University of Stavanger

The Faculty of Arts and Education

MASTERS THESIS

Study programme: Advanced teacher education for levels 8-13, with specialization in English	Spring term, 2022 Open
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Title of thesis: The cult of the perfect mother: An investigation of motherhood and femininity in Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011), Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) and Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living* (2018)	
Keywords: Feminism Motherhood Selfhood Ideology Memoir	Pages: 80 + attachment/other: 8 Stavanger, May 11, 2022

Abstract

This thesis takes its point of departure in the recognition that contemporary literary representations of female selfhood and motherhood are permeated by a neoliberal discourse of false idealizations, which can be traced all the way back to the ideas proposed by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Since Rousseau laid the grounds for the domestic ideology of the nineteenth-century, femininity has been based on a false mythification depicting the natural woman as a selfless object that is destined for motherhood. As a result of this deep entangling, the demands of maternal perfectionism and dedication still have a powerful hold on our consciousness. This has led to a naturalized cult of motherhood to favor both an inauthentic and idealized maternal discourse above an authentic and realistic one.

This thesis postulates that while individual narratives are informed by the cult of motherhood, they can simultaneously be employed to combat, probe and challenge the established structures. This thesis will address the female subjection to – and rebellion against – the dominating discourse through a close reading of Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011), Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) and Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living* (2018). The analysis will be undertaken in dialogue with feminist psychoanalytic theory in order to unpack and explore how the narratives simultaneously uphold and criticize the ideals of motherhood which are essential to female identity. This extends, moreover, to how they formulate a sense of being both a woman and a mother that might be free and authentic, while also ambiguously struggling with the ideological implications of the cult of motherhood.

Acknowledgements

I must begin by thanking my wonderful supervisor Janne Stigen Drangsholt, who is not only an intellectual genius, but also the utmost emblem of pursuing your passions and doing so with all the complexity that life contains. Thank you for opening up the world of literature to me, as you guided me through the English Literature course in 2020. Through your efforts, I have discovered a broad field of cultural and societal voices that have, in turn, sparked a particular interest for the silenced and marginalized ones. This master's thesis would never exist without your dedication, enthusiasm, guidance and motivation. Mostly, thank you for being an inspiration for living and being.

I would also like to thank my ever-loving and dedicated husband, Sindre, who is continuously cheering on my academic education and passions. I am truly grateful for your attentative capacities and your openheartedness. Thank you for being my firm foundation and my everyday fun. To me, you are the definition of home.

Lastly, my dear parents. Thank you, mom, that despite everything, you never settle for the established. Thank you for always being a critical voice and for fearlessly articulating the ambiguities of being a mother of five (!!) wonderful and monstrous children. Your way of unconsciously messing up the construction of gender roles, and showing me that women can be rational, strong, and tough rhetoricians, without being emotional monsters, is among the greatest you have taught me. And dad, the emotional wreck that I love limitless. Because you will already have begun crying by now, and since you understand close to no English, I will stop with the powerful but simple: thank you for everything!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The foundation of the modern image of the mother largely has its roots in the period of Enlightenment and the ideas permeated by the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, in his work *Emile: Or on Education* (1762), asserted that biological differences facilitate and legitimize distinct gender roles and spheres. This laid the grounds for the separate spheres ideology of the nineteenth century and, later on, the 1950s ideal of the perfect housewife and mother. Like the separate spheres ideology, the American housewife ideal of the 1950s evolved from the notion that men and women were biologically destined to perform distinctly different purposes, where men should preserve the commercial sphere and make a living for the family, while women should attend to the chores of the domestic sphere. The housewife was, consequently, a woman who married young, had children and fully devoted her life to her family and her home.

While this ideology was allowed to dominate the collective consciousness for a long time, there were also voices countering the main narrative. As early as 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft fought for civil and legal rights in *A Vindication for the Rights of Woman,* countering the strict gendered scheme that Rousseau had proposed. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), moreover, powerfully proclaimed that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (293) to defy the established idea of woman's natural vocation (537). And, not least, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), written at the height of the housewife-era, became an important contributor to exposing the devastating implications of the preferred and idealized narrative of motherhood. In the midst of the post-war era – when women got married younger, had more children, and received less education – Friedan discovers an increasing ambiguity and unrest concerning a problem that no one could name or fully communicate. Throughout her book, Friedan provides her readers with countless examples of anxious, depressed and frustrated housewives who are unable to articulate their internal desperation and hunger, other than asking "is this all?" Women seeking to find fulfillment outside the patriarchal narrative, ushered in the 1970s feminist campaign for female education and work opportunities. This rejection of the natural argument of female social roles and capabilities that was promoted in the 1970s contributed to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* which, in the 1990s, dissected the biologically

determined “sex” from the culturally produced “gender”. This laid the grounds for a continued contemporary emphasis on unique gender identities and expressions of selfhood.

These are, in fact, the structures that underpin the memoirs *Blue Nights* (2011) by Joan Didion, *Why Be Happy When You Could be Normal?* (2011) by Jeanette Winterson and *The Cost of Living* (2018) by Deborah Levy, which all have in common that they critique a culture plagued by a false conception and representation of feminine nature and devoted motherhood. Rather than providing us with the idealized versions of motherhood and femaleness, these works attempt to represent authenticity. In this sense, these three literary works represent counter-narratives within the mainstream culture which, according to Roberta Garrett’s *Writing the Modern Family* (2021), tend to favor idealized literary representations of motherhood (135). While counteracting the established ideals of femininity, these works are also in a position to reflect upon and even promote this ideology in some ways, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: Literary Review

The dominance of the narrative of motherhood makes it, to a large extent, resemble what the postmodern critical theorist Jean-François Lyotard referred to as a grand narrative. In his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), Lyotard separates the concepts grand narratives and small narratives, so as to describe an important postindustrial shift from the discourse of universal knowledge and truth towards one of difference and rebellion. In fact, as "the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government" (9), Lyotard claims that the "grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses" (37). Lyotard neatly summarizes his points by saying that "the little narrative *[petit récit]* remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention, most particularly in science" (60). The shift from modernity to the postmodern thus describes a cultural shift where the erosion of established truths (39) emancipates that which is diverse, fragmented, plural and fluid. This even leads Lyotard to conclude in his later essay "Defining the Postmodern" (1986) that human beings are like Gulliver: "sometimes too big, sometimes too small, never at the right scale. Consequently, the claim for simplicity, in general, appears today that of a barbarian" (1387). While Lyotard's theory is not central in itself in this thesis, the concepts of grand and small narratives are beneficial for the analysis at hand, in the sense that they can help us understand the immensity and complexity of the narrative of motherhood and the hold that it has had on human consciousness – and unconsciousness – for hundreds of years. Hence, these concepts are useful in investigating and understanding the cultural mechanisms pertaining, in particular, to female experiences and motherhood.

This thesis will investigate how the grand narrative of motherhood – intertwined in the domestic ideology – forms the material, psychological and existential framework of the contemporary memoirs of Didion, Winterson and Levy. The analysis of how these authors tell their individual stories of motherhood will start with a theoretical evaluation. First, on the grand narratives, whose framework can be traced all the way back to the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His ideas, as formulated in *Emile: Or on Education* (1762), were foundational in establishing a maternal discourse which was dedicated to the child, claiming that "God makes all things good; man meddles with them and they become evil" (8). The inborn goodness of child should, in Rousseau's argument, be at the core of the maternal – her existence

not only dedicated to the domestic sphere in general, but more than anything to the vulnerability of the child (9). While these thoughts were essential in legitimizing the separate spheres ideology of the nineteenth century, the premise of this thesis is that they still continue to dictate the idea of what it means to be a mother in our own contemporary culture.

2.1 The Kingdom of Fathers: A disguised expression of the capitalist law within the patriarchal structures of the family

While Rousseau's ideas developed into a powerful ideology of separate spheres within the nineteenth century, James Kilroy exposes in *The Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (2007) that it also facilitated the rise of the patriarchal family structures. With its strictly distinct gender roles, communicated through the dichotomy of agency and passivity, the separate spheres ideology accelerated the oppressive demands of women generally, and on mothers specifically. Though the notions of the family originated in an idea of biology, Kilroy exposes how it became a "prime social institution" (8) within the larger socio-political and cultural structures which empowered, and arguably continues to empower, the middle-class on a microlevel and capitalist society on a macrolevel.

In her book *Of Woman Born* (1976), Adrienne Rich addresses what she calls the "Kingdom of Fathers" (56), implicating the oppressive socio-economic structures of the twentieth century. While power, in her argument, is mainly attributed fathers (57), "[p]atriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms" (43). Rich is, in other words, uncovering the disguised expression of the capitalist law within the patriarchal model of family and motherhood. This is, after all, a law that is based on, and benefits from, the separate spheres ideology that compels women to the seemingly virtuous and sacred assignment of birthing and nurturing future laborers, as well as providing the comforts for the husband to continue working. It has, in other words, become "so universal as to seem a law of nature" (56), compelling a societal structure based not only on the enslavement of women, but also on the socialization of children into an internalized worldview of gender hierarchy, division and exploitation of the mother-slave.

Positioned within contemporary environment, moreover, Toril Moi's *What is a Woman?* (1999) unmasks this capitalist expression within the structures of the family. With her application

of Pierre Bourdieu's theory, it becomes clear that the "*doxic,* that is to say, (…) that which cannot be questioned" (282), representation of social gender divisions is, in fact, "a *habitus* which makes male power appear legitimate even to women" (282). This gendered inequality is, moreover, one of the main reasons why the ideological implications in maternal discourse must be further investigated. The following analysis will, therefore, examine the long history of family structures predating the patriarchal one, by way of investigating how the patriarchal family structure came to be the framework within which the capitalist law is expressed. This involves both the nineteenth-century demand of separate spheres and the 1950s image of perfect housewife and mother, as well as its continued influence well into the twenty-first century with the revival of the traditional stay-at-home housewife. This emphasis, moreover, also relates to the focus of the memoirs themselves, dealing with the complex realities of working women and mothers, and the consequent implications on selfhood.

With Friedrich Engels's investigations in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), comes his concluding remarks that the logic of economy and private property is, indeed, what created a radical shift in the structuring of family unions predating the patriarchal structure. Engels detects a convention of group marriages quite different from modern civilization, beginning with the "Consanguine Family" (42), followed by the "Punaluan Family" (44) and ending with the "Pairing Family" (55). Because it was near impossible to determine the biological father of a child within this pre-modern time, decent was, to begin with, traced by the maternal lineage, later labelled "mother right" (49). Evidently, the gradual shift towards a greater pairing in marriage came due to the increasing prohibitions in terms of kinship, which created great difficulties in arranging proper group marriages. The origin of monogamy, then, had little to do with the modern idea of love, and everything to do with the practical impossibility of arranging group marriages without implicating close relatives.

When Engels traces the development of the family, he simultaneously reveals how the role of women changed throughout the course of time. Even though women traditionally held a prominent and valuable position in society, this paradoxically changed as it became more civilized. Indeed, while there was an established distinction in terms of gender roles during the time of barbarism – to which men "went to war, hunted, fished, provided the raw materials for food and the implements necessary for these pursuits" (195), while women "cared for the house, and prepared food and clothing; they cooked, wove, and sewed" (195) – Engels finds that it was

not until the familial structures changed towards that of the patriarchal family that women became gradually subjected as slaves to men. The eventual overturn of the mother right marked the time when the civilized patriarchal family union of gender hierarchy became a fact. Instead of tracing a matrilineal heritage, the societal developments promoted the paternal lineage and therefore established a greater division between genders. The social driving forces that created this shift, then, were the economic developments of domesticated animals and herds, leading up to an increased exchange of commodities, such as milk, meat, offspring, or wool (196-197). The already established gender roles were thus heightened with the increasing production of both "livestock breeding, agriculture, [and] domestic handicrafts" (198) which all fell under the jurisdiction of man. With this increase came the demand for more labor, which slaves and servants came to fulfill. While the sphere of man continuously expanded, women's sphere became gradually smaller. This separation is, moreover, what created an oppressive gender hierarchy in which women had no share in the ownership of property and eventually came to be perceived as a sheer instrument for man's procreation (199).

With Engels' findings as a background, the objectives of this thesis seek to highlight the false patriarchal mindset of the domestic ideology to expose how it continues to control contemporary gendered behavior and structures of society. In the same manner as Rich claims that "[t]he command of Yahweh: "Be fruitful and multiply," is an entirely patriarchal one" (119), Roberta Garrett sets out to uncover its destructive continuation into the twenty-first century's neoliberal ideology in *Writing the Modern Family* (2021). Within the neoliberal framework of private economy and free markets, Garrett explores the destructive 1990s emphasis directed towards mothers "to re-embrace their rightful role as home-based nurturers" (16). After the battles won by the second wave feminism, Garrett notes a disparaging continuation of the socially produced and stigmatic ideas permeated by Rousseau. It revives not only the nineteenth-century ideal of angelic motherhood and the 1950s perfect housewife and mother, but also a perception of female destiny that is incompatible with ambitions of education and career:

> Yet the ideological re-endorsement of the affluent, leisured, stay-at-home wife and mother comes into direct conflict not only with women's raised educational and career aspirations since the 1960s but also with the need for both halves of the increasingly 'squeezed' middle-class couple to work. Two, or at least one and a half, salaries are required to

> achieve the standard of living necessary to raise children in the conditions of success created by highly competitive neoliberal economies (66)

The neoliberal ideology, with its emphasis on a stereotyped and polarized rhetoric of the maternal, promotes a binary perception of the mother as either good or bad. This underscores a socio-economic reality where "women's ability to contribute to society in ways unconnected to their traditional nurturing role" (124) is almost completely unreachable. While the memoirs of Didion, Winterson and Levy problematize notions of career and motherhood, Sharon Hays' important remarks in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996) – focused precisely on the contemporary ideological foundations of what she calls "intensive mothering" – create the basis of the memoirs' maternal and female battles. As the name implies, intensive mothering is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive and financially expensive" (8), in sum an impossible demand of the mother. Garrett finds that "[t]he belief that 'intensive' mothering is 'good mothering'" (10) only creates a stereotyped discourse forcing women to be completely dependent on a working husband. Even more than this, it establishes an idea that "the 'successful' intensive mother is […] more likely to be white and middle-class" (10).

Jacqueline Rose also gives a critical approach to the modern image of the mother in *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018). In exposing a naturalization of the essentialist maternal discourse, Rose finds a powerful societal demand that forces women to conform to the limiting roles of their perceived biological capacities or else be labelled as wicked. She claims that the governing discourse of motherhood only gives a one-sided idea of good mothers being

> perfectly turned-out, middle-class, mainly white mothers, with their perfect jobs, perfect husbands and marriages, whose permanent glow of self-satisfaction is intended to make all women who do not conform to that image (because they are poorer or black or their lives are just more humanly complicated) feel like total failures (17-18)

This essentially oppressive demand is not only isolating mothers from pursuing educational or career aspirations outside the home, but it also creates a stereotyped representation of good mothers which completely ignores variations of culture, ethnicity and class. Under the idealized

version of motherhood, with its glorification of the feminine roles of birthing-machines and housekeepers, female agency and imagination are restrained, and the individual female narrative is silenced. This is precisely why the ideological and discursive implications of motherhood must be studied in greater depth. We cannot continue to accept that motherhood should be the disadvantaged side-effect of modern civilization. Henceforth, the following section will pay particular focus to how women acknowledge their maternal ambivalence and how they deal with their seemingly inappropriate desire to get and education and work outside the home.

