower and provide women with role models who have broken the glass ceiling comes in the form of their writing and Lorde takes pride in her work. As she transcends with "Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," it's time to speak.

Audre Lorde's Feminist Voice

Audre Lorde's writing style inspires and evokes a change in her readers as she uses her creative energy to inspire women to embody women as they always envisioned themselves; her voice naturally speaks through written words in such a way that makes her arguably one of the most prominent feminist figures of the early 20th century. A minority author and poet, she combines all of her oppressive forces into one target but opens up her observations to include all women. Not entirely confessional or personal in her work, Lorde makes it a point to distance herself as the narrator of her poems, but her works still resonate with the events in her life. For instance, in the poem, "The Black Unicorn," she writes explicitly about themes she is familiar with personally – gender and race; by doing this, she aligns two minorities together and provides a universal platform for people to lift each other up.

In an interview with Adrienne Rich, Lorde explicitly discusses her connection with her works by defining her voice as a personal and emotional engine of progressive activism. She primarily wrote prose until her trip to Mexico, which instigated her poetic endeavors. Her writings as a result experimented with the relationship between the subconscious instincts and conscious rationality in the typical female, a balance she conveys in *Transformations of Silence into Language and Action.* Lorde discusses themes of fear, verbal power and the consequences of silence. She uses her experiences with cancer and her life as a Black lesbian poet to serve as an example of self-restriction. She didn't actively write and publish her best work until after her diagnosis, which indicates that the possibility of soon dying instilled in her a sense of courage toward expressing her agency. To leave a presence, one must simply speak up and make their voice heard. Inaction only continues the oppressive silence that women controlled by, so by

collectively verbalizing their thoughts, women can easier to identify their sense of self. In this respect, she speaks to all women and encourages them to vocalize whatever keeps them from fulfillment and independence. Her voice is encouraging and motherly, much like Sexton's in some of her works. It links also to Woolf's because of the psychological tendencies in her explorations.

Like Sexton, in Uses of the Erotic, Lorde also composed a piece that reinforces her maternal and empowering feminist voice. Lorde defines the different ways we can define the term erotic. She defines it in terms of love emerging from chaos and created through the power of a woman. Society has constructed love as a sexual term and deploys it to describe a subordinate woman. However, Lorde returns this construction to a meaning based off the historical root of the word. She uses this word as a reclamation of language for women. She claims that women need to take back language for themselves, which aligns with her thesis in *Transformations.* Her works are interconnected and her voice weaves them together. She dives deeper into the specifics of language by focusing on the word 'erotic.' She invests it with emotion and eradicates the sexual connotation. By manipulating language, we personalize it to fit our individual identities. It serves as an awakening for people who have been previously feared the consequences of language against their oppressors. Words, sounds and language empowers people to communicate their experiences, and Lorde encourages women to use her voice as she does. Having experienced her own pain and emotional losses, Lorde's voice works to show women how they can use words to be heard and exemplifies how far of an audience they can reach. Her voice is characterized by emotion, experience and language as empowerment. She uses these elements of her voice to associate her works with her individual feminist voice for her essays and speeches.

In terms of her poetry, Lorde's voice remains the same, with the addition of a sense of independence. Her poem, "For Each of You," presents the Black Angel in relation to finding one's true self. She speaks directly to people by using the pronoun 'you' and therefore attempts to reach every person who reads this. Persons seeking independence need to respect who they are and embrace their self. The only way to connect with each other is by loving one's self. By doing so, we can effectively communicate as a common gender, as a society, and as persons. As in her other poems, she embraces language as a tool to connect the world. Each person can form their own individuality away from their marriage and away from motherhood. She primarily addresses black women in this poem, but it's nonetheless applicable to every woman reading it. Her voice in this poem is gentle, reaffirming, and emotional. She speaks from experience and encourages women to embody their individual identity.

Additionally, she wrote a poem called "What my Child Learns of the Sea" that uses some of the same aspects of her feminist voice; this poem exclusively vocalizes the life of a mother. She dives into the limitations a woman has a mother because of her responsibilities keeping her within the home. Mothers want the best for their children and have often been the ones to stay home to care for them. As a result, she limits her own agency to embody the perfect mother. She focuses on the relationship between a mother and daughter. She speaks softly, imagining her child one day as she will leave Lorde's side. She hopes for intellectual blossoming and growing into a world where she can love and embrace her true self. Lorde's poem is somewhat different from her other works but the connection lies within the voice she writes with. Her voice is prominent in all of her works as nurturing, empowering and self-aware. These characteristics all encourage women to vocalize and establish their presence in society. She contributes to the feminist conversation by creating works that are gentle but idealized in comparison to Woolf and

to Sexton. She does not attack society so much as she hopes to work as a feminist within the structure of society. Her voice resonates with many women in its exploration of diversity and through her searching voice.

"What My Child Learns of the Sea" by Audre Lorde

Audre Lorde was a mother, an often forgotten side to her life. A careful caretaker, she hoped to pass on moral lessons to her children, by instilling in them the desire to understand one's own identity. However, she was limited in experiential motherhood because of circumstances. The most trying relationship, if not between husband and wife, is often between mother and daughter because of the tensions between the need to be one's own person and the urge to impart all one knows. This poem was written in 1963, a year after the birth of her daughter Elizabeth, and Lorde was trying to discover her new identity as a mother; the poem was not published until 1968, which could have been the result of the emotional tensions in her life. Nonetheless, Lorde's poem describes her attempt to edify her daughter on how to navigate the world around her, while still trying to explore for herself what it means to be a mother.

> What my child learns of the sea
> Of the Summer thunder
> If the bewildering riddle that hides
> at the vortex of spring
> She will learn in my
> twilight and childlike
> Revise every autumn.
>
> What my child learns
> As her winters fall out of time
> Ripened in my own body

To enter her eyes with first light.

This is why
More than blood,
Or the milk I have given
One day a strange girl will step
To the back of a mirror
Cutting my ropes
Of sea and thunder and sun.
Of the way she will taste her autumns
Toast-brittle, or warmer
than sleep and the words
she will use for winter I
stand already condemned.

The seasons represent growth and decay as Lorde muses on her hope for her daughter's intellectual growth. She struggles with her own identity in trying to find herself a space in motherhood. She hopes to "give the poem a resilience that transcends the time and place of its creation and ensures its continued relevance and thoughtfulness as an exploration of mother-daughter and parent-child relationships" (A Study Guide for Audre Lord's "What My Child Learns of the Sea by Cengage Learning). The poem is not grounded in a specific time, which coincides with her natural style; all of her poems remain historically ambiguous so that her words aren't confined to a certain time. Instead, they will continue in significance, even after she is gone.

Lorde opens by naming the superficial things she wants her daughter to know. She wants her to understand "the summer thunder/ of the bewildering riddle that hides at the vortex of spring/ she will learn in my twilight/ and childlike/ revise every autumn" (Lorde Lines 2-6). She wants to teach her about the Earth and about the world, edifying her on the way nature works. She mentions a line about her daughter learning in her twilight. This could possibly mean that she wants her daughter to learn from her darkness, and to learn from her mistakes and the places

she has come from; to revise every autumn is to shed all of the darkness and oppression until it is time for growth in the spring. Since autumn is a time of decay, Lorde suggests that she herself must let go of the darkness invading her identity so her daughter to do the same as she grows. She needs to be reborn each autumn to find her identity. It is her responsibility as a mother to instill these values in her daughter -- the need to fully recognize and assume a self.

Interestingly enough, Lorde doesn't start with spring, a season of growth. She begins her poem with images of decay and continues her descriptions into winter, a movement likely more applicable to her daughter than herself. She must shed her old identity that she had prior to becoming a mother and once Spring begins, she will have to grow into a new identity. Her next stanza mentions winter in relation to her daughter and her own body. She says, "what my child learns/ as her winters fall out of time/ ripened in my own body/ to enter her eyes with first light" (Lines 7-10). Her daughter was born in February, a winter month. As she worked throughout the fall and into the winter to shed her old identity, her daughter was "ripening" and about to come into the world. This poem is about Lorde, a mother, in the situation of finding her own being – a context potentially applicable to any woman. Every female must adjust to their new role as mother, where they both gain a dependent and also need to find the strength to understand their own relational identity.

In the last stanza, Lorde anticipates a future where her daughter is grown. Her poem is structurally tight: it opens in the future, moves to the present and ends in the future. In imagery, the poem echoes Woolf's Lady: Lorde imagines her daughter gazing into a mirror or a looking glass, trying to construct her own self-awareness. But unlike Woolf's Lady, Lorde, a mother, is limited in her actions. She cannot force her daughter to be a certain person because "one day a

strange girl will step/ to the back of a mirror/ cutting my ropes" (Lines 14-16). A mother can only play a limited role in shaping her daughter because there will be a day when she moves on from the past and finds her own identity as an independent woman. This poem revolves around identity and discovery as a once boldly independent woman starts a new chapter of her life, imagining her daughter's future. Lorde would relinquish control as she cannot have autonomy over her daughter's life like her own. Her daughter will make decisions, like "the words she will use for winter" and Lorde says, "I stand already condemned" (Lines 20-21). She feels censured by this because she is limited in her role in her daughter's life. Lorde can only teach her daughter to much before she needs to let go and allow her to be her own person with her own knowledge of self.

This poem appears slightly out of the ordinary or Lorde, whose work largely explores activist themes of race and gender; however, once her children were born, she found a new space for investigation that was broader and allowed her to understand a different path for identity. A woman's agency is limited within her home not only by her husband, but by her children too. A woman may be more than a womb, but her womb is a part of her being. The body is full of creative potential, and that reality is part of a woman's awareness in her quest for selfhood.

***The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* by Audre Lorde**

A seemingly simple piece by Lorde works as one of the most influential speeches women who feel imprisoned by silence can use to transform a sense of dependency into confidence in one's own thoughts, emotions, and abilities. Her essay, written in 1977 was presented at the

Modern Language Association's Lesbian and Literature Panel." "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" helped explain her centrality to the feminist movement of the 20th century because she confronts the repressive concept of silence while using her personal struggles with oppression to inspire others. She centers her arguments around her personal battle with cancer, which she describes as a battle of oppression; she writes to be heard and hopes that her story will inspire those similarly 'silenced.'.

Her struggle is both internal and external, and her words are applicable to any woman who feels as though she has something to say through the emotional content of her work. She transcribed her battle with cancer, itself a repressive disease restricting a person emotionally, mentally and physically—much like the figurative controlling hand placed over women prior to and during the 20th century. Lorde regrets her silence in a patriarchal world and questions why she was afraid to speak up (Lorde 41). Her words in this essay lay a foundational groundwork for her more creative pieces of poetry in which she describes her pain and emotions through the hardest part of her life. This piece is charged with a similar poetic creativity in her rhetoric and diction that edifies the audience about the power of language itself.

Scholars have described her voice as "central to the development of contemporary feminist theory" and claim she "is at the cutting edge of consciousness" (*Sister Outsider* 8)**.** Her piece demonstrates the need for women—minorities or the restricted—to speak about their feelings to make a difference. Her piece serves as a self-revelation for all women, coming from the voice of a black, lesbian poet. She opens with "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (Lorde, 40). Silence solves nothing. The summation of her conversation invites people, minorities specifically, to use their creative gifts to be heard: their

voices. Silence embodies a means to inform others of the current oppressive state, emotionally, politically, physically or spiritually, and will inevitably signify a connection between being and appearing. This separation of "being and appearing" can be bridged by language to link the mind-body dualism model introduced by Rene Descartes in the early 17th century. Her thesis in this piece coincides with her resistant 'female' voice as a pushback against the widespread fear of vocalizing thoughts.

Her opening lines set her tone to describe s a determined, ambitious and serious activist hoping to inspire an uprising in people to vocalize concerns, pain, and emotional state. She writes to reclaim the language taken from the feminine locus and uses it to empower women to speak out once again. She says, "I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me, beyond any other effect" (40). Lorde's first sentence powerfully states her reasoning for speaking. She believes in sharing thoughts and beliefs, regardless of judgmental responses because there will always be critics and skeptics. However, if thoughts and feelings are important to a woman, then they must be shared. Lorde mentions that only a few months ago she was diagnosed with breast cancer: "I am standing here as a Black lesbian poet, and the meaning of all that waits upon the fact that I am still alive, and might not have been" (40). Her experience with cancer showed her how short life is and makes her realize that she still had so much power left in her voice. Her tone explores what it means to be silent and at what cost. When diagnosed with breast cancer, she realized all of her regrets in life, with her inability to speak out, her silence being the more significant. She says, "in becoming forcibly and essentially aware of my mortality, and of what I wished and wanted for my life, however short it might be, priorities and omissions became strongly etched in a

merciless light, and what I most regretted were my silences…Death, on the other hand, is the final silence" (Lorde 41). After death, the opportunity to speak one's mind ceases to exist. There is only silence and darkness from which a person cannot escape. Lorde presents her experiences as a message to women that there will not always be a next time. There will never be protection in silence and there will never be change in silence—only the same paralysis of non-being. She tells women that their silence offers no protection, which is completely true because without their voices, no one can fight for them. Feminism exists upon the exercise empowerment and a common resistance to oppression. However, if women are too afraid to speak, then who will?

Lorde reveals the outcome of speaking out and the benefits one receives from them. She says "But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living" (Lorde 41). Regardless of where a woman originated from, her race, ethnicity or beliefs, there is always one thing each have in common: the desire for freedom. Lorde's oppression resulted in her own body restricting her during the cancerous phase and her recovery after surgery. Each woman faces oppression, but their origins may not be clear; only through language can oppression be fully discoverable and defeated. Language is a bridge that connects people, and Lorde promotes this connection because it breeds strength.

Her self-proclamation that she is black, a lesbian, and more importantly, that she is herself helps to show her strength and courage; she attempts to instill fear in women as a way of prompting them to help themselves. She asks, "what are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own,

until you will sicken and die from them, still in silence?" (Lorde 41). She questions her audience to force them to consider the reasons why they aren't speaking loud enough for anyone to hear. What is to gain from there silence? More importantly, who is to gain from their silence? No one.

Lorde is herself is afraid but using language as a form of action may be the only way to combat that fear because until a woman realizes her rights, potential and everything within her grasp, she will never be the woman she hopes to be. She asks her daughter what she thinks about this, and her daughter wants Lorde to "tell them about how you're never really a whole person if you remain silent, because there's always that one little piece inside you that wants to be spoken out, and if you keep ignoring it, it gets madder and madder and hotter and hotter, and if you don't speak it out one day it will just up and punch you in the mouth from the inside" (42). For a woman's own safety, she must speak out. Her instincts demand to be expressed, but a woman silences them out of this fear. However, the words need to be spoken. Otherwise, they will eat at her until she cannot bottle them up any longer. It's her responsibility to herself and to other women to make her presence visible in society by acting and speaking her mind.

Silence can only last so long, unless one has condemned herself to a life of secrecy; however, it can be a challenge to stay mute for an extended period of time. Silence as a result of fear can be defeated, but it requires a sense of community empowerment to be able to make a presence visible through language. Lorde says, "we can learn to work and speak when we are afraid in the same way we have learned to work and speak when we are tired. For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us" (44). One cannot simply wait to be brave, but instead she must just do it. There is no manual on how to not be afraid of language, but instead a support system encourages the courage it takes to

speak. Whether language flows because of race, ethnicity or gender, the point of this essay is to speak. Silence provides people with internal conflict that does more harm than good to a person. Lorde channels her energies into explaining this truth for the people before her, in hopes that if she were to reach at least one person, then the truth would inspire others.

“For Each of You” by Audre Lorde

In her 1973 collection, “From a Land Where Other People Live,” Audre Lorde composed a poetically bold piece where she explicitly engages her audience by using the pronoun “you”; her poem, “For Each of You” empowers and educates women in a maternal way. Her language is soft, sensitive and powerful, which comforts readers to know that they are not alone in their struggle of inequality and sacrifice. According to Zofia Burr, author of “*Of Women, Poetry, and Power: Strategies of Address in Dickinson, Miles…,”* Lorde presented this poem at Cornell and “used the convention of dedication to invite the Cornell audience to take the poem as if it were really for—not necessarily about, but meant to say something to ‘each one’ of them” (162). The poem reads as you it is addressed to a certain individual as reassurance that they will survive the feminist struggle. She writes:

> Be who you are and will be
> learn to cherish
> that boisterous Black Angel that
>   drives you up one day and
>   down another
> protecting the place where your
> power rises
> running like hot blood from the
> same source, as you pain.

When you are hungry
learn to eat
whatever sustains you until
morning
but do not misled by details
simply because you live them.

Do not let you head deny your
hands
any memory of what passes
through them
not your eyes
nor your heart
everything can be used
except what is wasteful
(you will need
to remember this when you are
accused of destruction.)
Even when they are dangerous
examine the heart of those
machines you hate before you
discard them
and never mourn the lack of
them
power lest you be condemned
to relieve them.
If you do not learn to hate you
will never be lonely enough
to love easily
nor will you always be brave
although it does not grow any
easier.

Do not pretend to convenient
beliefs even when they are
righteous
you will never be able to defend
your city while shouting.

Remember whatever pain you
bring back from your dreaming
but do not look for new gods in
the sea nor in any part of a
rainbow

Each time you love as
deeply as if were forever
only nothing is eternal.

Speak proudly to your children
where ever you may find them
tell them you are offspring of
slaves and your mother was a
princess
in darkness.

Aside from being an outspoken activist, Lorde primarily was a poet; she exhorts her audience with literary metaphors to convince them of their abilities. According to Burr, "Lorde nevertheless intended to employ a literary identity and some literary conventions in her own practice. And because her speakers in her poems are often assailable to an autobiographical "I," of all the 20th century women poets this study considers Lorde comes closest to fulfilling the expectations that a woman's poetry provide an image of the woman herself" (156). Lorde edifies her female audience about the life of an African American female, while channeling Virginia Woolf's Angel metaphor in the opening of her poem. Woolf's Angel lingers over a woman's shoulder, hindering her creative energy as she "drives you up one day and down another/ protecting the place where your power rises/ running like hot blood/ from the same source, / as you pain" (Lorde 5-8). Lorde wants women to cherish this Angel because she serves as the guardian, protecting the female from any potential harm from the patriarchy and from whoever else looks down upon the intellectual woman. She calls her the Black Angel, embracing her heritage and paying homage to the struggles she has faced not only as a writer, but as an intellectual African American woman, whose words did not matter in the male-dominated world until she embraced all that she is and has been through, by coming to terms with her struggles to

raise her voice through activism. Subsequent to embracing this identity, she uses her creative energy to release her subconscious thoughts and raise awareness of the "Black Angel" that is an extension of her femininity.

The Angel is meant to represent the pure woman, the 'good girl' archetype approved by historical patriarchal attitudes, and Lorde tells us to embrace and cherish her because she protects the sources of pain and power—which could represent the heart or the mind; Lorde could be showing the nexus between one's mind and body by tying the brain and heart together as one. This correlation could potentially serve as one answer to the origins of women's creative energy as expressed in their academic and personal life. In this lyrical poem, Lorde seeks to connect with her audience from a distance, encouraging them to take hold of their own lives and embrace who they are. She refuses to insert herself fully into the poem because it's not about her—it's about her audience of women. As Burr points out, "one of the burdens of this expectation is that it encourages the reader to take the poetry as a record and expression of the poet's experience rather than as strategic, addressed speech that makes claims on its auditors... In choosing to speak as a poet, Lorde may have sought to utilize poetry's distance—as crafted, performed speech—from autobiography, bur her poetry was continually being interpreted as mere autobiography and self-expression" (Burr 156). Although this statement could be argued against because writers put themselves in their works, through experiences, feelings or a truth that's important to them. Lorde uses her lens, developed in her Harlem childhood, to show her ability to distance herself from a subject so close to her and to advocate rhetorically as an observer, as a matronly figure in the poem. She takes on the persona and voice of a caring woman who's been through oppression without showing any ties to the events she cautions the female readers from. There's a distance between her and the reader as she addresses them as 'you,' but never uses

personal identification indicators like "I," "we," "me" or "us." She assumes the role of the bodiless narrator edifying the women she writes this -- or rather speaks this-- for. Performance poetry is meant to be spoken with a breathy quality, full of emotion and figurative language to say *something—anything* to evoke a reaction.