2.2 Writing the individual female self

> [I]n its current 'popular' form, feminism has been shorn of its prior association with wealth redistribution, anti-corporatism, anti-racism and ecological politics, and placed firmly within the dominant neoliberal ethos of competitive individualism and self-governance (2)

This quotation neatly summarizes Garrett's main argument. Contemporary feminism is unfortunately "most distanced from the broader social critique of class and gender power relations associated with the second-wave women's movement" (2). It is precisely this shift away from the achievements of second wave feminism and towards a neoliberal discourse and agenda that is problematic in terms of the maternal discourse. It compels a literary emphasis on the traditionally considered "female thematic terrain of the domestic and the maternal" (3), which fails to grasp the nuances of maternal experiences. With its clear ideological agenda, representations of maternal failure "to conform to the hegemonic ideal or adopt socially validated sentiments" (3) are perceived as both abnormal and dangerous, wicked even, particularly for the innocent child. There is, in other words, a growing "'conspiracy of silence' around many aspects of women's domestic lives" (3). This idealized rhetoric can, in fact, be traced all the way back to the traditional nineteenth century novel (43) where "[w]omen who refused to embrace the nurturing role were treated with fear and contempt" (43), typically depicted through the mythical figure of the wicked stepmother. This dichotomy between wicked mother and precious child thus continues "to exert a powerful appeal among readers of modern autobiographies, reappearing in a far more conservative and decontextualized form in contemporary 'misery' memoirs" (25).

With Garrett's foundational evidence, the following seeks to trace the literary patterns of female assimilation to, and rebellion from, the nineteenth century novel up until the contemporary environment's autobiographical writings. As already mentioned, this also relates to Rich's idea that telling stories renders "the male subjective experience of women" (34) so that the patriarchal mythology creates a double conception of the maternal being either good or bad, angel or monster. Such rhetoric is, in her argument, maintained by the patriarchal idea

> that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, "the devil's gateway." On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing (…) the masculine imagination has had to divide women, to see us, and force us to see ourselves, as polarized into good or evil, fertile or barren, pure or impure (34)

How women, then, deal with these conflicting demands between the idealized narrative and the authentic narrative, juxtaposed with the availability of patriarchal language, comprise the main focus of the following.

2.2.1 Writing as women's political imperative

In *A Literature of Their Own* (1978), Elaine Showalter postulates that the act of writing in the nineteenth century was perceived as both self-centered, egoistic, unwomanly, unchristian, and in clear contrast to the feminine ideal (18). Even so, writing became an important means of expression in this period. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar make compelling arguments about how female writers dealt with the imprisoning environment of the nineteenth century in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1980). Among their main notions, the symbolic image of a dark and angry monster – which came to function as a projection of the female author's own frustrations and compound realities – was particularly prominent in exposing how women sought to both identity with and to revise the patriarchal story. What is more, the monster powerfully reflects the polarized implications of the paternal language to which one side of motherhood is perfect and angelic, while the other is ambivalent and frustrated. It seems, therefore, as if women of this time employed the already established dichotomies, among them the one of angel/monster, to

communicate an alternative and silenced reality. The monster is thus the symbolic opposite to the angelic mother, manifesting a continuous yearning for liberation. The monster is, in Toril Moi's description in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (2002), a portrayal of a woman who "refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who *has* a story to tell" (57). This juxtaposes the aspects of self conforming to, or rejecting, the ideals of society, ultimately presenting the female being as both fragmented and divided.

The literary embeddedness in patriarchal language that was already established by the nineteenth century, must be challenged to create a new discourse that goes beyond the false gendered stereotypes. This involves exposing that the masculine subjectivity creates a discourse of polarizations that, in turn, forces women to inhabit the role of the other. Since this male-dominated language, often labelled the Law of the Father after Lacanian theory, makes it near impossible to avoid falling into literary patterns of objectification and marginalization of the mother, it makes sense that Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989) detects an overall tendency also within feminist discourse of daughters objectifying the mother. While this is particularly prominent within the nineteenth-century novel, Hirsch exposes the necessity of actively rejecting the troubling actuality of daughters speaking on behalf of their mothers through a process of discovering selfhood which demands, moreover, an overturn of maternal subjectivity. The result is, in other words, a continuation of the patriarchal cycle of dichotomy and opposition exemplified in the dissections between the self and the other, the good daughter and the bad mother. While speaking on behalf of the mother, the daughter's discourse promotes, in Hirsch's opinion, the "process of *othering* the mother" (136), and possibly of othering herself too. To voice the authentic version of the mother, then, involves the deconstructive model to which giving voice also involves silencing, and where "longing for connection" (96) also involves "a need for disconnection" (96). The process of finding language that adequately projects the juxtaposition of imprisonment and freedom, distance and intimacy, love and hate informs the great feminist undertakings at hand.

Within the contemporary context, a beneficial point of departure in the search for smaller narratives is the hierarchical gender division between the non-fictive genres of autobiography and memoir. While both genres are predominantly life writings, Linda Anderson highlights in *Autobiography* (2011) a particular prominence rewarded the autobiography, due to its portrayal of the unified masculine subject (3). Following the polarized dissection between male and female

– often considered opposing poles of intellect and emotions – it is within the act of self-representation that female autobiographical writings fail "to live up to the necessary test of 'great writing'" (81). Since the memoir, labelled a female genre, projects emotions into a personal representation of self (7-16) that does not follow the conventional pattern of the autobiography, it breaks with the Romantic belief in a unified self (4-5), so that the lines between fact and fiction are almost untraceable. It breaks with the essentialist portrayal of self and favors, instead, divided and fragmented representations. This narrative project of self fulfills, therefore, a critical feminist emphasis on deconstruction and diversity, so to disrupt the autobiographical, or even the patriarchal, venture of order altogether (5).

To this point, Anderson highlights the remarkable theories of Roland Barthes and Paul de Man, to mention some, whose critical approaches to the narrative representations of self are particularly interesting in the dissection between the autobiography and the memoir. It is, to begin with, the important emphasis on the death of the author, that Roland Barthes famously declared in his essay of the same name in 1968, that allows the linguistic elements of text to speak without the imminent threat of the author's truth. To him, the modern scriptor is then set free to trace "a field without origin" (1270), where the text becomes a fluid entity which is continuously reinvented in the conversation between text and scriptor. This enables, in other words, an ongoing interpretation of selfhood that is complicatedly intermingled with ideological and personal standings, that, in turn, rejects the autobiographical notion of a unitary and romanticized subject, as well as the authoritative presence of the author altogether. Following this prominence, Anderson concludes with Paul de Man's linguistic dilemma "that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language or tropes" (12), so to say that

> [a]utobiographies thus produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek. What the author of an autobiography does is to try to endow his inscription within the text with all the attributes of a face in order to mask or conceal his own fictionalization or displacement by writing. Paradoxically, therefore, the giving of a face, prosopopoeia, also names the disfigurement or defacement of the autobiographical subject through tropes. In the end there is only writing (12)

The general discourse of selfhood is, in other words, ultimately fictive – a concealed act of both the cognitive and the performative – describing the impossibility of separating the cognitive act of writing from the performative outcome of such writing. The process includes both concealing and revealing a fictionalized subject, underscored, moreover, by Kilroy's analysis that all narratives elicit "responses of both concurrence and denial" (18) which "reflects on and creates ideologies" (18). Writing the self is, therefore, liminal in that it juxtaposes opposing emotions of both imprisonment and freedom. Hence, "[j]ust as narratives are the product of ideological discourse, they themselves participate in the critique and modification of ideologies" (17). The important potential of the memoir thus exposes, according to Anderson, a discourse of self that is "an illusion, an ideological construct to be resisted and displaced" (67), so that text and scriptor can engage in an interpretive dialogue. In its mediation between the inside and the outside worlds of the self (113), it faces and defaces "the essentialized subject" (67), so to expose a self that is in complete opposition to the unified. The greatest potential of the memoir is, therefore, found in its communication of the ambiguities of a divided and fragmented self. It exposes, after all, a great discursive doubleness of imprisonment and liberation, or, in Anderson's words, in the potential of both giving voice and taking it away (12).

The analysis and distinction between the autobiography and the memoir adequately describes the importance of the female project altogether. With Toril Moi's evaluation of feminist criticism, she manages to underscore the importance of overcoming the "patriarchal value system" (102) to which "victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity; under patriarchy, the male is always the victor" (103). To her, it is the anti-essentialist argument that should steer solid feminist criticism, challenging the idea that meaning is only produced in a binary opposition. As the memoir communicates the deconstructed and fragmented individual female self, it remarks the great potential of language being a free interplay of both present and absent signifiers. There is, consequently, a much greater potential within language to produce multiple meanings of both ideological concurrence and denial which, in turn, can challenge the "sexist generalizations" (178). The demand for unity of self

> can be criticized precisely as a patriarchal or – more accurately – a phallic construct. As Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida have argued, patriarchal thought models its criteria for what counts as 'positive' values on the central assumption of the Phallus and the Logos as

> transcendental signifiers of Western culture. The implications of this are often astonishingly simplistic: anything conceived of as analogous to the so-called 'positive' values of the Phallus counts as good, true or beautiful; anything that is *not* shaped on the pattern of the Phallus is defined as chaotic, fragmented, negative or non-existent. The Phallus is often conceived of as a whole, unitary and simple form, as opposed to the terrifying chaos of the female genitals (65-66)

Overcoming the governing binaries marks the political imperative of women's writing. It involves exposing the discursive structures of the grand narrative to make way for an anti-essentialist and ambiguous discourse to arise. Since memories, emotions and thoughts seldom follow a chronological order, the memoir inhabits an important potential in creating individual narratives that reflect the complexities and ambiguities of life at large. It is particularly its capacity for blurring the lines between fact and fiction, that resembles Anderson's reading of Virginia Woolf saying the idea of self should be "a construct which is known as much through its fragmentation as its unity" (95).

2.2.2 "[H]ow to tell the tales of love of and for mothers? Or, how to listen to the tales that mothers choose to tell?" (91)

These questions are precisely what Jacqueline Rose, consequently, addresses in her book *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018). While the memoirs of Didion, Winterson and Levy seek to answer these questions, it is this search for adequate language – able to word the conflicting and anti-essentialist maternal experiences, as well as the female ambiguities of self – that stands out. The fact that each story juxtaposes ideas of what mothers should be, as well as detachments from just this idea, goes a long way in fulfilling Moi's anti-essentialist emphasis. The memoirs reveal how language is used in such a way as to expose internal battles and duplicit ideas of selfhood, especially pertaining to the ambiguous experiences and roles of mother- and daughterhood. In doing so, the memoirs underscore Barthes' emphasis on language itself and also Moi's consistent favoring of "the freedom of readers over the power of writers" (76). This involves employing a language of the multifaceted and fluid, evident in the co-existing divisions between imprisonment and freedom, distance and intimacy, love and hate, resemblance and

difference – all of which describe the ungraspable ambiguity that is "the great unwritten story" (Rich 225) of the mother-daughter-relationship.

The following analysis of the contemporary memoirs rests on the emphasis of Luce Irigaray's essay *And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other* (1981), which communicates the complexity of both interconnectedness and separation within the relationship between mothers and daughters. Here, Irigaray speaks to her own mother, saying "I would like us to play together at being the same and different. You/I exchanging selves endlessly and each staying herself. Living mirrors" (61). There is, in spite of Irigaray's emphasis, a powerful conflict latent in the idea of being living mirrors that are both individual and the same. This fragmented state of being individual souls that are, nonetheless, constantly linked to, and reflected in, one another – the powerful connection as well as the distinct disconnection – is precisely what the three memoirs juggle in various ways. The memoirs thus contribute to the important feminist project of deconstructing the established patriarchal binary to make way for embracing a more complex state of being and writing.

Part of this process involves exposing the unspoken and neglected ambivalence that reigns both within the self and within the relationship between any mother and daughter. It is, indeed, only through juxtaposing opposing emotions that the "cathexis between mother and daughter (…) the great unwritten story" (225), in Rich's argument, can surface. In fact, she claims that

> there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement (225-226)

This feminist critique exposes the fluid notions between imprisonment and freedom to further complicate the dissection between the idealized and the authentic narratives. While the idealized is synonymous with an imprisoned female narrative, it seems that the authentic juggles, instead, the co-existing emotions of both imprisonment and freedom – of "deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement" (226). How the different memoirs, then, deal with these opposing sides reveal the great insight that self, just like the act of writing, is never unified and stable, but, on the contrary, always multiple and changeable. This leads to Rose's conclusion that

> the demand to be one thing only – love and goodness incarnate – that is intolerable for any mother, and tears her mentally and physically to shreds. For it is perfectly possible to acknowledge that the love a mother may feel for her child is like no other, without buying into all the dire psychic trappings that are meant to follow. The idea of maternal virtue is a myth that serves no one, certainly not mothers, nor the world whose redemption it is meant to serve (82-83)

An authentic female narrative must overcome essentialist and romanticized notions of the idealized narrative through exposing the fragmented and the multifaceted – by juxtaposing the dichotomies of imprisonment and freedom, love and hate, interconnectedness and separation. This is, after all, an essential shift within contemporary feminist discourse that reconceptualizes "power, authority, and anger" (167) that, according to Hirsch,

> can emerge only if feminism can both practice and theorize a maternal discourse, based in maternal experience and capable of combining power and powerlessness, authority and invisibility, strength and vulnerability, anger and love. Only thus can the maternal cease to polarize feminists; only thus can it be politicized from within feminist discourse (167)

What must be done to overcome the objectifications and marginalizations of the past, should one follow Hirsch's arguments, is to expose the complex, ambiguous and multifaceted that exist within the female self, as either a woman, a mother or a daughter, but also amidst the relationship between mothers and daughters in particular. The main emphasis of the upcoming analysis of the three memoirs is, therefore, placed upon the established dichotomy between imprisonment and freedom by way of describing a doubleness at the heart of the female being and writing. There is, moreover, an additional weight placed on how the memoirs represent a maternal voice that is plural, following Hirsch's conclusion that

> [i]nasmuch as a mother is simultaneously a daughter and a mother, a woman and a mother, in the house and in the world, powerful and powerless, nurturing and nurtured, dependent and depended upon, maternal discourse is necessarily plural. (…) Rather than

> daughters having to "speak for" mothers, mothers would be able to speak for themselves, perhaps "with two voices." Only thus can mothers and daughters speak to one another. Only thus could the plots of mothers and daughters become speakable (196-197)

It is, therefore, this doubleness that accounts for the core analysis of this thesis project. The liberating and imprisoning process of finding language that articulates this doubleness is, as a result, among the main points of analysis. While doing so, this thesis – beginning the analysis with Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011), and then moving on to Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) and Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living* (2018) – also examines how each individual act of writing the self is challenging, undermining and sometimes even supporting the larger patriarchal narrative of women and motherhood.