Her words are carefully crafted, spoken by that poetic performance voice in everyone's heads as their eyes move line by line, word by word, feeling every breath and syllable of intent. She advises to "learn to eat/ whatever sustains you/until morning," because it is a way of coping and a source of temporary adaptation for survival while waiting to be heard (Lorde 10-12). A woman must fabricate a pseudo-persona to learn how to embody the idea of a provisional stereotype that society accepts in order to be published; she needs to become a man to fit into the idealized configuration of the intellectual society. Lorde prescribes undertaking a similar task, but without becoming the "good" girl without getting too caught up in the idealized life --and she provides a warning: "do not be misled by details simply because you live them." She returns here to the idea of cherishing and acknowledging the "boisterous Black Angel from the third line of the poem (13-14). Women could regress into the illusion of the perfect passive life, one offering safe paralyzing situation without independence. But the Angel creeps up on a woman, forcing an eye-opening acknowledgement to one's true self working against one's superficial self. She counsels her readers, by emphasizing the depth of her words, providing a weight to each line and word. Do not be misled by the way a man treats you or compliments you, but understand that it's only until morning, that it's only temporary because the Angel is pushing you every step of the way.

Through her activist voice, echoing the feminist goals of equality among men and women, Lorde speaks directly to the emotions and the weaknesses of women that often are the

root of their victimization when she alludes to the head and heart. To reinforce this point, Sally J. Sholz in *Feminism: A Beginner's Guide*, by, says that "*Feminism is a critical project.* It looks at all aspects of life to identify those elements that might be oppressive and suggests alternatives." (18). Sholz's description of feminism as a critical project lends itself to Lorde's work well because she finds the sources of tyranny over the female, which she alludes to and cautions against in her poetry, implicit in the idealized details of one's daily life. She says, "do not let your head deny/ your hands/ my memory of what passes through them/ not your eyes/ nor your heart/ anything can be used…you will need/ to remember this when you are accused of destruction…" (15-23). As much as a person can absorb the protection that the Black Angel has to offer, the true self must surface and reveal the emotions, memories, images, and thoughts—no matter how forbidden they may be. She calls upon women to never forget the details when accused of destroying the life the male created because it is these details that caused female rebellion; all of the little comments, the little dismissals, and all of the little moments where the female was undermined in the household eat away at her true self to wear her down into the submissive, dependent, superficial self.

In addressing her audience, "Lorde used the convention of dedication to invite the Cornell audience to take the poem as if it were really for—not necessarily about, but meant to say something to "each one" of them. At the same time, as an address to a group, a potential multiplicity of positions and perspectives, the individualizing dedication also suggests that the poem might not address any one member of the audience in exactly the same way it addresses other members of Lorde's audience" (Burr 162). Lorde addresses each person individually in such a general way that enhances potential for relatability with each individual woman who knew the same experiences, emotions and torments. The true power of poetry lies in being able

to touch each individual in a different way, while still maintaining the same general message that each person can take away with differing interpretations based upon one's situation. In this poem specifically, she addresses women to say "do not let your head deny/ your hands/ my memory of what passes through them/ not your eyes/ nor your heart/ anything can be used…you will need/ to remember this when you are accused of destruction…" which can be taken to mean to accept every memory because everything can be used against you; everything a person has seen, everything a person has felt can be used against someone and as a woman, you will be thought of as a traitor—annihilating the life the husband created, destroying the imagined "happy home" image and have chosen oneself over obedience to a male force (Lorde 15-23). As much as a person can absorb the protection that Black Angel has to offer, the true self must surface and confront the emotions, memories, images, and thoughts—no matter how forbidden they may be.

She uses the word "they," which could potentially mean memories, feelings, hopes and dreams or the unconscious desires within. In true feminist form, she adds that "even when they are dangerous examine the heart of those machines you hate/ before you discard them/ and never mourn the lack of their power" (24-27). She refers to looking at the machines women hate; this could be symbolic or straightforward, meaning sewing machines or other household machines she has become well-acquainted with as a symbolic throwing away of her old life. To not mourn their lack of power is to not mourn and grieve over the creation of a more powerful life for the female as she channels her energies to evolving into a more independent state.

Female autonomy requires control over oneself in all aspects because emotions could be construed as a sign of weakness, typically associated with "hysteria" in women; so to prevent this mischaracterization by the male species a woman must learn the principles of Mina Loy's *The Feminist Manifesto* to hate men and see them as an infectious animal, rather than as their

husband because “if you do not learn to hate/ you will never be lonely/ enough/ to love easily/ nor will you always be brave/ although it does not grow any easier” (Lorde 30-35). For true independence, all emotions must be repressed except for hatred because the power of hate transforms perceptions and relationships beyond the norm. Hate isolates a person, and Lorde connects the idea of isolation with the power of hate because once this correlation is made, persons can open themselves up to love again. She connects love and bravery and contrasts these images with hatred and isolation—two extremes on the spectrum of emotions to show how black and white a woman’s world can be. Love and bravery will not always be easy to command, but once the female isolates herself from the toxicity of the partnership, she can love others again and surround herself with like-minded people.

Beauvoir makes an interesting statement that lends itself to Lorde’s message in the poem by saying that “there are some escapes available to the wife, but in practice they are not available to all. The chains of marriage are heavy, particularly in the provinces; a wife has to find a way of coming to grips with a situation she cannot escape” (Beauvoir 515). Endurance has always been something women needed to conquer because without it, they become the superficial version of themselves and lose who the truly are. Lorde continues her poem to say, “you will never be able to defend your city/ while shouting,” which could potentially mean that the female must follow the third wave of feminism and try to work within the system and not being rash (Lorde 38-39). An “attack” should ideally be calculated, planned and composed in such a way that isn’t unnecessarily extreme. This feminist allusion to war defines the type of war each female is fighting internally and externally; the desire to lash out as a woman tries to be heard will always be there, but to defend herself from societal attacks, she must remain collected at all times, while always holding her values steady. The next few lines reaffirm this position: “remember whatever

pain you bring back/ from dreaming/ but do not look for new gods/ in the sea/ nor in any part of a rainbow" (40-44). This reference to gods reinforces the paternalistic thought process; men sometimes value themselves as gods to be worshipped, so Lorde advises that when a woman moves on, to always remember her past and not look for another dominant type of man to restrict her from her freedoms even if it appears to be a magical connection.

In using her own creative energy as an activist and artist, Lorde challenges women to concentrate their own energies emotionally, physically, spiritually and creatively when they find love again because "each time you love/ love as deeply as if it were/ forever/ only nothing is eternal" (45-49). This moment contrasts with the entire context of the rest of the poem because Lorde explains that nothing lasts forever and one should love with all one can. She says to remember all of the pain and to endure until this moment. She allows this brief moment of maternal love in which she says to love deeply and "speak proudly to your children/wherever you may find them/ tell them you are offspring of slaves/ and your mother was/ a princess/ in darkness" because it's the moment where the female finally is free (50-56). Her use of the word "Was" indicates a change in tense. Instead of actively speaking and remembering as a slave, she is now free from the darkness. Lorde describes the female as the princess, a papered and person of high society; she makes this point to depict the possibilities of the independent, unmarried female. Gilbert and Gubar make a case for Jane Austen's creation of her character Anne Elliot because "it suggests that women themselves have the power to create themselves as characters, even perhaps the power to reach toward the woman trapped on the other side of the mirror/ text and help her to climb out," which is the same technique Lorde applies in her poetry (16). She creates an omniscient narrator who concentrates all of her creative energies on helping the

trapped woman find her way out of the darkness. Both with Lorde's help and the acknowledgement of each woman's Angel as another force taking neither side. Lorde's poetic voice contributes to the feminist conversation by defining the feminist voice as one that empowers women and provides guidance for princesses in the dark, afraid to kill their Angels.

Uses of the Erotic by Audre Lorde

One of her most powerful works, *Uses of the Erotic*, which originally took the form of a paper to be presented at the Fourth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women at Mount Holyoke College in 1978, could arguably be a foundational work of the feminist movement. It's important to analyze her spoken word as it relates to her creative energy that informs her works. She paves the way for her literature and poetry by framing them with introductory talks in which she begs women to speak out. Lorde uses her feminist voice in all aspects of her life, so that she can channel her power in every way and fully give herself over to being the woman she has always wanted to be. So, in her opening of *Uses of the Erotic*, she states that the "erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" and "for women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives" (87-88). The erotic serves as a binding entity between all women because of the tyranny over their sexuality but it extends much farther beyond just pure sexuality. Lorde makes this distinction for the group of women she presented this piece to. She describes the erotic as a "measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having

experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves" (88). The erotic for women is about balancing emotions with a person's selfhood, meaning their identity. It's about balancing the chaos of our unconscious with a self-image. One can find power in this balance and can use it in such a way that promotes the equality and true self for a woman.

Because of the long-standing patriarchal tradition where a male makes the decisions and the female obeys every order given to her, women face an internal divide that the power of the erotic could potentially combine. Lorde uses her powerful speaking and rhetoric to convey the possibilities available to women through the engagement of the erotic by looking at it as more than a sexual pillar of life—it's a sense of feeling and satisfaction. In transposing her argument into a narrative piece, she uses her feminist academic voice. She critically analyzes the history of the word "erotic," describing that "the very word *erotic* comes from the Greek word *eros,* the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative powers and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge of and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (89). Lorde relates this excitement to creative energy, which allows her to use her language and knowledge towards embracing her femaleness to empower other women. She gives this word a more academic and authoritative force as she says, "we are now reclaiming." The power of her words deepens the academic conversation because words like "reclaiming" denote that language, history, dancing, loving, work and life all once belonged to women. She shows how women once had these things, but over time men began to control these aspects of the female's self. To Lorde, the "erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor

succumb to the belief that sensation is enough" and by being "in touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial" (88-90). The erotic offers a sense of power and motivation for Lorde as she tries to implore women to understand this fact and utilize it to their advantage. Sometimes women in their position of inferiority remain too scared to raise their voice against an oppressive force in their lives, embodied by husbands or male critics, and instead try to stoically endure; Lorde however, makes the point that women have the ability to experience erotic fulfillment if they choose.