Chapter 3: Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011)

While Joan Didion was celebrated for her excellent and heart-breaking portrayal of the universal and inevitable death of her husband in her first memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), Rachel Cusk remarks, in her article "Blue Nights by Joan Didion – Review" (2011) in The Guardian, that "*Blue Nights* is a tragic kind of sequel". Cusk continues, "where the earlier book drew its strength from the common well of suffering, the follow-up must grapple with the awful particularity of Didion's misfortunes". It almost seems as if the commonality of the first memoir dismisses the particularity of the second in the eyes of its reviewers, as if being too rough for anyone to find rewarding. While Didion, in Cusk's review, is able to fulfill "the moral core of memoir as a form" by navigating "between mourning as public fact and mourning as private experiences" in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, she fails to include the reader on the chaos of losing a child. Cusk even goes as far as to claim that what Didion "cannot do is master her own material: instead of grieving with her, we are watching her grieve", a process with which Cusk finds "piteous and exposing (…), and one which places a moral burden on the reader". It is thus Didion's exposure to the raw ambiguities of motherhood that falls short in the reviews. Deemed as both lacking humility and authenticity, Didion's writing reflects the cultural and contemporary reality of mothers alike – there is no room in society for maternal ambivalence.

"How often is the grief of a mother allowed to wander outside the frame of the requisite pathos?" (14) Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018) critically asks. "Why is it so hard to listen to such a mother, to dignify her with the story she might have to tell?" (14-15). These groundbreaking questions expose the raw brutalities that mothers, like Didion, experience when faced with the neoliberal demand of silence – experiences that have provoked Didion's pursuit of language able to speak the suppressed and the unspeakable. With the title "Blue Nights" as a point of departure, then, Didion implicates a dichotomy of night and day, functioning as a sort of non-space that is never either-or, but always liminal and in-between. While they communicate the extents of Didion's loss, the established idea of dichotomies also proves faulted. In fact, Didion's messed-up and fragmented narrative reveals the great flaws in thinking life can be adequately captured and understood in terms of these divided oppositions. As there is no sufficient language to grasp the full extents of Didion's grief, a fluid juxtaposition of the dichotomies seems like the only way to approach the unspeakable.

Didion thus begins her memoir by way of exposing life at its absolute worst. After the deaths of both her husband and her daughter, within a time span of twenty months, she rips open the wound of her loss and creates the most intimate narrative dealing with adoption and motherhood, sickness, aging and death, and the self. All of which are brutal reflections of neglected realities that have been too ruthless to even contemplate. Now, however, the darkness of her loss compels her to not only re-visit the glorious memories of her past, but also the painful ones, asking the questions she dared not ask before.

The deaths of her husband and child are the greatest disruptions of Didion's life, and her narrative is subsequently the outcome of this utmost destabilization. The concepts of sickness, aging and death are, therefore, all paradigmatic of her memoir by way of influencing her narration in terms of the imagery of blue nights. As spring approaches in certain areas of the world, a particular color of blue appears in the sky when the light is fading towards night. This is something Didion is experiencing in New York, particularly from the windows of hospitals where the emphasis on sickness and death is particularly strong. In these places, where time seems to stand still and where her daughter Quintana's life seems to float between living and dying, the blue nights approach to bring forth association of both beauty and destruction. *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (1996) describes the color blue as both "[i]ndifferent and unafraid, centered solely upon itself, blue is not of this world: it evokes the idea of eternity, calm, lofty, superhuman, inhuman even" (103). Their description contributes to the analysis of Didion's endeavor, being a sort of awakening of the self as she writes:

> *During the blue nights you think the end of day will never come. As the blue nights draw to a close (and they will, and they do) you experience an actual chill, an apprehension of illness, at the moment you first notice: the blue night is going, the days are already shortening, the summer is gone. This book is called "Blue Nights" because at the time I began it I found my mind turning increasingly to illness, to the end of promise, the dwindling of the days, the inevitability of the fading, the dying of the brightness. Blue nights are the opposite of the dying of the brightness, but they are also its warning* (4)

Here, the imagery of night subsidizes Didion's reflections as a symbol of the unleashing of the unconscious, according to *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (1996). Moreover, a symbol of the

"disappearance of all knowledge which may be defined, analysed or expressed and, further still, the state of being deprived of all proof and psychological support" (701). There is, in this sense, a particular connection between the fading of light and the fading of life that, throughout Didion's memoir, exposes life at its rawest and most critical. In between her memories and longings, the imagery of night exposes an increased fluidity, emptiness and aridity (701), looking back on the life that has outlived her only child. She is, subsequently, living in between the desperation of the loss and the balance of all the facts, evident in the way she composes her narrative. The twofold aspect of night – "that of the shadowy world of the brooding future, and that of the prelude to daylight when the light of life will shine forth" (701) – is reminiscent in the disruption between longer paragraphs, filled with objective material of what has happened, and short, single sentences and strong patterns of repetition. Like poetry, then, the rhythm of her narration can almost be heard like music, bringing perspective to the destructiveness of Didion's reality. While death is a disruption of narrative, Didion composes a narrative that is, itself, disrupted.

The repetitive dichotomy of night and day symbolizes Didion's maternal division, particularly the dissection between logical reasoning and objective facts on the one hand, and dreams and irrational emotions on the other. While this continuous division steers the analysis of her memoir, she manages to fulfill Marianne Hirsch's emphasis in *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989) where maternal experiences are a sort of semiotic interaction between the different worlds of the inside and the outside (163). Hence, Didion fulfills some of Hirsch's hopes for the future, notably in creating a discourse that is "maternal without falling into essentialism, that might act out the mother's contradictory double position" (198). The imagery of opposition and division thus exposes a self that is ripped apart and broken down. A self that is desperately longing for the past to reoccur, for her husband and child to come back home, in the midst of trying to logically catalogue the facts of past events to find some sort of balance. Death is a disruption of narrative, the same way as it is a disruption of self, both as a woman, wife and mother. Didion's maternal brokenness, but also her battle, come to light through a narration that is as destabilized as the mind itself, mirroring her internal monologues as fleeting and fragmented.

The aim of this analysis is therefore placed on "the inevitability of the fading" (4) – on how Didion is composing a narrative containing both the adoption and loss of her daughter, notions of motherhood, as well as the inevitabilities of aging, sickness and death by way of examining a self that is evolving. This involves an investigation of Didion's disrupted narration

as a reflection of the disruptions of life and of self, and particularly how she is articulating this state of being. Where death is the ultimate separation between mother and daughter, this discussion pays particular attention to how Didion is using her memories to re-examine life and to communicate the unspoken elements of it.

3.1 The narrative of adoption and motherhood

> Time passes.
>
> Memory fades, memory adjusts, memory conforms to what we think we remember.
>
> Even memory of the stephanotis in her braid, even memory of the plumeria tattoo showing through the tulle (13)

What is particularly striking about Didion's memoir is her introspection, looking back with the wisdom of hindsight that is unleashed by the fading of light. This enables, moreover, a comparable analysis of what life looked like on the surface compared to how it was beneath. Through her memories, Didion is not only remembering the past, and thereby remembering people who once were, she is also re-examining reigning ideologies and patterns of thought that used to guide her. All from the day she received a call from the hospital that a beautiful baby girl awaited them (55), to the immediate fear that arose and that never left her (57-58), to the visit of the social worker (72-73), and to the multiple work trips that Quintana were included on (85-92). What she is doing, then, is questioning the ideological foundation of her own ideas and experiences of motherhood. Even more than this, asking the terrible questions that no parent dares to ask, namely, was I ever enough?

Evidently, Didion's personal narrative involves, more than anything, a critical evaluation of herself as a mother. Like so many women, and particularly mothers, before her, her analysis of her own maternal behavior follows the traditional neoliberal pattern, described by Roberta Garrett's *Writing the Modern Family* (2021), of a "vulnerable and priceless child and the associated cultural preoccupation with scrutinizing maternal behaviour" (21). While asking critical questions about mother- and daughterhood, it seems the cultural notion of blaming the

mother, steeped in the domestic glorification of intensive mothering, provokes Didion's most destructive guilt:

> [B]ut when we talk about our children what are we saying? Are we saying what it meant to us to have them? What it meant to us not to have them? What it meant to let them go? Are we talking about the enigma of pledging ourselves to protect the unprotectable? About the whole puzzle of being a parent?
>
> *Time passes.* (16)

With these questions, come the realization that Didion's identity resembles that of "the 'too-good' mother" (62) by way of concealing, in Garrett's analysis, "her shameful feelings of maternal ambivalence in an excessive performance of socially sanctioned 'good mother' skills and behaviour" (62). While following the "recommended choice narrative" (56) of the 1960s, it seems that Didion tries to unconsciously overshadow the looming darkness implicit in the adoptive story of her daughter. Looking back, then, Didion is able to uncover the implications of the answers that she, as a mother, left unanswered:

> What I would not realize for another few years was that I had never been the only person in the house to feel the fear.
>
> *What if you hadn't answered the phone when Dr. Watson called,* she would suddenly say. *What if you hadn't been home, what if you couldn't meet him at the hospital, what if there'd been an accident on the free-way, what would happen to me then?*
>
> Since I had no adequate answer to these questions, I refused to consider them.
>
> She considered them.
>
> She lived with them (63)

The doubleness of this quotation remarkably exposes an ambiguous reality of both mother and daughter. While Didion clearly refused to contemplate, or even articulate, what was too difficult to handle, Quintana was forced to live with the unanswered questions of her origins. With Didion's introspection, then, comes the realization that she sought to remedy her own maternal

ambiguity through giving Quintana a "privileged upbringing" (75-76). She thus devotes all her time to arranging the most exquisite christening (73-77), lying to the social worker about her Spanish help finding a snake in the garden (72-73), or including Quintana on multiple work trips abroad thinking it was best to keep her close (85-92) – all of which to fulfill the preferred narrative of Quintana's life. This division between perception and reality – between the idealized narrative and the authentic narrative – can almost be summarized in the short and innocent list of "Mom's Sayings" (35-39) that Quintana concoct together with a friend:

> I wrote two books watching her clothes blow on those lines.
> *Brush your teeth, brush your hair, shush I'm working.*
> So read the list of "Mom's Sayings" that she posted one day in the garage, an artifact of the "club" she had started with a child who lived down the beach (35-36)

Beneath the surface of the neoliberal narrative of motherhood, this list exposes all the ways in which Didion feels like a complete failure. Her writing career takes her away from the traditional maternal responsibilities where she should, at best, be a stay-at-home mom who spent all her time within the sphere of the home to nurture Quintana in the best possible way. Instead, however, Didion, much like her husband, combines motherhood with a writing career to the extent that she is left feeling guilty and insufficient as a mother. Looking back, moreover, Didion asks herself how she could "have missed what was so clearly there to be seen?" (36). The doubleness of Didion's story, then, reveals how the list of "Mom's Sayings" breaks through the ice of her neglect to uncover her core of constant guilt and inadequacy. While it is easier to ignore such harsh realities and pretend they do not exist, it is precisely nightfall that prompts her truthful and devasting reflections of the past. There is no need to pretend any more, the damage is already done and the worst that could possibly happen is already a reality.

Didion's introspection, then, follows Adrienne Rich's theory of re-vision, communicated in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1972), which contributes to an ongoing revision that is as "difficult and dangerous [as] walking on ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are coming into" (19). It is, after all, the unspeakable truths of motherhood that are shining through Didion's narration of Quintana's origins. Following Rich's theory, which pays particular attention to the imaginative potential to

transcend the established, re-visiting the past and re-naming the writing is what enables one to "play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate" (23). This revision exposes the necessary complexity of the adoptive story which is, in contrast to the romanticized and idealized choice narrative, always ambiguous and multifaceted, involving the individual stories of both parents and child. Thinking back, then, Didion sees the images of Quintana in the various hotels that she was brought to, as part of work trips, as the

> truest memories of the paradox she was – of the child trying not to appear as a child, of the strenuousness with which she tried to present the face of a convincing adult. On the other hand it is just such images – the same images – that encourage a view of her as "privileged," somehow deprived of a "normal" childhood.
>
> On the face of it she had no business in these hotels (88)

Both Quintana's adopted being and her adult roleplay articulate not only Quintana's self but also Didion's. The elements that come to define Quintana's being are the memories of her weeding the tennis court (180), or organizing her dolls house remembering that she would need a projection room (85), or saying things like "where did the morning went" (89) and "I just noticed I have cancer" (84). At the age of five, she even called Camarillo, a psychiatric hospital, "to find out what she needed to do if she was going crazy" (40), and later Twentieth Century-Fox, a film corporation, "to find out what she needed to do to be a star" (40). All of these elements – indications of adult roleplay – expose, in fact, Quintana's fears of growing up:

> As I describe these very clear memories I am struck by what they have in common: each involves her trying to handle adult life, trying to be a convincing grown-up person at an age when she was still entitled to be a small child (…)
>
> Was this confusion about where she stood in the chronological scheme of things our doing?
>
> Did we demand that she be an adult?
>
> Did we ask her to assume responsibility before she had any way of doing so?
>
> Did our expectations prevent her from responding as a child? (86)

All these questions comprise a mirroring-effect between mother and child, suggesting that Quintana's adult roleplay was, in fact, an indication of both her own and Didion's misconceptions of age and aging – the inevitability of the fading that Quintana experienced and feared close at heart, while Didion suppressed for as long as she could. Another question that lingers is, therefore, the one Didion asks herself, saying "[w]hen we noticed her confusions did we consider our own?" (92). This involves the interconnectedness in the relationship between mother and daughter that seems buried in the margins of Didion's text, as is similarly highlighted in Hirsch's work. Through Didion's narrative of becoming, written amidst the deepest destruction, the individual selves of the two seem to forever intertwine and intermingle. While remembering Quintana's upbringing and responses, Didion starts seeing herself.

Her maternal experiences uncover, moreover, a betrayal of a contemporary mythology of childhood innocence (34), as is highlighted in Marina Warner's *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time* (1994). While this idea can be traced all the way back to Rousseau, it describes a subliminal guilt in-between Didion's writing. Though she seems to be doing her utmost to secure Quintana the best possible life, beneath the surface of her preferred and idealized narrative lies a reality of guilt towards the injured child which has, in Warner's analysis, "become today's icon of humanity" (36). Throughout Didion's evaluation of adoption and motherhood, then, her narrative seems focused on the most essential question that all mothers fear to ask: "[w]as I the problem? Was I always the problem?" (33). This is, perhaps, the most brutal question any mother can ask herself. While Quintana's being is paradigmatic to Didion's narrative, it fulfills Hirsch's emphasis on telling the complex and ambiguous story of motherhood – the one that breaks with the grand narrative and inserts an ambivalent and fluid being, a self that Didion comes to discover only after her daughter's death.

3.2 The narrative of sickness, aging and death

> To be a child is to be small, weak, inexperienced, the dead bottom of the food chain. Every child knows this, or did.
>
> Knowing this is why children call Camarillo.
>
> Knowing this is why children call Twentieth Century-Fox (100)

The narrative that Didion is composing rips open the wound of her loss and admits life at its absolute worst. Doing so, the symbolic division between night and day continues to influence her narrative project on the topic of aging, sickness and death, by explaining the ambiguity between mother and daughter, but also the ambiguity within the self, juxtaposed with the inevitable realities of the scientifically proven. Part of this tension, then, focuses on the mirroring of similarity and distance between mother and daughter, but also on Didion being the storyteller and thereby the one to expose not only Quintana's frailty in terms of aging, but also her own. The same way she refuses Quintana's sickness –*"[t]his was never supposed to happen to her*, I remember thinking – outraged, as if she and I had been promised a special exemption" (16) – is she also refusing the inevitabilities of her own.

With the tragedy of outliving her only child, then, comes new questions concerning Didion's own role in the world. She is no longer anyone's mother, or anyone's wife for that matter, so that part of her introspection goes beyond the devastation of losing her child to the point where her own self is all that is left in the crossfire between sickness, aging and death – the inevitable passing of time. Looking back on her daughter's sickness, her multiple and ever-changing diagnoses that eventually became borderline personality disorder (47-49), Didion questions her own misconceptions, saying:

> [w]hat remained until now unfamiliar, what I recognize in the photographs but failed to see at the time they were taken, are the startling depths and shallows of her expressions, the quicksilver changes of mood.
>
> How could I have missed what was so clearly there to be seen? (36)

With the pictures of Quintana comes a heightened awareness of the distance in their relationship; "[h]ow could we have so misunderstood one another?" (51). Who is Quintana really, beneath the narrative that Didion preferred to tell herself? It seems a natural defense mechanism for a mother to pursue an idealized narrative of both herself and her daughter. It creates a more bearable story of the two, without the imminent threats of maternal ambivalence and the abandonment of adoption. Didion's question exposes, therefore, the brutal implications that befalls, according to Hirsch, when mother and daughter "cease being able to speak and to listen to one another" (199). Hirsch continues with an important question that also relates to the similarity between Didion and

Quintana, saying "[b]ut what if they inhabit the same body, what if they are the same person, speaking with two voices?" (199). Her points gain a particular emphasis seen in association with the diagnosis Quintana is given, highlighting, yet again, their misconceptions:

> I had seen most of these hallmarks.
>
> I had seen the charm, I had seen the composure, I had seen the suicidal despair.
>
> I had seen her wishing for death as she lay on the floor of her sitting room in Brentwood Park, the sitting room from which she had been able to look into the pink magnolia. *Let me just be in the ground,* she had kept sobbing. *Let me just be in the ground and go to sleep.*
>
> I had seen the impulsivity.
>
> I had seen the "affective lability," the "identity diffusion."
>
> What I had not seen, or what I had in fact seen but had failed to recognize, were the "frantic efforts to avoid abandonment."
>
> How could she have ever imagined that we could abandon her?
>
> Had she no idea how much we needed her? (48-49)

The narrative of Quintana's sickness exposes, therefore, a reality where mother and daughter live in a sort of symbiosis, while also failing to contemplate essential evidence of the more difficult aspects of life. While Didion is afraid of failing as a mother (58), and thereby of giving Quintana a life that is less than expected, Quintana is afraid of being abandoned by her parents (49-51, 53-54, 60-61, 63-64). The two are therefore interconnected by their uncommunicated fears which, to both, involve the other. This is the neglected ambiguity at the heart of both Quintana and Didion's beings, one that reveals a story quite different from the preferred narrative of mother- and daughterhood. Moreover, with Quintana's diagnosis comes a revelation of the choice narrative that has been allowed to be the defining factor of her origins. While the intentions of the choice narrative were good, the fact that she was chosen also tells a completely different story; "[d]oesn't it tell you that you were available to be 'chosen'?" (61). The dichotomy between the intentions and the reality of the choice narrative, juxtaposed with Quintana's borderline personality disorder, are powerfully reflected in Didion's questions:

> Are we beginning to see how the word "abandonment" might enter the picture? Might we not make efforts to avoid such abandonment? Might not such efforts be characterized as "frantic"? Do we want to ask ourselves what follows? Do we need to ask ourselves what words come next to mind? Isn't one of those words "fear"? Isn't another of those words "anxiety"? (61)

Liminality is the authentic story of Quintana's life. Since she was chosen by someone, she was also abandoned by someone, and is therefore forced to live in-between the dichotomy of being lost and found. Her liminal reality is ultimately one that is revealed in the rational and scientific diagnosis that she is given. Here, too, the division between night and day is evident by way of describing a division between the societal and objective rationality of daylight compared to the irrational fluidity and ambiguity of night. The one side, which is without emotions and purely scientific, has a very specific language to articulate and diagnose all sorts of symptoms, while the other takes the form of an internal battle filled with emotions that no language can adequately capture other than saying "*[l]et me just be in the ground* (…) *Let me be just be in the ground and go to sleep*" (49).

It is precisely the realization of death – the gradual slowing towards nothingness – that puts the "contradictory double position" (Hirsch 198) of mother and daughter into perspective. Rebecca Solnit explains a similar point in her dealings with storytelling, selfhood and the mother-daughter-relationship in *The Faraway Nearby* (2013). As she explains that "[t]he moment when mortality, ephemerality, uncertainty, suffering, or the possibility of change arrives can split a life in two" (152), it becomes clear that the dichotomy of night and day – as is also symbolic of the division between logic and emotions, idealization and reality, distance and intimacy – describes Didion's, but also Quintana's realities of being. With the worst already being a reality, Didion is no longer afraid of what she used to be afraid of. The frailty of motherhood was singlehandedly focused upon Quintana, on the harm that could be done to her (53-54). Now, however, as Quintana is no more, Didion is still experiencing an increasing frailty. This is where the introduction to her memoir – *"[a]s the blue nights draw to a close (and they will, and they do) you experience an actual chill, an apprehension of illness"* (4) – explains Didion's own being. With the acknowledgement of Quintana's fading, comes the realization that Didion's life is also ultimately headed towards one thing:

> The way in which your awareness of this passing time – this permanent slowing, this vanishing resilience – multiplies, metastasizes, becomes your very life?
>
> *Time passes.*
>
> Could it be that I never believed it?
>
> Did I believe the blue nights could last forever? (17)

Yet again, the dichotomy of day and night powerfully explains Didion's split reality and approach to her own insights. While darkness, according to Solnit, is where the "unknowns [are] rising to the surface" (185), it is also the place where Didion's dreaming can go wild. Nightfall not only allows for a critical evaluation of the past, but also for dreaming about the past being present again, almost so that Didion can touch her daughter one more time (187-188). It overshadows, in other words, the logical and objective explanations, symbolic of the day, to which Quintana is physically gone forever, completely unreachable. It allows Didion to see that

> [s]easons in New York – the relentless dropping of the leaves, the steady darkening of the days, the blue nights themselves – suggest only death. For my having a child there was a season. That season passed. I have not yet located the season in which I do not hear her crooning back to the eight-track.
>
> I still hear her crooning back to the eight-track.
>
> *I wanna dance.*
>
> The same way I still see the stephanotis in her braid, the plumeria tattoo through her veil. (69)

While death, from the logical perspective of daylight, is the ultimate portrayal of separation, the imaginations provoked by nightfall also disclose a certain closeness – an intimacy that is achieved through the cognitive capacity of going back and remembering the past, of dreaming of what once was. Didion's logical awareness of death brings forth an even greater desperation for closeness, repeated throughout her memoir (68-69, 135-136, 150-188). It signals how she refuses to give up on the season of having a child and being a mother – without this season, what is she?

Part of Didion's split being also involves realizing an increased sense of frailty (102-109) – "*an actual chill, an apprehension of illness"* (4). For instance, when sitting on a folding metal chair in a rehearsal room, afraid to get up, panicked even (109-111). While feeling unbalanced and unsteady (175), the only logical evidence found from medical examinations is that she must gain weight and exercise more (112-115). Even though Didion is determined to maintain momentum (165-168) after her daughter's passing, she finds her health steadily decreasing. She gets diagnosed with herpes zoster and even the simplest acts of staying balanced, picking things up, getting dressed, or tying her shoes become close to impossible (173-177). While Didion tries to focus on the medical advice of proper food and exercise, it appears

> [m]y cognitive confidence seems to have vanished altogether. Even the correct stance for telling you this, the ways to describe what is happening to me, the attitude, the tone, the very words, now elude my grasp.
>
> The tone needs to be direct.
>
> I need to talk to you directly, I need to *address the subject as it were,* but something stops me.
>
> Is this another kind of neuropathy, a new frailty, am I no longer able to talk directly?
>
> Was I ever?
>
> Did I lose it?
>
> Or is the subject in this case a matter I wish not to address?
>
> When I tell you that I am afraid to get up from a folding chair in a rehearsal room on West Forty-second Street, of what am I really afraid? (116-117)

Didion's refusal is a repetitive attribute, signaling this division between perception and reality. With the fading that will eventually absorb her too, a sense of frailty seems to both hide and uncover, perhaps at the same time, Didion's fear of aging and even greater fear of admitting that her season of motherhood has passed. The divided sides of her narrative co-exist, and it seems as if Didion is both escaping reality while also trying to address the matter as it is (116-117, 134-136). Perhaps Didion's desire to be more direct is itself synonymous with her battle. In relation to this, Solnit's evaluation of her own intrusive sickness highlights an important point of Didion's

battle, arguing that "[y]ou cannot ignore that you are biological, mortal, and interdependent" (129). Simultaneously as Didion's health is worsening, her desire to be direct involves a yearning to address the depths of life; "the attitude, the tone, the very words" (116) must be able to communicate the alienation of self. The person she used to be is no more, since the person she used to cling to for a construction of selfhood is no more. She is no longer a mother, no longer a wife, only a woman – only Joan Didion. Her battle is therefore finding out who that new identity truly is, while also questioning the foundations of her previous notions of selfhood.

It is almost as if she surrenders the whole of her being to time itself – to the fading that pulls everything and everyone in – something she communicates like a work of art. What Didion has been doing up until this point, is combining longer paragraphs of objective observations or facts, with a repetition of shorter sentences of heartbreaking insights. This division of writing, symbolized in the division between night and day, creates a rhythm of poetry, of music even. It is, therefore, a narrative project that communicates the tone of chaos and internal battling with the most difficult aspects of life and death – of the gradual fading. It is, ultimately, a narrative that prompts the question of what narrative Didion has now that everything she once held dear is lost.

3.3 The narrative of self

What is particularly interesting about Didion's memoir is its fluid boundaries between the world of the outside and the world of the inside – the "contradictory double position" (Hirsch 198). This argument follows Linda Anderson's analysis of memoirs in *Autobiography* (2011), where she highlights a particular capacity for the "versatility and openness of the form" (113) which enables this continual mediation between worlds. In the case of Didion, her memoir is a re-evaluation of lived life where the wisdom of the present allows her to perceive the past with a widened perspective. While her reflection mainly focuses on her daughter, it is a narrative of Didion's own selfhood that is allowed to shine through. A narrative where she deals with the ambiguities of motherhood, but also that realizes the inevitable fading that is affecting all. To a great extent, her memoir continues the project of her previous memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), in terms of its emphasis on the extreme devastations of grief and how it comes to affect her becoming self. The idea of selfhood, which is at the core of the memoir, displays a self that is always in the process of becoming – always learning and evolving due to the various twists and

turns of life. This final sub-chapter sets out to explore how Didion composes a narrative of self that is intertwined in the already mentioned ideas of motherhood, sickness, aging and death. How is she able to tell her brutal story without falling into cliches and romanticized idealizations, and instead expose her own internal and external complexity in a way that allows the reader a deep sense of intimacy?

How the various concepts of sickness, aging and death are all ideas that seem both all-too familiar and also completely unreachable, remain among the most fascinating aspects of Didion's memoir. It appears she is battling between acknowledging the beauty of fading light and its subsequent darkening, all of which become suddenly rushed as she begins to notice her physical and mental fading. When asked the most essential question "*who do I want notified in case of emergency?*" (185), the chaos of her reality is brought to an open end. While forced to comprehend her own state of being – her own aging – as "long hours [are] now spent waiting for the scans, waiting for the EEGs, sitting in frigid waiting rooms" (184), the split manifests again, in the magnitude of realizing the facts juxtaposed with her inadequacy to do so. Her response, "[e]mergency, I continue to believe, is what happens to someone else" (185), thus describes it as a neglect to realize the material and biological self that others, due to illness, must read and interpret. Solnit describes it as a ship that others steer, containing "mysteries you do not understand; those mysteries include that eventuality when you are no longer your self at all" (94). Part of her unconscious refusal, or even neglect, to comprehend the facts uncovers the ambiguous relationship between the inside and the outside worlds, made stronger in the face of sickness. It is almost as if sickness tears apart Didion's normal defense mechanism of rejection to bring forth an alienation of both the internal and external self. This ambiguity at the heart of Didion's being is captured by Solnit's portrayal of sickness, saying that

> [a] major illness or injury is a rupture that invites you to rethink, to restart, to review what matters. It's a reminder that your time is finite and not to be wasted, and in breaking you from the past it offers the possibility of starting fresh. An illness is many kinds of rupture from which you have to stitch back a storyline of where you're headed and what it means. Every illness is narrative. There are the epics, in which you will ultimately triumph over what afflicts you and return for a while to your illusory autonomy, and the tragedies, in which the illness will ultimately triumph over you and

> take you away into the unknown that is death, and the two are often impossible to tell apart until they resolve (137-138)

Solnit powerfully exposes points that are reminiscent of Didion's situation. While her daughter was never supposed to die, it appears Didion also finds herself to be an exception from the biological way of life. Battling between fact and fiction – the rational and the irrational – her illness is ultimately a tragedy because it has to end in death, eventually. Along the way, however, her story might also be an epic, by way of explaining a self that is becoming more acute to the actualities of life. A self that is becoming better equipped to capture the ambiguous because her path has forced her to dwell and expand on it. Her narrative of self is, therefore, as complicated as all the above-mentioned dichotomies of acknowledgement and rejection, fact and fiction, rational and irrational, ideal and reality, that never exist in an either-or relationship. Didion's fluid approach to all of them, thus describes her process of rethinking, restarting and reviewing (Solnit 137), which is evident in her approach to the memory of Quintana:

> I know that I can no longer reach her.
>
> I know that, should I try to reach her – should I take her hand as if she were again sitting next to me in the upstairs cabin on the evening Pan Am from Honolulu to LAX, should I lull her to sleep against my shoulder, should I sing her the song about Daddy gone to get the rabbit skin to wrap his baby bunny in – she will fade from my touch.
>
> Vanish.
>
> Pass into nothingness: the Keats line that frightened her.
>
> Fade as the blue nights fade, go as the brightness goes.
>
> Go back into the blue.
>
> I myself placed her ashes in the wall.
>
> I myself saw the cathedral doors locked at six.
>
> I know what it is I am now experiencing.
>
> I know what the frailty is, I know what the fear is.
>
> The fear is not for what is lost.
>
> What is lost is already in the wall.
>
> What is lost is already behind locked doors.