Aside from the non-sexual sense of the term "erotic," the sexual significance remains and plays a crucial role within the structure of the home. Lorde approaches the term from a more sexually-distanced angle because of the constant reverberation over sexuality within feminism. Lorde is herself an exception to the traditional female archetype because she is a black, lesbian poet, a contrast to the traditional white mother of the 20th century who was a staple of feminist discourse. Lorde's language and approach defamiliarizes society and the women she is speaking to by addressing the topic in such a way that dances around the elephant in the room: sex. Desires of power certainly relate to the sexual desires women yearn for, which rarely surface. Barbara Ryan, author of "Sex Radical Politics, Sex-Positive Feminist Thought, and Whore Stigma" in *Identity Politics in the Women's Movement,* says, "mainstream feminism, as it turned out, had never been entirely comfortable with sex" (Ryan 93). Lorde, much like Sexton pushes the boundaries of the sexual representation in some of her works because she does not abide by the societal rules regulating her own body. One must confront their sexual identity in the battle to bring who a person wants to be to the surface. Virginia Woolf wrote extensively on this psychological exploration; in her essay "Professions for Women," she uses a metaphor about a

fisherman to describe the imaginative freedom possible to a woman; she explains it through the embodiment of a young girl dreaming. Within her dream, the girl allows her mind to roam freely as she searches the world until she hit a hard object and she stopped dreaming. Her fishing line was gone. Through this demonstration, Woolf figuratively explains how a female's imaginative thoughts are quickly abridged by the patriarchal society. She can never win her internal battle between who she is and who she wants to be because of existing social conventions. Lorde's work demonstrates her desire to be her true self and love who she wants to love—she doesn't want her dreams to be halted by something or someone.

The concept of women's sexuality was nonexistent outside the home because the female was meant to be completely devoted to her husband and to never let her mind wander sexually. Lorde opposes this thought and uses the erotic as a source of power, a source of energy one can channel. She notes the misunderstanding of how erotic can be turned into power because "we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic" (88). The notion that sex as power can relate to pornography and often gets confused as such because of the misunderstanding of the feminist's definition of the exotic as a source of power. Thus, the male perception denotes that the erotic relates directly to only pornography and the act of sex itself, rather than as a source of empowerment in other aspects of one's life. Within feminism, the meta-term that covers academic women and motherhood, it remains that "my and all women's right to explore and define our own sexuality… was not universally accepted in the community of women who called themselves feminist" (Ryan 93). Sexuality was taboo for females because of the dangers it presented to male dominance and the social order. A female was supposed to marry and become dependent on the male; however, if she explored the depths of her own sex,

she may realize her power as a female and reach beyond her constructed femininity. As Lorde advocates for, feminism is more than just a rising of equality in terms of power; it includes all aspects of a woman's life—including sex. Audre Lorde indirectly addresses the satisfactory feeling of sex by focusing on the benefits of engaging in platonically exotic feelings.

Her sexual relationships were fragmented from her younger years, after having been with Levine. So, she attacks instead the erotic from a completely different angle, by transmuting it into feeling, empowerment and a sense of community. Anne Sexton, on the other hand, approaches sexuality directly in her poetry, seemingly encouraging the archetype of the 'whore' – as men have titled women who freely discuss their sexuality and the erotic impulse of freedom through transgression. Lorde explains her relationship with sexuality by claiming that, "the erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (89). The satisfaction between sharers brings women together to dispel any difference among them; they form one voice. Lorde's speeches for women attempt to engage them to do what they've always wanted to do and to be who they are. That is the first step towards becoming an independent woman of equal caliber to men, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually. Part of Lorde's activism revolves around finding ways to empower women to break their silence; and by presenting talks and voicing her feelings through poetry, she activates her feminist energy from her life experiences to channel her differently erotic, connective and powerful voice to motivate other women.

Chapter 3 : Who is Anne Sexton?

Born November 9, 1928, Anne Sexton came into the world as Anne Gray Harvey; her birthplace was Newton, Massachusetts, where she lived a middle-class, privileged life, but also one filled with suspected abuse and instability. A difficult childhood filled with alcoholic parents, a mentally ill aunt and sexual abuse created her lifelong reliance on counseling. While some documents recalling her childhood appear dark and scarce, she does admit some information about her relationship with her parents before the birth of Anne and her sisters.

Her mother, Mary Gray Staples, seeking a literary career, attended Wellesley college. Her mother grew up in a wealthy family of successful journalists and politicians, while her father, Ralph Churchill Harvey, attempted to join the army and then owned a wool factory, according to *An Accident of Hope,* Sexton's biography (Skorczewski xiv). Shortly after the pair met, Anne's mother gave up her ambitions and later her father was sent home from the army; the army found out about his early enlistment at the age of sixteen, so instead of fighting in World War I he found a job as sample boy for a wool business. He worked his way up the business to salesman and by the 1930s, "his sizable commissions enabled him to take on a partner and establish a business of his own…the R.C. Harvey Company was among the most respected woolen firms in Boston" (Sexton 3). Her family also went on to build a library and organize the *Squirrelana,* a magazine located on Squirrel Island in Maine. The pair eventually had three children, Jane, Blanche and Anne, who would all describe their childhood differently.

Sexton struggled more than her sisters as a child, partly because of an inability to concentrate and a natural inclination towards disobedience—much like Audre Lorde. She was characterized as:

> the youngest and most rambunctious child…often pronounced too clumsy and sloppily dressed to join in the family's social activities. When she did attend the family's formal dinners, she was regularly criticized by her father, who once left the table claiming that her acne was making him physically ill. (Skorczewski xiv)

It could be assumed that Anne's relationship with her father created repressed negative emotions and the scrutiny she received from him contributed to her dramatic nature; she grew to despise her father for his behavior. The effects of her father's criticism may have been psychologically repressed until Sexton's therapeutic writing allowed her to release those feelings. His inappropriate behavior and lack of emotional support could be the catalyst for her feminist activism as she writes to empower other women; she felt what many women who were boxed-in by her circumstances experienced. Sexton felt rejection from her parents for her gender and for who she was, claiming in *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters,* that she saw herself more as "a girl who was meant to be a boy, the unwanted daughter" (Sexton 3). Sexton felt a constant sense of rejection from her family and needed to seek out therapy as she grew older. While she had some fond childhood memories, those are few in comparison to her unpleasant remembrances.

Her relationship with her very cold and strict parents, provided little love and comfort. Her mother examined her body when she had a cyst, which Sexton referred to as "painful and humiliating," while her father's:

> ambivalence toward Anne turned to loathing and ridicule in the evenings, after cocktails, when he often made lewd remarks Anne and her sister Jane. Later, Sexton was to speculate about whether she had been sexually abused by Nana or her father, a question which returned in her therapy sessions dozens of times and which is the subject of many of her poems" (xiv).

Her speculation of sexual abuse may have been true, or a part of her need for attention; regardless, Sexton's femininity was compromised at that point in her life. As with Virginia Woolf who was sexually abused by her half-brothers, this act left a mark upon Sexton that shows in her poetry. Her confessional pieces explore one's appearance and relationships, a result of her therapeutic emotional release. Her pent-up emotions from her childhood manifest themselves in her poems and even sometimes her plays, such as *Mercy Street.*

Growing up, Sexton had a much closer relationship with her great aunt, "Nana" Anna Ladd Dingley, a spinster and long-time newspaper editor. Dingley provided the kind of attention Sexton desired from her mother but never received. For Sexton, "Nanna was to provide Anne's only memories of loving physical contact. Nana offered afternoon cuddling sessions and back rubs, providing an especially intimate relationship compared to the formality and unavailability of Anne's parents" (Skorczewski xiv). Her grandmother provided the only form of matronly love and acceptance Sexton received in her life. She lived with the Harvey's until Sexton was 13. Unfortunately for Sexton, her grandmother soon became senile and was put in a nursing home; this event had a profound impact for Sexton's psychological state.

Apart from having issues with her family, with the exception of her grandmother, Sexton has problems with friends as well. To find acceptance, she sought attention from anyone who would give it to her. As a result, Sexton became very domineering in comparison to her siblings. Sexton was "a demanding child. She felt safest on home territory, and insisted that friends come to her house to play," and her sister claimed that Anne was incredibly difficult to be friends with because she was very dominant (Sexton 4). She created dramas in which she needed to be the lead role, and would perform them in the home. She sought attention constantly. However, all the attention she received was more or less negative because she was incredibly devilish and

manipulative. She would unravel the hems of her dresses, go through her sister's dressers and even kidnapped one of her friends; she kept her friend in a closet overnight until the mother began searching for her child (5). Anne was punished with a riding crop and thus recalls her childhood as painful. Her pranks were not laughed at but instead created annoyance among her parents, siblings and friends. Her father's use of the riding crop as a punishment and the lack of acceptance created a woman whose self-esteem was nothing compared to what it was before her death. She chose to be a leader and stand out, a way to draw attention and forget the rejection that she had had in her home.

When it was time for a formal education, Sexton went back and forth between public and private schools. She repeated fifth grade because she her teachers thought she'd "never learn anything" (5). She felt more isolated than ever as a result. Her teachers suggested Anne see a counselor, but her parents ignored the advice and instead sent her to a boarding school. She was openly rebellious and sought love and acceptance from people outside her family as she grew older. She was "determined to be a seductress" and "practiced kissing—using her full-length mirror as a model… she took her own reflection into a deep and passionate embrace" (5). She was photographed from 1940 to 1948 in provocative clothing that demonstrated her taste for the dramatic. She was an alluring presence for men as she dressed differently and behaved as a seductress. She kept hundreds of letters from boys and was a constant flirt. She lacked effort in school, but was incredibly outspoken. She wrote poetry to boys, including her boyfriend, "who later reported that Anne's father traveled to his home to beg him to marry his daughter when Anne was only 16" (Skorczewski xiv). Her father's meddling most likely took a toll on that relationship, as it didn't last too long.

In 1945, she was sent to a boarding school in Lowell, Massachusetts, where she began to write and act. She smoked in the bathrooms and abandoned campus against the rules. She continued on her flirtatious endeavors as "her grades suffered as she composed letters to boyfriends, whom she did not hesitate to play against each other. One of her favorite tricks was to write passionate love letters to several different young men, then intentionally mix up the envelopes" (Sexton 8). Writing became a constant in her life, in her love letters and poetry. Having become an expert on flirtation, one of her favorite poetic themes was love. She also wrote about loss, loneliness, despair and death. She showed great interest in poetry and experimented with the different forms the genre has to offer. Through poetry, it was evident that "when interested, she could spend considerable time on the smallest details" (9). Her poems would be published in her school's yearbook and it was perhaps here where Sexton found a sense of acceptance. She fell in love with poetry and continued to write until she was accused of plagiarism.

These accusations led to a brief period when Sexton fell out of love with poetry. Her mother claimed she had plagiarized Sara Teasdale, an American lyric poet. Channeling that sense of rejection from her family, Sexton stopped writing. Her mother's accusation haunted her for years because instead of growing as a result of her parent's approval, she only received further rejection. Only at her school, Rogers Hall, was she comfortable because here she was con; and she had received various forms of recognition from her school. Years later, she attended finishing school at The Garland School, which didn't really have an effect on her. It was just "a holding pattern before marriage" (13). Both of her sisters had been marriage by the time she finished at Garland. So, she began to tell people she was engaged and initiated the wedding planning process.