> The fear is for what is still to be lost.
> You may see nothing still to be lost.
> Yet there is no day in her life on which I do not see her (187-188)

Her story reads like poetry, like musical tunes of tragedy where she juxtaposes the rational and the irrational in a narrative that is as disrupted as her own sense of self. The quotation exposes the fluidity between logic and emotion evident in the inevitable process of fading. Death is, ultimately, what lingers between rationality and irrationality – it is as simple as the stopping of a heart but also as complex as the loss of a soul, of a being, of a reality. It rips open a wound and gives a new perspective to the remaining, and it is precisely this reality that Didion is exposing through her construction of narrative. It is a story that juggles the objective materials of Quintana's and Didion's conditions, as well as the emotional implications of inadequately contemplating the facts of loss. Following Anderson's argument, then, Didion's split self implicates the trauma, leaving a gap within her, so that a disrupted narrative becomes the only way to speak from beyond understanding (129-134).

It is, eventually, through this story of disruption that Didion realizes that even though they are separated by death, they are together in the intimacy of a shared fear. The whole of her memoir exposes, therefore, a story of mother and daughter who are both speaking from, and dealing with, a state of loss. Didion's increasing frailty is ultimately mirrored in Quintana, by way of explaining not only Didion's loss of her only daughter but also Quintana's loss of her biological mother. While Didion is desperate to be with her daughter, writing "[h]ow could I still not need that child with me?" (181), one is able to imagine a similar longing in Quintana's discourse. This includes her many questions that go unanswered, her inadequacy to find some sort of resolution and her desire to simply die by way of ending what she cannot speak.

Loss is an internal wound of constant division between separation and intimacy, as is also highlighted by Solnit, saying that "[p]ain, along with its cousin touch, is distributed universally on the body, providing a sort of boundary of *self*" (106). While pain, in this analysis, might be synonymous with the objective reality of loss, touch describes the desperate desire to bring back and to re-live the past. Though the pain of loss describes the separation between two souls, memories are what allow an intimacy that closely resembles touch. The distinction between these two variables is, eventually, the boundary of self – it is the reality that, finally, leads Didion to

find the answer to the one question; "*who do I want notified in case of emergency?*" (185). It is, obviously,

> [o]nly one person [who] needs to know.
> She is of course the one person who needs to know.
> *Let me just be in the ground.*
> *Let me just be in the ground and go to sleep.*
> I imagine telling her.
> I am able to imagine telling her because I still see her.
> *Hello, Mommies.* (187)

This poetic narrative enables Didion to speak almost from beyond life. It is thus the construction of a broken-down narrative that enables Didion to recognize her own state of being ripped apart. The poetry of her writing is not just music, but also logic, in the sense that it describes the state of mother and daughter in such a crystal clear and complex way. Both are ripped apart by their individual losses, and Didion's narrative goes beyond the point of consolation to include the reader in the emotional absorption of this loss. By doing this, Didion allows the reader such an intimate presence as though being able touch her, the same way she comes close to touch her daughter through her memories (187-188). Following this idea, the mastery of Didion's narrative becomes all the more clear. She is creating a narrative that is, itself, death by way of explaining that writing, just like death, is all about being separate and close at the same time. Solnit explains this process of writing as

> saying to no one and to everyone the things it is not possible to say to someone (…) [W]riting is speaking to no one, and even when you're reading to a crowd, you're still in that conversation with the absent, the faraway, the not yet born, the unknown, and the long gone for whom writers write (64)

The reader is brought as close as to trace Didion's process of thinking, even though the fact is that all are distant and separated, both mother and daughter, reader and writer. The narrative, consequently, communicates the double story of reading and writing as a parallel to the double

story of mother and daughter which is, eventually, symbolic of death itself. The single sentences and strong patterns of repetition highlight Didion's internal journey, where memories keep disrupting the logic reasoning, creating a simultaneous intimacy and distance. The state of being ripped apart and broken down is ultimately the narrative that Didion is left with. The openness of death is, finally, where she leaves the reader. Where no language can adequately describe her loss, her narrative creates a rhythm and a music that provoke the most heartbreaking emotions. This is where the reader is left – with the openness of emotions.

Her narrative, then, becomes her own way of preserving the past and dealing with the inevitability of the passing – reminiscent of Solnit's analysis that "[t]ime itself is our tragedy and most of us are fighting some kind of war against it" (83). Didion's story is, therefore, a remedy that deals with the inevitable that involves us all. The battle of the internal and external captures the multifaceted that no language can adequately project. It is, in sum, an account that reaches beyond the limitations of language in an attempt to tell the story of the ambiguous aspects of motherhood, sickness, aging and death.

Chapter 4: Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011)

> [B]ut adoption drops you into the story after it has started. It's like reading a book with the first few pages missing. It's like arriving after curtain up. The feeling that something is missing never, ever leaves you – and it can't, and it shouldn't, because something is missing (5)

With Winterson's memoir as a sort-of follow up from her autobiographical novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), reviewers have been quick to determine how this project is, in fact, a radically different one. With a first glance, it seems as if both narratives follow a neoliberal discourse, dissecting maternal wickedness from childhood innocence and portraying the adoptive mother Mrs. Winterson as "one of the greatest horror mothers of English-language literature", according to Dwight Garner's "On a Path to Salvation, Jane Austen as a Guide" (2012) published in The New York Times. In spite of this powerful and stereotyped portrayal of wickedness, reviewers claim the memoir is an even more unconventional and ambitious project. Emily Stokes notes in her article "Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?" (2012) in Financial Times that it is "a memoir about how the stories we tell can bring us closer to the truth or help us hide from it". In fact, Stokes finds Winterson's "self-knowledge on the page, however messy the project", to be one of the memoir's greatest rewards. It promotes a reading that "is unusually visceral", whereas Winterson allows the reader to see her truest confrontations. It is the greatness of juxtaposing wickedness with a journey of deep-felt sympathies that makes reviewers applaud Winterson's memoir. Zoe Williams for one, claims in her article "Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? by Jeanette Winterson – Review" (2011) in The Guardian, that the memoir "deepens one's sympathy" not only for Winterson herself, but also for the adoptive mother. Eilis O´Hanlon, moreover, even states in "Review: Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? By Jeanette Winterson" (2012) in Independent, that Winterson is "too good a writer" to simply fulfill the neoliberal discursive pattern of the misery memoir. In fact, Winterson manages to mirror her own madness in the figure of her own mother, so that her memoir gives an authentic portrayal of maternal and daughterly ambiguities.

From an early point, Winterson declares "I can't remember a time when I wasn't setting my story against hers. It was my survival from the very beginning" (5). This marks the opening, but also the narrative project, of Winterson's memoir. It is, in other words, initiated as a quest narrative for an individual storyline, where she takes a stand against the religious narrative of her adoptive mother. While growing up in an environment where her adoptive mother is in charge of language (27), Winterson realizes she has had enough. Like any other quest narratives, it begins with the home. A place which, ideally, should be a sanctuary of security and comfort, while to Winterson, however, is a mere physical construction of imprisonment and destruction.

Within the confinements of home there is a battle of narratives taking place. A battle that can, in many ways, be summed up as a conflict between normality and happiness, as is referred to in the title. On the one hand, the battle exposes Mrs. Winterson's narrative of religious virtue and suffering which, to Winterson, euphemizes a state of being lost within an illusionary framework of normality. Because normality is defined as the "usual, typical, or expected" (*Compact Oxford English Dictionary for Students*), it portrays the 1960s framework of Winterson's childhood, and thus her desperate desire to escape the governing gendered demands of wife- and motherhood. As she is set on finding a new sense of home, she actively engages in a narrative of happiness – defined as a "feeling or showing [of] pleasure or contentment" and "willing to do something" (*Compact Oxford English Dictionary for Students*) – through rejecting normality and the feeling of being lost. The gap between the two adjectives marks an important narrative inconsistency between mother and daughter, which steers the whole of her memoir.

As her idea of home seems both interconnected with, and destabilized by, her filial experiences, the opposing narratives of normality and happiness describe why Winterson embarks on a quest narrative of being found and of finding home. Working from a state of loss, due to her adopted situation and the implications of her adoptive mother, Winterson's narrative seeks to find a new home – a different foundation to nourish an individual sense of selfhood, set free from the established feminine, or even religious, ideals. To do so, Winterson employs diverse literary models, particularly the religious narrative of her mother, the fairy tale, the quest narrative, and, eventually, the mother-daughter-narrative. Together, these models allow her to maneuver in the landscape of writing her own narrative of becoming. A landscape which also comprises a battle between the grand and idealized narrative and the small and authentic narrative.

The analysis at hand focuses on Winterson's own approach to the different narrative models, both in terms of how her memoir engages with, or derails from, them. It involves, moreover, the conflict between the mother and the daughter projects, with a particular emphasis on unpacking the ways in which Winterson problematizes how the choice to be normal is connected to telling a normal story, and how happiness enters the equation. The analyzation extends to how the individual narrative deals with the inevitable conflicts between assimilation and rebellion, idealization and authenticity, all of which are symbolized in the dichotomy between happiness and normality.

4.1 The religious narrative of Mrs. Winterson

> God is forgiveness – or so that particular story goes, but in our house God wad Old Testament and there was no forgiveness without a great deal of sacrifice. Mrs Winterson was unhappy and we had to be unhappy with her. She was waiting for the Apocalypse (9)

As Winterson's quest narrative is sparked by Mrs. Winterson's religious narrative, the beginning of the analysis must focus on how Mrs. Winterson's Pentecostal evangelical Christianity seems to affect the individual characters of mother and daughter. While Mrs. Winterson establishes her perceptions of life through daily readings of the Bible (4, 27), it becomes all the more clear that her preferred narrative is one of virtuous suffering, depicting life as "a Vale of Tears" (9) and a "pre-death experience" (9). She lives, therefore, in the belief that life on earth is all about daily devotion and sacrifice for the Kingdom of Jesus. Awaiting an eternity in heaven involves, according to Winterson, that Mrs. Winterson

> didn't love life. She didn't believe that anything would make life better. She once told me that the universe is a cosmic dustbin – and after I had thought about this for a bit, I asked her if the lid was on or off.
>
> 'On,' she said. 'Nobody escapes.' (22)

The fact that Mrs. Winterson perceives life as a "cosmic dustbin" (22) describes a reality of imprisonment and misery, where happiness is both sinful and dangerous. It is, on the contrary,

unhappiness, in Mrs. Winterson's opinion, that is the true emblem of a sacrificial and virtuous life (69, 96). Within her narrative, then, there is a clear link between unhappiness and normality, to which suffering is the true mark of a devoted Christian like herself. It is, in her argument, a reality that no one can, or should, escape. Regardless of her strict biblical conviction, however, one cannot fail to notice a hint of ambiguity. While desiring a similar lifestyle of subordination for her daughter, as the only way for her to be saved, there is also an indication of the opposite. Winterson makes this observation clear when she states that her mother "longed for me to be free and did everything she could to make sure it never happened" (88). The doubleness of imprisonment and freedom – evident in the dissection between happiness and normality – is thus particularly striking in Mrs. Winterson's approach, as it seems her normal lifestyle of holiness is ultimately unbearable.

From this point on can one begin to envision how the different narratives of mother and daughter challenge one another, in terms of their differences and similarities. While Winterson grows up with the "dark story of the Devil and the crib" (10), to which Mrs. Winterson declares the Devil led them to the wrong crib, it highlights a doubleness not only of Winterson's articulated failure to conform to the expected way of life. A failure that continues to disappoint her parents and, most importantly, God. It is, however, also the story of Mrs. Winterson who projects her own failures onto her imperfect daughter, as a way of dealing with her own internal misery. While being an imaginary figure throughout Winterson's childhood, the saint-like baby Paul functions as the perfect enactment of Mrs. Winterson's religious narrative. Though she finds out, much later, that baby Paul is, in fact, her biological older brother and the baby Mrs. Winterson thought she was adopting (10-11, 201-202), his imagined exemplary behavior is the emblem of constant comparison. In fact, it seems that baby Paul is not only Winterson's double, by way of representing the division between good and bad behavior, but also Mrs. Winterson's double. In Mrs. Winterson's narrative, baby Paul seems to fulfill all the biblical teachings to a point of perfection that neither Mrs. Winterson nor Winterson can ever uphold. This continued battle is further invoked as Winterson, age twenty-five, calls her mother from a phone box to talk about her newly published book *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), to which her mother says that "success is from the Devil, keeper of the wrong crib" (4). This incident proves, yet again, their battle between happiness and normality. Where Mrs. Winterson would have preferred Winterson to stay silent and fulfill the same act of surrender as herself, Winterson, on the other

hand, believes in "the power of stories because that way we speak in tongues. We are not silenced" (9). While their battle is the ultimate sign of separation and division – which compels Winterson to break with the silence of Mrs. Winterson's unhappiness (9) and insert, instead, her own story of selfhood – there is also an uncommunicated complexity within their relationship. While Winterson employs a language that seeks to communicate her own state of being, she is also adopting a Pentecostal Christian discourse in this particular quotation. By doing so, Winterson reveals her own ambiguous and conflicting strategy which desires to both understand and escape her mother at the same time.

Following this discrepancy and, therefore, trying to understand the reality of Mrs. Winterson's narrative, one must measure it against the patriarchal and industrialized context of the domestic ideology juxtaposed with Christian ideology. In sum, these forces seem to compel Mrs. Winterson to succumb to a lifestyle in captivity, believing that martyrdom and unhappiness is virtuous. The two ideologies intermingle at the point where Mrs. Winterson is trying to fulfill a sacrificial and angel-like maternal role that, since the Victorian period, has been synonymous with female salvation. Together, Christian theology and the idea of domestic virtue demand a fulfillment of the feminine roles connected to the sphere of home. Within an environment where the households were small in size to accommodate only the necessities and support the efficiency of the capitalist and industrialized society (18) – promoting man's labor through woman's sacrifice (44-64) – Winterson portrays Mrs. Winterson as someone who does not fit in with her everyday surroundings in a physical sense, saying that she was

> too big for her world, but she crouched gloomy and awkward under its low shelf, now and again exploding to her full three hundred feet, and towering over us. Then, because it was useless, redundant, only destructive, or so it seemed, she shrank back again, defeated (35)

The portrayal of Mrs. Winterson's explosive and monstrous anger deems her to be both unfeminine and unmotherly, wicked even. This is where Winterson's narrative becomes even more interesting, because it begins with employing, and then turns to deconstructing, the patriarchal binary perceptions and idealizations of women. It underlines that Mrs. Winterson's religious narrative is, in fact, falling apart. It cannot sustain her every aspect of life, and instead of helping her become the perfect, loving and calm mother she is supposed to be, it is, indeed, the

narrative that provokes her deepest frustrations. To this point, Jacqueline Rose's *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (2018) and Roberta Garrett's *Writing the Modern Family* (2021) communicate a unison emphasis on portrayals of aggression and cruelty being the destructive side-effects of the impossible idealizations of women and motherhood. In fact, Rose even goes as far as to claim that "the acuity and rage of mothers somehow continue to be one of the best-kept secrets of our times" (18).