However, in 1948, she had been introduced to Alfred Muller Sexton II, nicknamed Kayo, who was studying at Wellesley to become a doctor. She met his “strict, serious, and loving parents,” but she “did not conduct herself as a lady should. She smoked. She was too racy, too boy-crazy, too wild—and she was engaged to someone else. During the first meeting with Kayo’s parents, Anne wore too much bright red lipstick and stained Mrs. Sexton’s best linen napkins a gaudy crimson” (13). Regardless of her behavior, Kayo fell in love with her and it was the first time Sexton spoke to her mother about this, which meant that Kayo was a real love. She had been a flirt and a heart-breaker for a living until she met Kayo. Afraid Sexton was pregnant, they asked her mother for advice. So, in August of 1948, Sexton’s mother gave her blessing and they eloped (Skorczewski xv). She left a note for her parents apologizing primarily for the elopement but reassuring her parents that she was happy and that they would love him.

They moved to New York so that Kayo could finish school at Colgate and they rented a room on a dairy farm. She embodied the perfect housewife here, cooking, cleaning and eagerly awaiting her husband’s return from home. While he was in college, however, Sexton did not lose her independence. She attended parties at his fraternity and spent quite some time there, making herself a semi-permanent fixture in the house. However, in 1948 Kayo left school to get a job because they were completely reliant on their families for money. They moved back to Boston and he became a woolen boy as Anne’s father had done, at his company. They alternated between their parents’ houses until Kayo enlisted and was sent oversees as part of the naval reserves for the Korean War.

He dodged the draft by enlisting in the naval reserves, where he was sent to Baltimore for training. In 1951, Anne returned home from Baltimore and he was sent out. She became a model for the Hart Agency in Boston, where her sister worked. She lived with her parents for a

short period of time and then kept switching back and forth between her parents and her in-law's homes. Apparently, during her husband's deployment, her "new family now began to notice disturbing elements in her personality. Her moods shift at lightning speed—alternating between deep depression and extraordinary excitement within a few minutes" (21-22). She became very impulsive and took up gambling as she went to visit her husband by driving cross-country to see him. They lived in San Francisco, where they conceived their daughter before Kayo was sent to Korea. She went back to her parent's house in the meantime.

She gave birth to her first daughter, Linda Gray, in 1953, the same year Kayo returned home from Korea. He had just missed the birth, calling her every hour until their baby was born. This was the point in their lives where they began to put down permanent roots, which would have been one of the most stable points in Sexton's life since she was a child. However, she did not become the stable, happy housewife like many other women. They became homeowners in Newton Lower Falls, Massachusetts, and "Sexton was forced to take on the responsibilities of motherhood and housekeeping on her own for the first time" (Skorczewski xv). Kayo became a salesman to support the family and traveled constantly, which left Sexton as the housekeeper, mother, chef and the stable core of their home life. However, she hated motherhood; she "had found childbirth horrifying and later avoided discussing it. The continuous, irksome work of caring for an infant depressed her, and the baby cried incessantly, or so it seemed" (Sexton 22). A year later, Sexton was diagnosed with post-partum depression and was admitted to a neuropsychiatric hospital after her first mental break. She felt anxious and overwhelmed by life around her, and unable to care for her children.

In 1954, she was hospitalized again when her Nana died from advanced arteriosclerosis. Her second daughter, Joyce Ladd Sexton was born a year later, for which Anne was not prepared

or in the right mind because "she felt she was drowning" (22). She abused her children and they were sent to live with her in-laws. Her daughter was playing with a toy and tried to stuff her own excrement in it as she had done the day before; Anne grew irritated and threw her baby across the room (22). Shortly after this, she was hospitalized once more. Mentally, motherhood was taking its toll upon her, as she couldn't be alone with the children because when she was, "she became paranoid, depressed and suicidal. She heard voices, fell into apparent trances, and twirled her hair into knots" (Skorczewski xv). While this may be an extreme and individual case, Sexton's psychological break had a large impact on every other aspect of her life. One of her first episodes of depression coincided with the passing of her grandmother and now we see another with the birth of her children. The triggers could have been a loss of acceptance and love, and being forced into the role of single house-wife because Kayo was gone so often. Out of fear for her life and the survival of their family, she was admitted to Westwood Lodge where she met Dr. Martin Orne.

Orne eventually became her therapist and she chose to see him consistently for help. They met "at least two or three times a week for the next eight years (Skorczewski xvi). In the hospital, "Anne continued to search for a new identity while living in the structured routine of a mental hospital" (23). Her moods continued to be erratic, her depression worsened and she became suicidal. She wrote her husband a letter while he was traveling to outline the extent of her problems, and demonstrated her desire for acceptance and love. She told Orne during one of their sessions that "the only thing for which she had a talent was prostitution, because she knew how to make men feel sexually powerful" (Skorczewski xvi). It is in this statement, that references to her suspected sexual abuse surface. As a result of their sessions, Orne recommended that Sexton write to describe her experiences and feelings. She soon began writing

and “fueled by his encouragement, she brought him more than 60 completed poems, and, as she later told an interviewer, she knew she had ‘finally found something to do with [her] life!’ (p.43). In the fall of 1957, Sexton enrolled in a poetry workshop at the Boston center for Adult Education” (Skorczewski xv). Her publications during this period of her life may be some of best works because of their rawness emotionally and the candidness with which she writes. Her feelings are shared among many women and housewives. As Betty Friedan describes in *The Feminine Mystique,* the housewife who simply has a mind of her own is next to go…the end of the road, in an almost literal sense, is the disappearance of the heroine altogether, as a separate self and the subject of her own story” (40-41). Sexton couldn’t escape the power of her mind and the role of housewife while her husband was away; she became a victim of oppression—psychologically and literally. Once she became dependent upon her husband and she gave her body over to children, her mental state changed.

While in therapy, her therapist encouraged that she writes after an attempted suicide on her twenty-eighth birthday. Orne eventually suggested that their sessions be taped, which produced the collection of her therapy tapes available in the archives. A year later, she joined poets in Boston like Maxine Kumin, Robert Lowell, George Starbuck, and Sylvia Plath and poetry became the main subject of her life. She was a confessional poet, whose poems imitated life so well that readers could connect to these works and feel as though it were their lives they were experiencing (Wagner-Martin). Poetry was the only constant in her life because it supported her through traumatic events in her life: death of her parents, her depression and mental breaks. More importantly, poetry provided an outlet for her to explore the “problem without a name.”

Her poems were primarily centered around women; she wrote about both the everyday and consequential problems a woman faces, such as menstruation, abortion and drug addiction. She attacked controversial topics to bring a woman's problems into the light instead of depicting her as the 'heroine of the home' with no problems of her own. Sexton had "always claimed that her career as a poet had the shape of a story; and that it opened not with the event of writing her first poem, but with the suicide attempt that separated her from a former life" (Colburn 7). She formed a new identity after her suicide attempts that allowed her to become a poet and explore the problem without a name. She basks in her painful memories to write poems and engage her own psyche because writing is a therapy for her.

Her therapist encouraged her to write, and according to *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale,* he told her "don't kill yourself, your poems might mean something to someone else someday" and he was right (Colburn 8). Her contributions to feminist literature are immense. In the late 1950s until the 1970s she was in contact with the Hudson Review, in which many of her poems were published. Her correspondence with Stanley Kunitz, a poet, and Fred Morgan, the editor of the Hudson Review at the time, is documented within the Firestone Library at Princeton University. In this correspondence, Sexton explains her insecurities about her poems before publication. And repeatedly sought acceptance from Kunitz and Morgan for her work. In Hudson Review, she published "The Ballad of the Lonely Masturbator," "The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts," "The Break," "To Lose the Earth," "Menstruation at Forty," "Crossing the Atlantic," "Imitations of Drowning," "Two Sons," "The Double Image" and "A Story for Rose on the Midnight Flight to Boston." In these works, she provides a sexually charged platform for women to explore their own identity in terms of their desires. Sexton was not an overtly exhibitionist

woman, but her past surfaces in her poetry from time to time in her repeated themes of beauty, love, and acceptance.

Anne Sexton's Feminist Voice

Anne Sexton was a very sexual poet with a deep understanding of our relationship with the body; her writing often concerns the body's correlation to feminine identity, which directly speaks to many women of the 20th century. Sexton repressed many painful memories that were extracted by her therapy sessions; as a result, she engaged in constant self-reflection and developed a strong grasp of the various identities a woman can possess. Her sessions consisted of many discussions about what an identity is, and she found a strong difference between the two. In a description of the therapies, it was evident that Sexton and her therapist's "contrasting views of identity—for Orne, as already there, if distorted, and for Sexton as emergent—speak volumes about the power of the creative imagination to challenge existing structures of thought, even structures designed to define the psyche itself" (Skorczewski 4). Sexton was never one to abide by any constructed rules, even if it meant psychological rules. She faced many struggles in life that influenced her identity in such a way that she could still feel the painful rejection and had trouble discussing parts of her life. To do this, she instead chose characters that would represent herself or that would represent her view towards something in an effort to show women the ways in which they could command their own identities. They could construct themselves however they please. She examines how we view our flaws and how we see ourselves as a part of society and in relationships. Her poems resonate with mothers especially because she directs her words in their direction. Her poems addressing identity, dissatisfaction and valuing experiences,

imperfections and motherhood, speak for the women whose silence has kept them in the dark for decades. Most of her poetry appeals to a mature audience because of her explicit language or complicated themes expelled by her feminist voice.

Her voice is very sensual and confrontational as she uses inspiration from her subconscious thoughts during therapy. A combination of vivid descriptions and emotionally charged diction present a universal story of a woman confronting her reality. Some of her imagery is "sensational, full of food and feeding, sexuality, greed and death—often fused, in a kind of synesthesia of appetites," according to *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (Colburn 272). She writes from a very emotional place, exploring the hunger in her mind and body by focusing on what has become traditional feminist ideologies. She, much like her feminist colleagues, focuses beyond the superficial of the self, but does it from a more erotic and aesthetic perspective. While Woolf is psychological, some of Sexton's works critique societal perceptions of the superficial, hoping to positively impact a woman's self-esteem, like in "Woman with Girdle." Within that poem, her creative energies channel feminine insecurities about their bodies. That poem strips a woman of her dignity to rebuild her confidence in all of her 'imperfections;' by doing so, she creates an empowering foundation for a woman to derive pleasure from her appearance without a restrictive garment. As a narrator her voice becomes maternal, as she comforts the woman examining her body in the mirror. She confronts the negative thoughts every woman has while criticizing themselves in the mirror, hoping to change her appearance to abide by societal standards of beauty. Her specific voice sensually encourages a woman to embrace her natural self and love every inch of her being—forget the dissatisfaction.

Since many of her poems were written during her therapeutic years, her voice embodies the experience of dissatisfaction in life. While she does confront self-conscious thoughts of the

body and tries to encourage women to rise above their fears, she also examines dissatisfaction within a relationship. She composed "The Black Art" as a depiction of dissatisfaction in an equalized relationship; she presents a female whose life mirrors that of her husband. She focuses on the abundance of feeling, and implicitly suggests to the desire to value experiences. The husband and wife desire the impossible and happiness but there's an abundance of dissatisfaction in their lives. They want more than to experience the stereotypical life of motherhood, sex, war and gossip. Her title itself denotes the evil of abundance as it creates space between a relationship and influences the mind to seek independence. She focuses first on a female author and explains that she feels too much, which indicates the pull between focusing on obtaining her independence and maintaining her femininity. The female in the poem is depicted as having her own agency and her own identity. However, she is married or in a relationship with someone ver similar in their desires. Sexton's voice in this poem is confrontational as she exposes the flaws in this relationship. She examines the plausibility of an equal relationship but uncovers imperfections of a marriage preoccupied by abundant desires. Her poem communicates to all women and in doing so, she hopes to incite a sense of female self-realization. She wants the female to understand her power and independence as a woman. Her voice in this poem is much like the one in "Woman with a Girdle," but she speaks more as an outsider. Sexton's voice is critical but also sympathetic and loving. Her tone embodies the dissatisfaction the poem discusses as she confronts the problems within the relationship and within one's being. Because of this, her voice is multi-faceted and as a whole can be described as confrontational and looking for sensation.

Her last poem, "Self in 1958" is extremely psychological and confrontational; she becomes a plaster doll and in doing so, she exposes Sexton's use of "problem without a name"

within the poem. Her allusion to Friedan's concept works as one part of the feminist web. Aptly titled, Sexton looks into the psychology of this narrator as she considers the reality surrounding her. She lives in a perfect house as the ideal wife, but finds dissatisfaction in what she should be. Many women identify with the words within this narrative because of how oppressive male dominance can be; her existential search and tone of voice in this poem align with Virginia Woolf's style of writing. This poem resonates with the need for identity and individuality beyond the feminist archetypes of the pure girl, the witch, the Madonna, for example. This type of marriage creates conflict between the self and society, which Sexton hopes to eradicate through her confrontation with this impasse. The poem's antagonistic claim ignites the desire in women to use their agency for independence; by speaking directly to the psychological conflict women struggle with, Sexton encourages women to develop their own individuality. She makes use of her imagination, to see herself as a subject rather than a passive being. As she does this, she defines her individual voice as part of a meta-feminist voice classification. In a voice that is very critical, sarcastic and harsh, she looks at a life lacking fulfillment.

In all three of Sexton's poems, her unique voice becomes evident towards the end of each narrative. When she engages in the art of writing, she focuses on feminist themes of identity and fulfillment, and reaches toward embracing imperfections and claiming individuality. These themes tie many feminist authors together as they engage in answering the overarching question posed by Friedan: What is the problem without a name?

"Woman with a Girdle" by Anne Sexton

Your midriff sags toward your knees;
your breast lie down in air,
their nipples as uninvolved
as warm starfish.
You stand in your elastic case,
still not giving up the new-born
and the old-born cycle.
Moving, you roll down the garment,
down that pink snapper and hoarder,
as your belly, soft as pudding,
slops into the empty space;
down, over the surgeon's careful mark,
down over hips, those head cushions
and mouth cushions,
slow motion like a rolling pin,
over crisp hairs, that amazing field
that hides your genius from your patron;
over thighs, thick as young pigs,
over knees like saucers,
over calves, polished as leather,
down toward the feet.
You pause for a moment,
tying your ankles into knots.
Now you rise,
a city from the sea,
born long before Alexandria was,
straightway from God you have come
into your redeeming skin

Anne Sexton concerned herself very much so with the external self and the way in which society perceives the body; thus, she creates works addressing the stereotypes a woman must live up to. Her poem, "Woman with Girdle," constructs a realistic visual of the female body that does *not* depict it as a womb to be filled but shows it for what it is--human. She concentrates on describing the beauty in the body's natural form but describes it with undesirable imagery to contradict the way we think about our exterior. She plays on traditional ideologies of vanity to force a reflection from the reader because we criticize our bodies more than necessary. A

societally constructed woman is gruesome, ugly and unrealistically trying to maintain appearances for the sake of acceptance, while the natural woman hides her body. In her poem, "Woman with Girdle," she describes a specific body that is supported by a girdle: similar to a corset that hides the imperfections women fear. This girdle has two purposes: to keep one's figure shapely and to give confidence and support to a woman. While her normal themes include: sexuality, the body, individuality and comfort in one's own being, she focuses perceptions of a person in this poem as well.

Girdles are worn beneath clothing as a layer of protection and gives a sense of confidence, while physically holding in all imperfections. Historically, women wore corsets to mold their bodies into a specific shape and keep their waistline small. As fashion progressed, the corset evolved into a girdle, which Friedan describes as:

> the fantastically uncomfortable dress "ladies" wore then was a symbol of their bondage: stays so tightly laced they could hardly breathe, half a dozen skirts and petticoats, weighing ten to twelve pounds, so long they swept up refuse from the street…but when the feminists wore the Bloomer dress in public, as a symbol of their emancipation, the rude jokes, from newspaper editors, street corner loafers and small boys, were unbearable to their feminine sensitivities. (99)

Feminine clothing was heavy, restrictive and uncomfortable until it began evolving into the latest fashion trend. When women wore bloomers and pants, their new attire became a point of controversy because of how outlandish it was. Clothing alters a person's appearance, and Sexton points this out. She writes with a certain hostility towards the girdle—the object that provides a false constrictive beauty and reflects societal fabrications of what a woman should

look like. As Sexton was not one to comply with rules, she reacts harshly to their description of the body.

Sexton begins her poem with the image of a woman, presumably older, whose body sags. She's most likely standing in-front of a mirror while looking at herself as if she were a stranger observing a woman's body. She's getting dressed and looking at herself before putting any clothes one—observing in the raw. This is a realistic depiction of what a naked woman looks like, where a "breast lie down in air, / their nipples as uninvolved/ as warm starfish" (Sexton 2-4). The imagery is unflattering, dampening any chance of arousal for a male reading this poem. But that's the point. This poem intentionally addresses a female's insecurities and addresses how she manipulates them for acceptance. The first half of the poem is bold and direct, almost like the neo-Classic male model of writing, but the second half differs in tone and explains that women should show their bodies, regardless of how they perceive their seeming imperfections.

Sexton directly addresses the women who choose to alter their bodies and change their shape to adjust to societal standards of beauty; her blunt decision is an attempt to get women to identify with the words on the page and to show women that they aren't alone in these thoughts. Many women prior to the 20th century have always maintained a certain appearance that was appealing to their husbands. Curves and perfection were always the goal for women to be considered attractive but as a woman ages, she loses firmness and the stereotyped identifiers of external beauty. In Sexton's poem, the woman personifies the girdle clinging hopelessly onto its abilities to maintain her shape because that's the expectation. She says, "you stand in your elastic case, /…moving, you roll down the garment, / down that pink snapper and hoarder, / as your belly, soft as pudding, / slops into the empty space" (Lines 5-11). Her treatment of the skin beneath the girdle encasing the body is almost repugnant as she describes its slopping. Sexton

could be referring to the girdle as an "elastic case" to mean that it restricts and suffocates a woman even though it stretches. She has room to breathe and move, but not much beyond that—much like a housewife who can gossip with her friends but cannot get a job of her own. She reinforces the female expectations of motherhood when she says "down, over the/ surgeon's careful mark, down over/ hips, those head cushions and mouth cushions, slow motion like a rolling/pin" (Lines 11-15). These words and descriptions refer to the role of motherhood, of the hips that birth children, that children lay on and that support her frame. Sexton's also referencing the role of the housewife in these lines as she turns the image from motherhood to cook. She equates the woman slowly putting on the girdle with the motion of a rolling pin, a motion a woman knows all too well. Gentle with her words, she softly refers to the life women have lived through the description of the rolling pin because it's something they can identify with. As housewives, rolling pins and kitchen tools are very familiar. She breaks her tone of anger for these caressing words because of how sensitive the subject is. She's heading towards a motivationally empowering tone for the rest of the poem as her voice alters.

Now she uses more positive imagery, like "over crisp hairs, that amazing field/ that hides your genius from your patron," which refers to her head as she slips the girdle over her head. (Lines 15-17). Her head and hair protect her brain as a physical barrier between who she is and the patriarchal influence. Her voice becomes motherly as she focuses on the woman's body instead the girdle itself; a woman reading this would feel a range of emotion. Initially, a woman may feel attacked, but by the time the girdle is slowly sliding onto her figure, a woman may feel that her imperfections are beautiful. There's value to her exterior and to every inadequacy or blemish. Even when a woman pulls the girdle over "thick thighs, thick as young/ pigs, over knees like saucers, over/ calves, polished lather, down/ towards her feet," it's hard to feel

insecure (lines 17-20). The image of a young pig is meant to comfort a woman because society constructs them as adorable and a positive image. Saucers, polished leather and young animals would have been familiar to a woman because they were all parts of their domestic life. She would know these well, and though unusual juxtapositions, they could have been comforting or flattering images for a female to be compared to. Sexton figuratively is a mother comforting the woman in the mirror as she stares at herself in her natural state. She is preventing a further attack on the woman's psychological view of herself, hinting that her body is beautiful without the girdle.