This reality becomes clear as Winterson portrays an incident where she, after years of living away from Accrington, comes back to visit. Before knocking on the door that has always been locked, she stops and studies her mother through the window; "there was a barrier between us, transparent but real – but it says in the Bible, doesn't it, that we see through a glass darkly?" (99). In the quotation, Winterson's gaze of her mother, highlighted by the image of a window, represents the prevalent division of remoteness and closeness in their compound relationship. This is, moreover, evocative of their continued difficulties in seeing each other clearly. With the Biblical parallel to 1. Corinthians 13.12, St. Paul speaks of the distinct differences between humanity's time on earth compared to the eternity in heaven. On earth people perceive as though through a dark glass, that is, with a limited scope. After the resurrection, however, people of faith will be able to see God face to face and be judged by more than their appearances. The Lord, unlike the world, sees the inner core, which signals an immense form of freedom that is lacking in this relationship between mother and daughter, like in the world at large. This is signaled in the formulation "now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known" (*King James Bible*, 1. Cor.13.12). The vision that humanity has on the world – like Winterson has on her mother and vice versa – is imperfect and flawed. Though she can see her mother face to face, it is as though they are looking through a glass that, in turn, represents the hidden and uncommunicated ambivalence between them.

4.2 The fairy tale

> When I was upset I went roaming into the Pennines – all day on a jam sandwich and a bottle of milk. When I was locked outside, or the other favourite, locked in the coal-hole, I made up stories and forgot about the cold and the dark. I know these are ways of

> surviving, but maybe a refusal, any refusal, to be broken lets in enough light and air to keep believing in the world – the dream of escape. (21)

Because the genre of fairy tale is remarkable in connecting ancient mythical elements with present realities, the succeeding pages pay particular attention to how the genre is essential to Winterson's project, and therefore also of creating a framework of her own existence. The duplicity of the genre itself exposes how Winterson is both confirming and re-establishing various ideas of society, while also pushing its limits to tell a radically different and transgressive storyline. Since the genre is one that Winterson has encountered as a child, it helps her to communicate both her lost state and her desires to be found. Its particular capacity for seduction and imagination explains why she is engaging with such fairy stories – through them, she comes to believe that there is a world beyond the experienced one and creatures beyond what is seen, so that she, too, can dream of escaping her destructive reality for her own happily ever after.

To begin with, Winterson models the double-dealing of the fairy tale as a metaphor for the imprisoning and liberating aspects of life at large, symbolic in the dichotomy of happiness and normality. In line with this, Winterson exposes a genre that is both a social manipulation, that reproduces ideas to the point of naturalization, and a discourse of the forbidden, neglected and previously unspoken – all of which are elements that are employed by Winterson to facilitate a fluid discourse of life itself. Her story engages ancient and stereotyped myths to reveal how the societal frameworks pressure her to conform to an idea of happiness reached through a quest for normality, namely by marrying the prince and living happily ever after. However, it is also a story that reveals the imprisoning effect of such expectations, and therefore one that provokes, questions and challenges the established. In many ways how she relates to fairy tales is reminiscent to Marina Warner's discussion in *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995), saying that

> [t]he enchantments also universalize the narrative setting, encipher concerns, beliefs and desires in brilliant, seductive images that are themselves a form of camouflage, making it possible to utter harsh truths, to say what you dare (XVII)

While the mythology of fairy tales can either entrench social myths and prejudices, or open up and be emancipatory, Winterson seems to employ the naturalized and stereotyped fairy depictions

as a disguise to communicate the cruel realities of her own existence. By actively engaging in the traditional discourse of fairy tales – positioning herself as the suffering hero of her own narrative (6) – Winterson moves beyond its limitations and highlights, instead, the thematic duality of lost and found. This involves both her incarceration and her dream of liberation in alternative worlds of magic and enchantment – places elsewhere where happiness is defined by herself. By doing so, she underscores how women, throughout time, have employed the traits of the traditionally female genre as form of camouflage (Warner XVII) of the silenced and cruel truths of society.

To understand Winterson's narrative, and specifically how she engages with various mythical images, then, the story of Snow White can be used as a paradigm of the analysis. First, in terms of the mythical portrayal of the wicked stepmother, since Winterson's narrative is prompted by the massiveness of Mrs. Winterson – her seemingly abnormal behavior and size, living for unhappiness and normality under the divine law. The dichotomy of good and evil signifies a foundational distinction between the two characters of mother and daughter that is quite remarkable in representing two different generations of women, where the one is able to overcome the demands of society while the other is not. It appears, therefore, that how they relate to the concepts of happiness and normality expose radically different quest narratives to which each of them tells themselves and follows. While Mrs. Winterson is doing her utmost to fulfill the domestic ideal of housewife, motherhood and virtuous Christianity, Winterson is searching for something beyond what she perceives as a limited life as she writes:

> The pursuit of happiness is more elusive; it is life-long, and it is not goal-centered.
>
> What you are pursuing is meaning – a meaningful life. There's the *hap* – the fate, the draw that is yours, and it isn't fixed, but changing the course of the stream, or dealing new cards, whatever metaphor you want to use – that's going to take a lot of energy. There are times when it will go so wrong that you will barely be alive, and times when you realise that being barely alive, on your own terms, is better than living a bloated half-life on someone else's terms.
>
> The pursuit isn't all or nothing – it's all AND nothing. Like all Quest Stories (24-25)

In Winterson's world, like in the world at large, there seems to be a conflict between the notion of happiness and the one of normality. Her storytelling is, subsequently, one that searches for an

individual meaning in life, even though it goes against what society, and even her mother, expects in terms of normal conduct. For instance, when she falls in love with a girl and cannot compel herself to apologize simply because it is the appropriate thing to do in the eyes of the church and society (78-84). Her love for Helen is beyond her monogamous and heterosexual destiny because it gives her another sense of purpose. Her story is, therefore, the ultimate portrayal of being willing to pay the price in search of individual meaning and purpose. She thus extraordinarily recaptures the discrepancy between mother and daughter, saying that

> [h]appiness was still on the other side of a glass door, but at least she could see it through the glass, like a prisoner being visited by a longed-for loved one.
>
> She wanted to be happy, and I think that is a lot of why I enraged her as much as I did. I just couldn't live in the cosmic dustbin with the lid on (50)

To understand Mrs. Winterson' perception of life, one must understand that she is coming from a generation of women who hold on to the domestic ideal of wife- and motherhood almost so that it becomes a religious manifestation. To her, happiness is the ultimate deviation from the norm of religious female conduct. Her logic evokes the critical theory developed by Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970), which exposes the patriarchal implications on female living. Greer asserts, therefore, that security "is when everything is settled, when nothing can happen to you; security is the denial of life" (268). Even though Mrs. Winterson is secretly dreaming of happiness, as Winterson points out in the quotation, the false patriarchal perception of security is so powerfully internalized that it compels her continued subordination. The distance between Mrs. Winterson and Winterson revolves upon this matter of security, whereas Winterson refuses to live a life of pretend, sacrificing who she truly is in favor of a false and apathetic version. She prefers, instead, the transgressive narrative and thereby breaks with the prevalent domestic and gendered expectations of both her mother and society at large.

The symbolism of normality and happiness, equalizing lost and found, is, furthermore, underscored by the mirror of comparison and the glass coffin of Snow White, by way of describing a simultaneous discordancy and resemblance between the mother and daughter. Though Winterson's story is, ultimately, one where she is doing all in her power to separate herself from Mrs. Winterson, posing her as the ultimate wickedness of her own life, it is also a

story where Winterson can see her own reflection in the image of her adoptive mother. This resembles the theoretical evidence of Luce Irigaray's *And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other* (1981), where she exposes mothers and daughters as "living mirrors" (61) that endlessly stay different and the same, by saying

> [y]ou look at yourself in the mirror. And already you see your own mother there. And soon your daughter, a mother. Between the two, what are you? What space is yours alone? In what frame must you contain yourself? And how to let your face show through, beyond all the masks? (63)

The complexity of Irigaray's discourse highlights the ambiguity of being a daughter looking in the mirror and seeing the reflection of her mother which, in turn, poses questions of both selfhood and individuality. While being separate human beings who are continuously also the same, one might wonder what space is left for the individual narrative? It is thus the, quite literal, references to imprisonment within Snow White's glass coffin that prompt the traditional fairy notion of houses and rooms within houses being elements of captivity. For instance, in Bluebeard's Castle with a room in the attic for his dead wives, or the gingerbread house of Hansel and Gretel, or the grandmother's house in Little Red Riding Hood. With Winterson's repeated employment of the metaphors of glass and window, then, it seems to emphasize that the house, like the glass coffin itself, depicts of the incarcerated physical space of both mother and daughter. While the house represents the mother's religious narrative, promoting a domestic and heterosexual lifestyle of suffering within its four walls, it also symbolizes the devastating dissection between mother and daughter in terms of happiness and normality. While the house is Mrs. Winterson's domain, it is also the space she fills with the vastness of her uncontrollable outburst and religious convictions, as ways of dealing with her own sense of being lost (35). To Winterson, the dissection between the family house and the Lancashire Pennines symbolizes not only the gap between the narratives of mother and daughter, but even more than this, her internal division between imprisonment within the confinements of normality and escapism to alternative realities of happiness. Even though Winterson is depicting mother and daughter as complete opposites, it is clear that both are ambiguously experiencing and dealing with the established domestic narrative of being.

The same ambiguity is evident in Mrs. Winterson's storytelling – her efforts to dominate language and create a narrative of their similar fate – attempting to have Jeanette internalize a worldview of her own loss and displacement. Through her daily readings of the Bible (4, 27) and her continual stories of Jeanette's biological mother being a destructed woman (220), it seems that her hope is for Jeanette to adopt the biblical teachings and succumb to a similar lifestyle of domestic devotion and suffering that ultimately would limit Jeanette's prospects and perspectives to that of her own. This resembles the mirror in the story of Snow White, which tells the Queen another narrative than the one she desires. Posing as a clear narrative threat, then, the Queen begins pursuing to kill Snow White so that she can change the narrative and remain the most beautiful one. Unlike the Queen who wishes Snow White dead, Mrs. Winterson wants to save Winterson from eternal damnation by forcing her to succumb to the monogamist and heterosexual path of her own conviction. This desire – being synonymous with a lifestyle of captivity within the house – is, however, a complete bereavement of Winterson's individual self and therefore something she must escape to live. While Mrs. Winterson's lost and imprisoned life within the domestic sphere of the house is, to her, a patriarchal fulfillment of security, it is also a narrative threat of normality, and therefore of death, to Winterson. This is, at the end of the day, the ambiguity and the double-bind of the two opposing narratives of mother and daughter. Where normality is the physical manifestation of a life within the house and therefore of a seemingly secure incarceration, it ultimately limits the female self to that of being completely lost and frustrated, dead even. Happiness, on the other hand, is symbolic of a dream of elsewhere without the strict domestic and gendered rules of living. In Mrs. Winterson's conviction, then, the only way to eternity in heaven in through normality, to which happiness is its greatest threat. It seems, therefore, as if she wants neither and both for her daughter. This idea fulfills Hirsch's conclusion saying that by

> [a]dopting the language of feminist object-relations theory, I saw female development as the gradual and not always successful process of identification with and differentiation from a mother who remained an important inner object for the maturing daughter, a process shaped by the fluctuations of symbiosis and separation (20)

The conflicting emotions of imprisonment and escape, symbolic of the division between happiness and normality, describe the shared state of being lost and longing to be found. It underscores, moreover, what Hirsch identifies as association and intimacy juxtaposed with discrepancy and isolation within the mother-daughter-relationship. Winterson's process of becoming, then, portrays the two as complete opposite reflections in the mirror to eventually move beyond the dichotomy and find resemblance. Her portrayal of the two allows her to see how both are, indeed, lost and displaced souls that, in different ways, are searching to be found and of finding home (23).

4.3 The quest narrative

Winterson's narrative model ultimately takes the form of a quest that goes back through her filial understandings and contemplations to find her own way of being in the world. While the fairy tale is a childhood narrative, creating belief systems that children hold on to, the quest narrative is better equipped to be employed in all stages of life to figure out how to move forward. This involves, for Winterson, a pursuit of happiness, in the sense of a meaningful living, that is not all or nothing, but "all AND nothing. Like all Quest Stories" (25). Winterson twists the traditional quest narrative, which is the skeleton of the fairy tale, by derailing completely from its conventional linearity. When employed by Winterson, who is both a homosexual and all-too focused on her abusive adoptive mother, to which it is clear can never fulfill her gendered destiny, the quest must be for something radically different. Prompted by the desire to find her own Holy Grail, she finds that "being barely alive, on your own terms, is better than living a bloated half-life on someone else's terms" (25).

Her upstream journey follows the traditional circularity of the quest narrative, nonetheless, beginning and ending with the home. Like so many other quest stories, Winterson's is also ignited by a point of darkness:

> All those hours spent sitting on my bum on the doorstep have given me a feeling for liminal space. I love the way cats like to be half in half out, the wild and the tame, and I too am the wild and the tame. I am domestic, but only if the door is open.

> And I guess that is the key – no one is ever going to lock me in or lock me out again. My door is open and I am the one who opens it (60)

Like Snow White who is forced to escape to the cottage in the forest, Winterson is forced to transport herself, through her imagination, to alternative worlds in order to survive the destructiveness of her reality. Comparable with the forest – representing a space where no rules apply, a position of the dark unconscious where anything can happen, according to *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (1996) – the doorstep and the coalhole represent liminal spaces to which conflicting sides co-exist in an in-between relationship. The fact that Winterson is locked out compels the duplicious notion of both confinement and escapism. On the one hand, she is held captive within the confinements of the house to which her mother's narrative governs. However, she is simultaneously also excluded from the house, experiencing a sort of homelessness out on the doorstep. This idea is further underscored by the fact that Winterson, throughout her childhood, never had a key to her own house (125) to which she could come and go as she pleased. Winterson is thus both held captive within, and excluded without, the house, representative of just these liminal spaces. As Winterson makes the dissection between these two sides clear within her writing, she is also exposing a third option, namely the potential of leaving. The doorstep is, subsequently, a space of simultaneous confinement and exclusion, as well as a space that mobilizes agency.

This agency manifests in the different narrative projects of mother and daughter, whereas Winterson, unlike her mother, powerfully decides to come clean about her true love for Janey (112-114). Instead of pretending, hiding and keeping secrets, and instead of nourishing a second self, she thus breaks her mother's heart, whose realizing that her daughter is "back with the Devil" (113) and will therefore never fulfill her religious and domestic expectations:

> 'Jeanette, will you tell me why?'
>
> 'What why?'
>
> 'You know what why …'
>
> But I don't know what why… what I am… why I don't please her. What she wants. Why I am not what she wants. What I want or why. But there is something I know: 'When I am with her I am happy. Just happy.'

She nodded. She seemed to understand and I thought, really, for that second, that she would change her mind, that we would talk, that we would be on the same side of the glass wall. I waited.