Sexton's most obvious and forceful moment of empowerment for natural beauty comes at the end of her poem, where the woman takes a moment to stand in front of the mirror. She embraces her flaws as Sexton says, "tying your ankles into knots. / Now you rise, / a city from the sea/ born long before Alexandria was, / straight away from God you have come/ into your redeeming skin" (Lines 22-28). The woman becomes more powerful, rising above and ignoring the beauty of others. She embodies the beauty of an undiscovered old city that hasn't been celebrated like Alexandria was. In this place, curvy women were the most beautiful and prized. The upper class and most desirable women are often seen as voluptuous, as most illustrations from that time period depict. Even the Greek and Roman Goddesses seemed flawlessly created. Sexton's comforting tone is an attempt to redeem natural beauty without the suffocation and entrapment of constructed beauty standards. Her poem evolves from the themes of rejection to an acceptance of one's appearance as it turns dramatically from the ugliness of the superficial to the beauty of the natural. She references the natural world, a city from the sea, which is naturally made and beautiful just as it is—the way God intended for it to be; Sexton conveys to women that they too are naturally beautiful, regardless of what is on the outside of their skin.

Sexton uses her creative energy to allude and reference commonly known places and things in order to engage women into thinking harder about the poem and about themselves. How many women have used a girdle to slim their waist? How many women have looked at their body and recognize the depressing imagery Sexton uses? Now, how many woman have looked upon themselves as Sexton does in the second half of the poem? While more people probably connect with the first half of the poem, Sexton isn't satisfied with allowing herself and women that given correlation. Women should love themselves in a different way, as the narrator encourages in the second half of the poem. Sexton's themes of empowerment, self-love and bountiful reflection of one's natural beauty are meant to build women up after society has tears them down. Women's beauty is remarkable; they just need to see that for themselves.

"The Black Art" by Anne Sexton

A woman who writes feels too much,
those trances and portents! As if cycles
and children and islands weren't enough;
as if mourners and gossips and vegetables
were never enough.
She thinks she can warn the stars.
A writer is essentially a spy.
Dear love, I am that girl.

A man who writes knows too much,
such spells and fetishes!
As if erections and congresses and products
weren't enough; as if machines and galleons
and wars were never enough.
With used furniture he makes a tree.
A writer is essentially a crook.
Dear love, you are that man.

Never loving ourselves, hating even
18 our shoes and our hats, we love
each other, precious, precious.
Our hands are light blue and gentle.
Our eyes are full of terrible
confessions. But when we marry, the
children leave in disgust.
There is too much food and no one left over to
eat up all the weird abundance.

Anne Sexton concentrated her creative energies on composing a piece that focuses on abundance in society, the needs of men and women and the dissatisfaction we feel as a result. With these themes in mind, she published a poem in 1962 called "the Black Art." Sexton may be playing on words when she calls this "The Black Art" because it's defined as black magic, which refers to evil and witchcraft. Her poem focuses on two people—a male and a female—who could possibly be writers. Creative work instigates a person to explore their subconscious for their most meaningful thoughts. Within a woman's subconscious lives monsters, their angels and forbidden thoughts, or what men would deem as evil or black magic. Black magic lives within our minds and therefore writing can be considered the black art. Authorship is an art in itself and it gets dark for a woman—especially for a woman like Anne Sexton. Her writing coincides with her bouts of depression, where her therapist recommended she begin composing poems.

Sexton composes this poem to address the writer who feels everything and lives in a world full of excess. A woman is biologically susceptible to hormonal imbalance and thus frequent emotional influxes. The poem is very confessional and refers to herself directly, the "I' as the inspiration for the poem. While reflecting on this poem in *Anne Sexton: A Self-portrait in Letters* she mentions that the poem was "written unconsciously," and that:

> "The Black Art" [PO] poem could be a life. After all, I never really tried it. Sylvia liked it but what the hell that means I don't know…Maybe she just kind of liked it. Anyhow she lived it. I wonder if it's possible? (284-294)

Sexton and Plath were good friends, and they were both confessional poets whose emotions take prominence in their poetry, especially in poems concerning death. However, Sexton's poetry explored more than death. She alludes to it often, but focuses on the life she's living. Thus, I would claim that she writes about her own feminist struggle of excessive feelings. Based upon her difficult childhood and the resulting confessional nature of her poetry, she creates works like "The Black Art" that discuss abundance. She produced many poems while in therapy and most of them, including "Self in 1958" directly portray her feelings and emotions towards society. Additionally, she claims that "A woman who writes feels too much, / those trances and portents," and then in the next stanza says, "a man who writes knows too much, / such spells and fetishes" (Sexton Lines 1-2). She does not discriminate between men and women in this poem. It's a confessional piece addressing her life and her husband's life. An author who feels too much can be male or female, which reinforces the feminist belief of equality. By beginning with the female, she immediately emphasizes herself first and refers to female hysteria as a problem prior to the 20th century. Women were kept out of academia and judged based off their overly hormonal stereotype, and Sexton wants the men to understand how ridiculous this perspective is; men were always the academics and scholars who wrote, so she equated this attitude to female emotional stereotypes by arguing that men write too much. She ends the lines in the exact way, using the same type of language to show the similarity in the arguments. She says, "Dear love, I am that girl" and "Dear love, you are that man" (lines 8-16). Her comparison

of male and female demonstrates the similarities between the sexes. She produces a depiction of life and alters it to fit the respective sexes.

These characters who are overly emotional and in-tune with their senses, feel as though they need more; they advocate for abundance. She describes the stereotypical possessions of and desires for men and women respectively, and in doing so, attacks the traditional role of men and women. She points out what each gender desires: “as if cycles/ and children and islands weren’t enough; as if mourners and gossips and vegetables/ were never enough” (Lines 2-5). When we think of women, we often associate them with children. Her reference to islands and children as not being enough indicates that she reduces societal expectations of female happiness to be limited within the boundaries of a nice island and motherhood. The next line, “as if mourners and gossips and vegetables/ were never enough,” continues this stereotype of women as gossip fiends and cooks (lines 4-5). She claims that these stereotypes are not enough. Women grow tired of the monotony of the everyday until their’ inner goddess’ yearns for more. These women want to break from their constructed stereotypes and find fulfillment elsewhere—outside of their two-by-two small box they have been occupying for years.

Sexton then refers to the woman again, where she identifies the female first in this mirroring image because they have always come second; and she is the author of her own story. She fronts the female’s desire for more and says, “she thinks she can warn the stars. / A writer is essentially a spy. / Dear love, I am that girl,” (lines 6-8). These lines indicate the prevalence of desire for the female and the yearning for the impossible. Women want more than they have been given in life, yearnings which would have been impossible for her ancestors and the women who came before her. She knows of this psychological conflict because she is a spy, as the poem denotes. She looks into the mind of all women, spying on their thoughts as a

voyeur living in a web of women. Sexton knows these feelings because she has felt them too. Sexton's work is deeply reflective. As Friedan said, "the feminists only had one model, one image, one vision of a full and free human being: man," so Sexton's exploration of her subconscious thoughts is new territory for her like other women (84). She uses the male in the poem as a reference to the only intellectual model women have had for centuries. She's writing to a man to compare the sexes and equalize the desires and needs of both. Evident by "dear love, you are that man" and "dear love, I am that girl" in stanzas that mirror each other almost exactly, paints the sexes as living the same lives.

Sexton is working with a relationship, peering into the minds of both genders and their complaints: Nothing is ever enough for the man or the woman, not "cycles and children and islands/…mourners and gossips/ and vegetables" for the woman, or "erections and congresses and products" or "machines and galleons/ and wars" for the man (Lines 4-13). These descriptions would be considered sources of luxury or comforts for each respective gender; a woman should take pride in having children, mourning the loss of loved ones, gossiping, gardening and going to islands, while stereotypically men should take pride in politics, sex, money, electronics and fighting. The dissatisfaction in the poem exists in real life. Her repetition of "weren't enough" is a way to criticize the traditional woman who is never satisfied with her family. Motherhood isn't enough for her and neither are her experiences. During the time of this poem, most women would have been housewives raising children and the desire for more would have made her an outcast. She would have been isolated in her quest to "warn the stars" (Lines 6-8). She has firsthand felt the isolation of wanting to be different and wanting more than just motherhood. She knows the feeling of not being happy. Sexton imagines a man feeling similar in her line, "with used furniture he makes a tree" (Sexton Lines 14). He sets out to do something

that isn't entirely impossible, but it's a great challenge. She creates a world within this poem that, while entirely possible, but is a stretch; however, she does make it realistic with the male ability to make a tree and the female's inability to "warn the stars." These tasks are meant to fulfill that missing sense of abundant desire in a person because no one is really satisfied.

Sexton's last stanza syndicates the singular male and female in the first two stanzas and correlates with the traditional female beliefs about the problem without a name; she fabricates a world in which men and women feel the same—dissatisfied in abundant emotion. A woman desires more than motherhood, while a man desires more than sex. This duality is part of Sexton's universal voice, making her work relatable mainly to women but also to men. Out of her dissatisfaction, she says, "never loving ourselves, hating even/ our shoes and our hats, we love each/ other, precious, precious" (Lines 17-19). A female works hard to keep up appearances but sometimes she begins to hate her appearance due to the superficiality of societal demands. It becomes hard to love oneself when a person isn't sure who they are. We can declare how much we love each other and other women, but not fully believe it. Her next line is incredibly interesting because she says, "our hands are light blue and gentle" (Sexton line 20). When someone's body turns light blue, they are suffocating or losing oxygen. Metaphorically speaking, Sexton could be referring to the feeling of not being able to breathe in their lives—they're losing touch with reality. She says, "our eyes are full of terrible confessions," which could reference sinful behavior—as judged by societal standards or moral codes—or it could mean the woman feels guilt about her thoughts, actions and lies (line 21). A woman's confessions would revolve around her "forbidden thoughts" of freedom, sexuality and independence, which were all dismissed by the patriarchy.

She ends the poem with a reference to food and her ensuing disgust, which connects the mundane with the yearning; in her reference to vegetables she brings the poem full circle with this: “when we marry, the children leave/ in disgust/ there is too much food and no one left over to/ eat up all the weird abundance” (lines 22-25). Sexton claims that children leave once they’re old enough and are disgusted by the romance between their parents. The reference to excess food could be a metaphor for an abundance of desire or love. There’s so much more desire left to be filled. It’s impossible to consume the abundance and fulfill the abundance of materials with a life-span. Just as food has an expiration date, so does happiness and craving.