She said, 'Why be happy when you could be normal?' (113-14)

The liminal spaces of Winterson's existence compel her to find the tough language to describe her authentic life – both the conflicting expectations and demands of the idealized feminine narrative, characterized through the notion of imprisonment and normality, and her deep internal hunger for escapism, happiness and a truthful narrative. Various narrative models are therefore essential in Winterson's attempt to find "a language powerful enough to say how it is. It isn't a hiding place. It is a finding place (40). The fact that she, throughout her quest, becomes better equipped to articulate her liminal and ambiguous reality is, in sum, an important step towards her own Holy Grail.

Years later, when Winterson comes to visit, she is surprised at her mother's response to her presence; "I rang the bell. She half turned. 'Come in, come in, the door's open.'" (99). With this remark, it is clear that something has, in fact, changed. Throughout her journey, Winterson comes out liberated, but even more than this, with a greater potential of actually seeing her mother. Her own ambiguity and sense of imprisonment are thus reflected in her mother. She discovers that both are, indeed, lost and wandering souls, desperately longing for something:

She had lost something. It was a big something. She had lost/was losing life.

We were matched in our lost and losing. I had lost the warm safe place, however chaotic, of the first person I loved. I had lost my name and my identity. Adopted children are dislodged. My mother felt that the whole of life was a grand dislodgement. We both wanted to go Home (23)

As indicated in the quotation, amidst Winterson's own experiences of being lost and longing to be found, she recognizes a reflection of Mrs. Winterson. The Pentecostal evangelical Christianity, which is supposed to liberate Mrs. Winterson is, in fact, the source of her deepest senses of confinement and frustration. Home with or without a capital letter, indicates this gap between ideals and reality evident in the lives of both. While the physical home in Accrington is an

incarceration – a domestic symbol of the religious and domestic duties of wife- and motherhood – Home, on the other hand, focuses upon something beyond this neglected, suppressed and limiting position. On this point, both are portrayed as being too big for life with their likewise monstrous anger and frustration. The fact that both are longing for Home relates, therefore, to their inabilities to assimilate to the ideal of female conduct (21, 24-25, 62, 105-110). Instead, both seem to wish for something meaningful – a finding place where purpose is set free from their domestic limitations. While Mrs. Winterson, then, longs for the most meaningful finding place in terms of eternal liberation in heaven, Winterson, on the other hand, longs for happiness by finding her own sense of meaning. The ambiguity within their relationship reflects, moreover, this doubleness of imprisonment and freedom – of Mrs. Winterson wishing for Winterson to both achieve some sort of independence, by becoming a missionary living outside of Accrington (88), while also secretly hoping that she will remain within the confinements of the house, just like herself:

> I don't know why she hated Accrington as much as she did but she did, and yet she didn't leave. When I left it was as though I had relieved her and betrayed her all at once. She longed for me to be free and did everything she could to make sure it never happened (88)

This doubleness is also described by Hirsch as "symbiosis and separation" (2), where, despite the huge conflict between then, both are constantly ransacking the house for the other: "[w]e circled each other, wary, abandoned, full of longing. We came close but not close enough and then we pushed each other away forever" (103). It is an equivocality of loss and longing to which Winterson becomes a physical embodiment of Mrs. Winterson's unspoken hunger for freedom. While Mrs. Winterson's narrative lacks language to expose her ambiguity, Winterson is, indeed, able to envision a liberated life beyond the house. To her, the domestic sphere of heterosexual marriage and motherhood is not all. Her journey of escapism is, thereby, enabling her to articulate the notions of security to be an unsatisfactory illusion, and therefore not an adequate finding place. This is, in fact, what Mrs. Winterson appears to both reject and internally awe; her daughter's determination, courage and willingness to make change possible.

4.4 The mother-daughter narrative

> When we leave the parental home, even now, we do much more than go out of the house with a suitcase.
>
> Our own front door can be a wonderful thing, or a sight we dread; rarely is it only a door.
>
> The crossing in and out, the different worlds, the significant spaces, are private coordinates that in my fiction I have tried to make paradigmatic (61)

In all quest narratives, the quester always returns home. In this case, however, finding home has changed, paving the way for a multifaceted analysis of the mother-daughter narrative altogether. Her journey first begins with her childhood home, being as far from a safe haven as could possibly be. With her early interest and embeddedness in literature, Winterson discovers not only narrative models to which she can follow, but more importantly, an increased strength to dare enter the imaginary cellar of her own life and expose her own darkness, destruction and unconsciousness (6-9). Here, the irrational paves the way for an expanded narrative that is unhindered by the rationality of civilization, or even of her mother's religion. It is thus precisely these neglected moments of solitude that enable her to go beyond the limitations of her existence, and dream about thresholds that she can cross and hearths that can bring her warmth (60-61). The unconscious space of the uncivilized, where possibly anything can happen, is therefore the space where Winterson begins the story of her own happily ever after.

Her journey leads her to acknowledge her lost state, but more than this, the space she is longing to find. Her quest includes both loss and love narratives that seem to be all about her mother – both the mother she lost and the mother she has not been able to find. Following Hirsch's analysis of the mother-daughter-relationship, it is only natural for the daughter's developing identity to desire a symbiotic union and bonding with the mother (130, 132). She is, in fact, the child's first touch and the first embodiment of home, so it is no wonder that Winterson's journey begins by endlessly searching for her adoptive mother, and then for her biological mother, as means of finding herself. Following this, she writes

> I have written love narratives and loss narratives – stories of longing and belonging. It all seems so obvious now – the Wintersonic obsessions of love, loss and longing. It is my mother. It is my mother. It is my mother.
>
> But mother is our first love affair. Her arms. Her eyes. Her breast. Her body.
>
> And if we hate her later, we take that rage with us into other lovers. And if we lose her, where do we find her again? (160)

It is precisely this longing to belong that compels her to search for her biological mother, and while doing so, a state of utter chaos strikes again as her girlfriend Deborah decides to leave her, only to detonate the "lost loss" (161) of Winterson's life yet again. It ignites the craziness of the loss that has determined the core of Winterson's identity throughout her life – an identity of loss that is continuously wounding. It takes her back to the abandoned state where her biological mother left her, to the cold nights on the doorstep, to the points where only books could save her – "[a]t my most precarious I balanced on a book, and the books rafted me over the tides of feelings that left me soaked and shattered" (164). Yet again, space is paradigmatic of her story, since the loss gives her a sense of herself as a "haunted house" (165). The imagery symbolizes how the destructiveness of her past keeps haunting her, and how the wound of past and present keeps destabilizing all foundational elements of identity. There is no firm ground to which she can rest upon because it keeps being torn away from her. She knows nothing about her origins, her mother left her and this identity of loss is like a ghost that keeps traumatizing her. From her state of monstrous destruction, she realizes that

> I had been twice born already, hadn't I – my lost mother and my new mother, Mrs Winterson – that double identity, itself a kind of schizophrenia – my sense of myself as being a girl who's a boy who's a boy who's a girl. A doubleness at the heart of things.
>
> But then I understood something. I understood twice born was not just about being alive, but about choosing life. Choosing to be alive and consciously committing to life, in all its exuberant chaos – and its pain (168-169)

Her darkness allows her to, yet again, uncover the ambiguous doubleness of life – the chaos and the stillness, the love and the hate, and the continuous juxtaposition and fluidity amongst them.

The fact that Winterson, throughout her journey, acknowledges her own double-identity of constant division compels her to converse with her own internal monster, as a way of learning to love (177). Winterson's story is the ultimate portrayal of how love hardened into loss (211), but throughout her destruction she comes to discover a love that is changing (186). Since her ideas of love and loss are permeated by her notions and experiences of motherhood, it seems only natural that it takes her on a quest for her biological mother, believing that finding her lost love will be like finding home. This is perhaps why their eventual reunion is so fundamentally different from what Winterson dreams of. Throughout their meeting she keeps comparing her biological mother, Ann, to Mrs. Winterson, and also to herself. How are they similar and how are they different? What would life be like in this household compared to the one in Accrington? Would she have felt accepted? She thinks so. Would she be educated? Probably not (214-19). In short, as Ann stands in front of her, reality simply falls short of her magnetized dream. Though Ann is her biological mother – the one who held Winterson inside herself for nine months and the one who suffered while giving birth to her – she is also a complete stranger (226-29). They share blood and DNA, arguably the closest thing any human being can share with one another, but despite this intimacy there is great distance between them. Adoption and reunion do not follow the romantic TV depictions. For Winterson, there is no biological connection. She cannot fulfill the expectations of a prodigal daughter returning home (Luke 15.11-32), just like she could not fulfill the Biblical destiny that Mrs. Winterson had planned for her. Throughout her journey that goes back through her mothers, Winterson finds that her idea of motherhood is an idealization to which Mrs. Winterson and Ann can never fulfill.

This realization compels Winterson to discover an even greater complexity in her relationship with Mrs. Winterson. The destruction that compels her own quest narrative is, indeed, where she ends up finding not only herself, but also her mother. In finding the doubleness of life and the ambiguity of self, she also finds the reflection of her mother's. Simone de Beauvoir's remarks in *The Second Sex* (1949) that the mother projects on to her daughter an ambiguity of the self as well as a double-jealousy "of the world that takes her daughter, and of her daughter who, in conquering part of the world, robs her of it" (577). It is, in sum, this fluidness between individuality and interconnectedness that is at the core of the mother-daughter-relationship. Winterson's story of becoming is, therefore, discovering a greater story of mother-

daughter ambiguity which has, until now, been silent and undiscovered. Even the symbolism of childbirth exposes a similar narrative:

> Birthing is a wound all of its own. The monthly bleeding used to have a magical significance. The baby's rupture into the world tears the mother's body and leaves the child's tiny skull still soft and open. The child is a healing and a cut. The place of lost and found.
>
> It's snowing. Here I am. Lost and Found (222)

Ambiguity – the fact that nothing is either or – is where Winterson is found. Home is, therefore, the narrative that is able to expose such fluid truths. For Winterson to word this ambiguous reality is, indeed, the great unwritten story that Rich refers to as the "cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused" (225), because it is a narrative with no other language than taboo, frustration and uncertainty. Her quest for her mother, then, is truly a quest about finding her first Home, which was an idealization of her biological mother but is not anymore. Now, Home, like her idea of motherhood, rests on a completely different foundation. It is no longer ideological, but personal, because she is in possession of language to make her own definitions. Her story proves that there will always be a tension between intimacy and distance between mothers and daughters, just like there will always be an internal tension within the self that amounts the compound and fluid that is never accurate and stable. The wound, then, is something that the mother will always share with her child, and it will always be something that forever connects them, but also something that truly separates them (222-23). Childbirth is, eventually, a wound in the mother's body, a wound that marks the beginning of a new and independent life, but also one that marks an interconnectedness that can never be broken, irrelevant of the material distance that might arise. Like any mirror, Winterson and her two mothers share a wound story that truly connects them, though there is also great physical and emotional distance between them.

> Love. The difficult word. Where everything starts, where we always return. Love. Love's lack. The possibility of love (230)

This is, at the end of the day, a realization that moves beyond the binaries of either or, where love within the various concepts of mother- and daughterhood no longer has to fulfill a romanticized falseness. Love itself is therefore symbolic of Winterson's quest, beginning with the lack of love at home and returning with the possibility of love at Home. Her experiences of love go from being a bomb site between herself and Mrs. Winterson (112) to letting in enough glimpses of light to have her discover the monstrous aspects of Mrs. Winterson that she used to hate, but now truly treasures – "[s]he was a monster but she was my monster" (229). Like mirrors, mothers and daughters are reflections of something similar while also something distant and distinct, and it is precisely this ambiguous density that Winterson comes to acknowledge through her journey of becoming. Her discovery, then, revolves upon the necessity of storytelling altogether. Writing from the wisdom of hindsight – working through the trauma of her past – Winterson exposes how narrative, indeed, comes to be her Home. Her quest is not only for her mothers, even though it goes through them, but truly for a narrative that adequately projects the intricacies of life – the monstrous emotions, the split self and all the uncertainties. Throughout her journey of storytelling she finds herself within the narrative that, to her, is Home.

Chapter 5: Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living* (2018)

While critics claim Deborah Levy's memoir is a feminist manifesto, with clear intertextual references to Simone de Beauvoir, it holds the powerful potential of exposing the cultural policing to which women who rebel against the patriarchal narrative are forced to experience. Indeed, as Kathryn Hughes remarks in her article "The Cost of Living by Deborah Levy Review – A Memoir and Feminist Manifesto" (2018) in The Guardian, Levy engages not only with de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), but even more than this with "the philosopher's personal struggles to reconcile sexual love with intellectual liberty". Hence, Hughes continues, Levy manages to create a "work that is not so much a memoir as an eloquent manifesto for what Levy calls "a new way of living" in the post-familial world". Levy's candor of "the liminal, the domestic, the non-event, and what it is to be a woman", Kate Kellaway writes in her review article "The Cost of Living by Deborah Levy Review – Short, Sensual, Embattled Memoir" (2018) in The Guardian, compels Kellaway to "always feel, reading Levy (…), that she is a writer with nothing much – and with everything – to say". Kellaway even claims that Levy's memoir is "a little book about a big subject", in the sense that it not only breaks with the patriarchal narrative to find a new way of living, but it also exposes the impossible balance between rage and empathy. It is a major subject, because it communicates the ambiguous core of the maternal – a juxtaposition of the idealized and the repressed. It is her potential of "purposefully discollecting" her thoughts that Dwight Garner's article "Stepping Out of Character and Starting a New Story" (2018) in The New York Times finds particularly rewarding. Levy is thus celebrated by reviewers for her capability of altering the established female narrative and filling it, instead, with a rejection to pin anything down. It is a freer narrative, with the full specter of maternal and female complexity, ambiguity and diversity.

Levy's narrative project manifests the difficult initiative to change the course of life, in a way that exposes the implications of breaking with the patriarchal narrative on both a societal and a personal level. Through her symbolic representation of a chaotic tempest, Levy reveals her ambiguous approach to both disruption and deconstruction on the one hand, and order and unity on the other. The tempest is thereby synonymous with the necessary relocation and disruption of the imprisoning patriarchal storyline. In breaking away from her marriage, Levy begins to tear apart the established notions of selfhood, gender roles, marriage, femininity and masculinity to

impose another story of being. She is, in other words, deconstructing the very elements that have imprisoned her for the past fifty years, in an important project of gathering and writing a freer narrative.

Drawing on the already mentioned dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, Levy approaches a societal structure that is both unequal and abusive, highlighting her overall theme which is, as the title goes, the cost of living. To understand the remarkable extents of this title, one must first analyze the word "cost" and its connotations to "capitalism", before turning to its implications on the word "living". While the capitalist connection exposes the unjust reality of the housewife, whose ultimate cost of continued subordination and silence contributes to the patriarchal and capitalist expansion of the sphere of man. The word "living", however, compels an important emphasis on the female condition that consists of either existing or of living – of barely surviving within the imprisoned structures of society or making a choice to live a freer life. The same way the housewife only exists within the sphere of the home, Levy actively chooses to live another sort of life and must, therefore, pay a high cost for her own liberation. This doubleness is supported by theorists such as Friedrich Engels (1884), Adrienne Rich (1976) and James Kilroy (2007), who claim that the domestic ideology of the nineteenth century established and supports the expansion of capitalism. Even more than this, a system that benefits from the familial structures of the patriarchal family, and therefore of the subordination of women. It is, after all, the separate spheres ideology – promoting gender specific notions of masculinity and femininity – that seems to enable and support a society based on profit and inequality in a way that contributes to the high costs of female living. Either conforming or rebelling to the patriarchal narrative, demands a much higher cost for a woman compared to that of a man. The fact that Levy claims to be writing a living autobiography with the title "The Cost of Living" is the utmost symbol of her present tense costs of transgression.