A less feminist reading of this last stanza indicates that there’s a disruption in the narrator’s family life. A disconnect exists between happiness and acceptance. The male and female are not satisfied with even the most trivial and simple things such as clothing. They find disgust in the materialistic objects of every day. Superficially, the couple looks normal and happy but these are the thoughts filling their heads at night. They realize that “our eyes are full of terrible confessions” (Line 21). Both man and wife have secrets and sins, which they repress or hide. There’s emotional distance between the couple. The marriage presented in this reading depicts a distant relationship. There’s silence and dishonesty between two independent people yearning for fulfillment in life, even though they have children. Sexton writes, “when we marry, the children leave in disgust,” which could indicate a sexual marriage or a literal marriage (Lines 22-23). Children, especially a child like Sexton, run from physical embrace. Much like the partners in this poem, the next lines appear disconnected from the poem itself. She says, “there is too much food and no one left over to eat up all the weird abundance” (Lines 24-25). Suddenly, she refers to an excess of food, possibly referring to her missing children. There’s a lot of space

in the room, now that the children have disappeared repulsed by their parent's embrace. No one is left to fill that "weird" space.

Many women can connect to the emptiness because they constantly feel it. Emptiness leads to a search for a different life. Her poem attacks societal constructions about gender and equalizes the genders because both men and women feel the desire for more. Her poem depicts a contemporary relationship where both people are plagued by independent desires. She focuses on the male and female individually and as a couple, to examine a person when in a relationship and when single; a female is exactly like a male. Feminist writing embraces this more contemporarily prevalent ideology as motivation for women to break their oppressed silence. Feminist writing often recognizes the female as a centralized heroine of the story or poem, rather than a subordinate player or a muse, focusing on *her* story, *Sexton's* story. As Lorde would agree, Sexton has something to say about women in society and she uses her everyday images to both reveal and challenge her isolation.

"Self in 1958" by Anne Sexton

What is reality?
I am a plaster doll; I pose
with eyes that cut open without landfall or
nightfall upon some shellacked and grinning
person, eyes that open, blue, steel, and close.
Am I approximately an I. Magnum transplant?
I have hair, black angel, black—
angel—stuffing to comb, nylon
legs, luminous arms and some
advertised clothes.

I live in a doll's house with
four chairs, a counterfeit

table, a flat roof and a big
front door.
Many have come to such a small crossroad.
There is an iron bed, (Life enlarges, life
takes aim) a cardboard floor, windows that
flash open on someone's city, and little
more.

Someone plays with me, plants me in
the all—electric kitchen, is this what
Mrs. Rombauer said?
Someone pretends with me ——
I am walled in solid by their noise —— or
puts me upon their straight bed.
They think I am me!
Their warmth? Their warmth is not a
friend! They pry my mouth for their cups
of gin and their stale bread.

What is reality
to this synthetic doll
who should smile, who should shift gears, should
spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder, and
have no evidence of ruin or fears? But I would cry,
rooted into the wall that was once my mother, if I
could remember how and if I had the tears.

Anne Sexton was admitted to a hospital for depression in 1956, where her psychiatrist encouraged her to write as a form of therapy for her depression; one of the pieces she composed while in the hospital is titled "Self 1958." This poem supports her confessional style and portrays themes of individuality, existentialism, identity and femininity through an extended metaphor; Sexton writes the poem in first person, but embodies the role of a plastic doll. Many women can identify with this poem specifically because of how candid and realistic these thoughts are. Anne Sexton as a poet speaks openly and freely about her thoughts and feelings. Her voice comes from her experiences in life and therapy, which makes her writing extremely confessional and

emotional. She doesn't use personal details, but channels her experiences and energies into the themes of lacking individuality, the constant existential crisis of Betty Friedan's "problem with no name," and being treated like an object.

Sexton portrays her themes through an extended metaphor about a plastic doll, living in a perfect house; the importance behind this poem specifically lies within her specific voice and how she channels her personal feelings into a piece that every woman could connect to. Feminism acts as a web connecting women across the world; they all identify with the same struggles and live to empower each other. Her poem is a part of this web, acting as a literary direction for females. She relates to the concept of a woman as a womb, where she has but one purpose in life. In her poem, the literal purpose of the female is to be a stationary object of the male gaze, but the metaphorical purpose she refers to is for a woman to be the perfect housewife. A woman in this position, she identifies with both the literal and metaphorical purpose. This is the type of woman who wonders to herself every day, *how did this happen? What can I do?*

Sexton's poem speaks to these women as she opens the poem with a question that has filled the minds of every woman at least once in their life: "what is reality" (Sexton 1). This question correlates with the thoughts of oppressed females struggling to be their true selves, when she asks "because the life they live, isn't always the life they want. She continues the poem by introducing her metaphor of "I am a plaster doll; I pose/ with eyes that cut open without landfall or nightfall/ upon some shellacked and grinning person, eyes/ that open, blue, steel and close" (Sexton 1-5). A plaster doll has no thoughts of her own, no life of her own and no freedom of her own. Every inch of a doll must be moved and manipulated by another person because she cannot speak or move without the assistance, which is the life many women have felt for hundreds of years. She references her eyes that are open "without landfall or nightfall,"

indicating that her eyes are always open and she sees everything; she's physically present but unable to act by her own agency.

The doll is meant to be observed, gazed at and admired for her looks, which discredits any intellectual capacity she might have. She is reduced to "nylon legs, luminous arms and/ some advertised clothes" where she lives "in a doll's house with/ four chairs, a counterfeit/ table, a flat roof and a big/ front door" (lines 9-14). These descriptions simmer among the superficial. The way she describes her body lacks emotion and care as she observes *herself* as an object. The conditioning from society to view women this way has influenced her own self-identification. The need and desire for perfection invades the female mind with the need to have "luminous arms" or "advertised clothes" to depict a certain appearance; by describing the exterior of the woman and continuing into the interior of the house, she builds a relationship between the two in her poem because of the similarities. A woman doesn't view herself as a male does. She views herself as an extension of this house she describes: as a fake. The tone she uses is flat, sarcastic and angry as she writes each line. The poem lacks happiness and fulfillment, especially when she describes the roof as "flat," or the table as "counterfeit." The table is an imitation of something real, indicating that she feels she is living an imitation of a doll's life.

Women want something real—a life worth living; however, what this doll describes is nothing of the sort. She doesn't ask for the attention but points out that "someone plays with me, plants me/ in the all—electric kitchen...someone pretends with me--/ I am walled in solid by their noise—or/ puts me upon their straight bed. / They think I am me" (lines 20-26). The female is kept company by the person controlling her. She says they play with her, they pretend with her and they are kept by the voice of this person. She is referring to her husband or her boyfriend who has control in their relationship. She's afraid of his words, which could be inferred by the

reference to being “walled in solid.” The relationship between this doll and her puppet master operates upon his imagination because she says, “they think I am me,” meaning that she pretends to live this fantasy. This is the part in the poem where her tone becomes more direct and biting.

She becomes very angry as her emotions begin to reveal themselves in the last part of the poem. She says, “their warmth? Their warmth is not a friend...What is reality to this/ synthetic doll/ who should smile, who should shift gears, should/ spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder, and/ have no evidence of ruin of fears? But I would cry, / rooted into the wall that was once my mother, if I could remember how and if I had the tears” (27-36). She finds no comfort in their attempt to take care of her in this fabricated reality. The doll does not disobey or stray from the life she *should* be living. She smiles, she welcomes her husband with open arms and shows no sign of emotional or physical deterioration. She must be the perfect housewife and perfect doll for her husband because that’s how he constructed her. She feels the desire to be a real woman and cry but has no idea how because she has been brainwashed by the expectations of society. She has no tears and no memory of a reality she was present in. Her reality differs greatly from the reality of the male because she feels trapped in a plastic body with no way out; the husband designed this reality to fit his desires and needs without considering her need for intellectual or physical freedom.

Sexton’s poem directly addresses the double standards women feel oppressed by and the psychological affects this type of entrapment has on a woman. Her anger becomes more evident at the end of the poem. This anger could be directed towards the creators of the standards or towards herself for letting this become her reality. Sexton voices her frustrations of this psychological torment a woman can feel when she loses her individuality. She impresses upon women the importance of individual identities to prevent them from becoming lost as perfect

housewives without a mind of her own. Sexton's poem serves as an edification for women to caution against agreeing upon an unequal relationship where the female becomes subservient in every way. We see her voice surface as her anger is revealed. Sexton's voice is direct, candid and cautionary in this poem, appropriate for her traditional style of confessional and raw language.

The poem itself makes a woman consider who she is, and to determine her battles with society and herself. She must confront her psychological and sociocultural difficulties before attempting to completely liberate herself. Otherwise, in tandem with Woolf's psychological dilemma, she will constantly teeter between the state of being and non-being. The poem could be said to represent, in a literal sense, a state of non-being for the female that leaves her anxiously questioning her reality. Sexton's piece speaks to herself and to all women as her words resonate in the minds of the oppressed housewife looking for a different life. Her themes of the objectified female attempting to struggle into her individual and identity produces a feminist piece empowering women to direct their creative energies toward their own liberation.

Conclusion: Defining the Feminist Voice using Woolf, Lorde and Sexton's Works

Much of my critical investigation into a female writer's work explores her emergent selfhood and her need to independently choose which sense of self to present to the world—the raw, honest and forbidden self or the superficial, impure self-abiding one mirroring the diktat of society.

This new definition of the gendered writer could be applied in terms of her eroticism and acceptance of sexuality, or it could be in terms of her desire to fulfill her dreams by recreating herself to fit an imagined and idealized sense of self. Regardless of the reason, the feminist

voice can be defined in terms of how a woman writer views herself, as creative subject and not predetermined object, and how she chooses to empower others. The feminist voice primarily acts as a vessel to support the feminist ideal of equality and of aids other women in reaching their full independence and selfhood.

Certain shared elements constitute this feminist voice. As Lorde, Woolf and Sexton have all exemplified in their works, the feminist voice concentrates on a woman's need for self-awareness and of her power over her identity. All their works intend to empower women to speak out and fulfill their potential; the only things barring women from fully commanding their agency are societal constraints and constructions through male dominance, and their own reactive and sometimes self-defeating internal conflicts. Out of this tension, we might postulate the following definition of a feminist voice: First, it is the individual style and tone of a woman author generated by her experiences, creative energies and conflicts within a sociocultural environment that favors one gender. Next, a feminist voice is an active form of resistance; it engages in existentialist interrogations of self and world in an attempt to solve conflicts through communication between the sexes. In tone, style and subject matter, works by Woolf, Lorde and Sexton call to all women to improve the quality of their lives by resisting the dictates of entrenched patriarchal traditions. Their literary output has spanned the entire 20th century, and their works are now recognized as beacons that inspire and guide women writers. Feminism embraces all ethnicities, races and women of every culture. The same simple but imperative truth pertains to feminist literature: it accepts all female authors advocating for the equal acceptance and celebration of female intelligence.

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