How Levy, then, relates to the cost of living repeats the internal split between imprisonment and freedom, represented through the repetitive employment of the color yellow. Its symbolic potential is thus hinted towards both by the cover of the book itself, but also through Levy's naming of chapter 4 "*Living in Yellow"* (19). It is, indeed, within this chapter that she decides to paint her bedroom walls yellow, only to find that the color drives her mad (36-37). It is, moreover, also within this chapter that her "male best friend", about to get married for the third time, wants to wear "a bright yellow jacket" (62) that Levy tries to steer him away from.

The ambiguity of the color itself is also exposed through the extended description in *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols* (1996), where it inhabits both a divine essence that pierces everything and brings eternal life and living to the world (1137), while also exposing the opposite of life, namely of giving "advance notice of Autumn, when Earth is stripped bare and loses its cloak of greenery" (1138). While representing life, then, yellow also denotes "decrepitude, old age and the approach of death" (1138). Levy's employment of yellow marks a doubleness of life and death found in her ambiguous and chaotic existence, where a part of her battle consists of being both devastated and liberated at the same time. She is both grieving the loss of the ideal that she tried to fulfill, in terms of wife- and motherhood, while also experiencing the massive costs of her liberation. The doubleness underscores, moreover, Levy's latent conflict in dealing with emotions of imprisonment within the patriarchal constructions on the one hand, and the massive costs of freedom on the other. The gap between these opposing notions of imprisonment and freedom gains a heightened awareness seen in relation to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's well-known short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). In this chapter, the short story will be employed as a point of departure in analyzing how Levy represents and deals with the tempest of her life, particularly how it manifests being torn between the imprisoned state of the idealized narrative and the liberated reality of her authentic narrative.

It is also of interest to analyze how the battle of Levy's inside and outside worlds comes to affect her evolving sense of selfhood – particularly in terms of embracing and telling a more complex story of being that does not, necessarily, follow the established – and how it relates, moreover, to the projects in Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011) and Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011). While the three memoirs all contribute to a similar narrative project of articulating the unspoken female ambiguities, the analysis focuses on how each employs language to represent an evolving sense of female selfhood. The loss that the three authors experience in various ways serves, in turn, as the greatest emblem of both the devastating implications of the patriarchal narrative and the subsequent challenges in formulating a transgressive narrative.

With the emotional dissection between imprisonment and freedom steering the analysis of Levy's memoir, it is the feminist theory emphasized in particular by Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics* (2002) that enables such investigations. Both by complicating the patriarchal environment and its influences on language, and by demanding deconstruction and complexity to

overcome the inequality and segregation of the contemporary and neoliberal context. Levy thus contributes to the shared feminist project as both Didion and Winterson, in the sense that all of them problematize the established Law of the Father to search for and employ language that moves beyond the established polarizations and dichotomies. The following investigation, then, begins by focusing on how Levy demands authority over her own text the same way she demands authority over her own life, creating a narrative that breaks with the traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity, before turning to the tempest and the major costs of living in yellow.

5.1 Writing the masculine versus the feminine narrative

When Levy's memoir opens with an observation of a young woman conversing with an older man, it becomes clear that Levy is, in fact, seeking her own unity in the image of this particular character. Though the young woman first sits alone reading a book, she eventually takes up an invitation to join the man who is much older than herself (1-6). While their initial conversation fulfills the typical scenario of the gendered binary – where the man talks and she listens – she does, in fact, interrupt him (1). This is not only a breach of the traditional gender roles, but also an insistence on the audience and space she is usually deprived of. While telling the story of a scuba-diving experience in Mexico – "how she had been underwater for twenty minutes and then surfaced to find there was a storm" (2) – she is, in fact, disclosing an undisclosed, neglected and previously silenced hurt at the person in the boat who did not come to save her (2). While glancing "at him to check if he knew that she was talking about the storm in a disguised way" (2), she finds that he neither understands nor cares, as he responds "'[y]ou talk a lot don't you'" (2). With this depiction of masculinity and femininity, Levy relates to the greater silenced narrative of women that can only be communicated in hidden symbolic images.

This compound division between man and woman compels a further analysis of the patriarchal narrative altogether. How the female character relates to the dissection between the feminine duties of silence, subordination and calmness, opposed with the masculine traits of agency, superiority and power, manifests not only her beginning attempt to be silent, prior to her interruption, but also her difficulties in conveying to the man

> a man much older than she was, that the world was her world too. He had taken a risk when he invited her to join him at his table. After all, she came with a whole life and libido of her own. It had not occurred to him that she might not consider herself to be the *minor character* and him the major character. In this sense, she had unsettled a boundary, collapsed a social hierarchy, broken with the usual rituals (2-3)

Beneath the traditional gendered dichotomy of agency and passivity lays the unequal suppression and silence of the female story which, in Levy's observation, the young woman is trying to break free from. Levy thus notes that "[w]hen she smiled, I knew she was making a bid to be someone braver than she felt" (3). Like the young woman, Levy is also making a bid to be braver and freer, though the cost of doing so is extremely high. Even naming the man "the Big Silver" (4) after the diving boat, falls short of its attempt at critique. The cost of disclosing the deeper story is too high (4). While observing them, Levy is reminded of an

> Oscar Wilde quote 'Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.' That was not quite true for her. She had to make a bid for a self that possessed freedoms the Big Silver took for granted – after all he had no trouble being himself.
>
> *You talk a lot don't you?*
>
> To speak our life as we feel it is a freedom we mostly choose not to take, but it seemed to me that the words she wanted to say were lively inside her, mysterious to herself as much as anyone else (5-6)

Making this intricate point at the beginning of her memoir exposes many of the ideas that the memoir itself deals with – both the difficulties of the established and idealized gender roles, and the even greater complications in fulfilling them, creating a division of self. But also, how the conflict between the outside and the inside world describes the limitless consequences that follow an attempt to create a freer narrative. All of which are evident in the distinction between major and minor characters, representative of gendered dichotomy between the older man, responsible for most of the action, and the young woman, positioned in the margins. Why this is such an established entity one might wonder, and this is exactly what Levy is questioning through her opening analysis of the two.

As already stated, in the female character Levy finds a doubling of herself – of her own desires to be heard, acknowledged and valued for her individual story and being, opposed with the difficulties of the traditional gender roles, challenging her chances of both agency and subjectivity. The young woman gives up on disclosing to the older man the "undisclosed hurt" (2), or even the truth of her being, the same way Levy battles with a similar dissection between the ideas of risk, danger and the potential of change on the one hand, and security and comfort on the other. This is, moreover, reminiscent of Germaine Greer's analysis of security in *The Female Eunuch* (1970), being a false ideal settled only to secretly force women to conform to the patriarchal narrative of femininity. Greer even proclaims that "[t]here is no such thing as security. There never has been" (267). In fact, the whole notion of security is based on a disguised patriarchal desire to have men and women conform and assimilate to the gendered demands of the domestic ideology so to promote the capitalist expansion. All the while it seems as if "[s]ecurity is when everything is settled, when nothing can happen to you" (268), it is, in reality, "the denial of life" (268). The young woman and Levy share a powerful internal desire to be rebellious, as well as a great fear of stepping out of the seemingly secure narrative. Though the patriarchal story is disguised as both safe and comfortable this is, ultimately, death.

While the "Big Silver was the wrong reader for her story, (…) I thought on balance that she might be the right reader for mine" (6) Levy writes, demanding a reader who is, like herself, capable of reading between the lines, challenge the established ideas of security and embrace both a liminal and fluid being. There is, after all, a similarity between the two narratives in the way both withhold the truth while also exposing it in broad daylight. The employment of symbolic images becomes itself a symbol of the imprisoned female condition of writing. This imprisoned female narrative can, in fact, be traced as far back as we have instances of female storytelling. This includes the oral tradition of fairy tales which, according to Marina Warner's *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1995), gives "women a place from which to speak" (XXI). Through her close analysis of the tellers of these fairy stories, Warner concludes that fairy tales

> offer a way of putting questions, of testing the structure as well as guaranteeing its safety, of thinking up alternatives as well as living daily reality in an examined way (411)

The doubleness of the genre reveals, therefore, how female storytellers, from an early point in history, employed mythical images and characters to speak their unspeakable realities of neglect and imprisonment. The fairy portrayals of wicked stepmothers, for instance, provided women with the secure distance necessary to utter their own frustrations of the patriarchal environment. The same is true of the nineteenth century female authors who, according to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's analysis in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1980), portrayed their anger in a concealed manner through the depiction of monsters. The female condition is, after all, a reality that has been too difficult to fully communicate. While there, throughout history, has been no language that adequately captures these female troubles, various portrayals of madness and wickedness gave women a chance to speak, though in a concealed manner. The narratives of both the young woman and Levy expose, therefore, the great patriarchal consequences of concealing one's inner issues juxtaposed with the desire to be rebellious and speak the truth plain and simple. They seem to, subsequently, share an internal hope that the right reader will be able to analyze the symbolic tempest that is, in fact, the female condition of living itself. It is thus the in-between narrative that women, like Levy, are left with. As Levy makes a shift in her writing, breaking away from being an omniscient third person narrator in the first chapter to employing a personal narration with the personal pronoun 'I' in the following chapters, it marks a great shift in being which is enabled by the symbolic tempest. While the tempest compels her to embrace the chaos of its dislocations, it also communicates the unspoken elements that desire security and comfort. It is, consequently, a doubling of the young woman's split narrative. While looking at the young woman, in an attempt to find unity within the self, Levy discovers her own ambiguous, split and disrupted self.

The same is true in Levy's problematization of the traditional gendered dissection between the genres of autobiography and memoir, as she calls her narrative a "living autobiography" despite the fact that it is listed as a memoir. While Lina Anderson's *Autobiography* (2011) distinguishes the genre of autobiography from the memoir, as a traditionally more prominent male genre (8-11), Levy demands that her story be heard and valued on equal grounds as the masculine texts. She also complicates the traditional notion of writing the self in the past tense (8) by employing a present tense discourse, created while events emerge. This also breaks with the discursive patterns of both Didion and Winterson's memoirs, which are both written from the wisdom of hindsight. By doing so, Levy manages to reflect on the

difficulties of being and writing as a process, and to problematize the representation of a unified self. Instead of writing the typical story of "how I survived the divorce", Levy creates a plotline of the in-between components of an on-going divorce and resettlement. It is a liminal narrative that destabilizes not only notions of being, but also of writing.

This narrative project thus contributes to the overall aim of both Didion and Winterson in creating an authentic and realistic approach to the female narrative of being, as opposed to the idealized narrative. The dichotomy between the idealized and the authentic is, therefore, exposing the polarized distinctions between masculinity and femininity within the patriarchal discourse. By having the traditional dichotomies steer the analysis of Levy's memoir, in addition to relating it to the memoirs of Didion and Winterson, the investigation contributes to Roberta Garrett's emphasis in *Writing the Modern Family* (2021), saying one must expose neoliberal implications within the discourse of motherhood to overcome the "'conspiracy of silence' around many aspects of women's domestic lives" (3). Levy is, therefore, in the good company of both Didion and Winterson, creating a story that overcomes the traditional dichotomies with its authenticity, fluidity and multilayers. The great simplicity and difficulty of doing so is, in sum, her own way of revealing the female condition altogether.

5.2 Writing the tempest as a living autobiography

> Everything was calm. The sun was shining. I was swimming in the deep. And then, when I surfaced twenty years later, I discovered there was a storm, a whirlpool, a blasting gale lifting the waves over my head. At first I wasn't sure I'd make it back to the boat and then I realized I didn't want to make it back to the boat (7)

The tempest is the symbolic representation of relocation, of the process that destabilizes and disrupts the very foundations of life so that new perspectives, ideas and brave acts can arise out of the shadows of the unspoken. It describes the conflicting poles of imprisonment and freedom that are evident both before Levy decides to give up on her marriage, and afterwards. It includes, therefore, both the doubleness of either continuing to conform and assimilate to the ideal of femininity, or rebel and break away from its holds, while also, after the choice is made, experiencing an ongoing division between grief and the immense costs of liberation. That way, it

is reminiscent of both Didion and Winterson's narratives, communicating a complete chaos and madness of self and exposing the importance of female agency, particularly with relation to Winterson's similar choices of rebellion and liberation. Levy is, consequently, contributing to the broader feminist field of liberated life-writings of the female self with her remarks that

> [c]haos is supposed to be what we most fear but I have come to believe it might be what we most want. If we don't believe in the future we are planning, the house we are mortgaged to, the person who sleeps by our side, it is possible that a tempest (long lurking in the clouds) might bring us closer to how we want to be in the world (7)

This is, therefore, the story that proclaims she will no longer be silent and conformed. Levy is breaking away from the traditional narrative and the traditional behavior of women, like the young woman at the beginning of her narrative, to tell another story of being. The chaos of her reality prompts her to begin her project of communicating her ambivalent being which leads her to acknowledge that

> [w]hen I was around fifty and my life was supposed to be slowing down, becoming more stable and predictable, life became faster, unstable, unpredictable. My marriage was the boat and I knew that if I swam back to it, it would drown. It is also the ghost that will always haunt my life. I will never stop grieving for my long-held wish for enduring love that does not reduce its major players to something less than they are (8)

It is, after all, the ambivalent emotions of being that describe the costs of choosing a different life, but this is also the potential of writing a narrative that matters. Just like Didion is using the destructiveness of her loss and grief in a search for language that adequately projects her evolving sense of selfhood, Levy employs her conflicting emotions of loss, chaos and ambivalence to expose the female brutalities connected to the costs of transgressing. It is, nonetheless, the most important decision Levy can make for herself, as she describes that

> [t]o strip the wallpaper off the fairy tale of The Family House in which the comfort and happiness of men and children have been the priority is to find behind it an unthanked,

> unloved, neglected, exhausted woman. It requires skill, time, dedication and empathy to create a home that everyone enjoys and that functions well. Above all else, it is an act of immense generosity to be the architect of everyone else's well-being. This task is still mostly perceived as women's work (15-16)

It is tempting to say that what lingers in the background of Levy's rebellious narrative is the intertextual references to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), which deals with the same implications of the patriarchal narrative. While Gilman's narrator, who remains nameless, gives a journal-like narrative of her imprisoned state within a marriage, a house and a room that is overall oppressive, it is her evolving madness that is particularly interesting in relations to Levy's memoir. Since "The Yellow Wallpaper" exposes the limiting realities of staying within a marriage that is obviously destructive and unequal, it compels an important layer of being that is beneficial in describing Levy's situation. The way Gilman employs dramatic irony exposes not only the patriarchal infantilization of women – evident in utterances such as the one where the narrator describes the "nursery" she is forced to stay in as a sort of "playroom and gymnasium, I should judge; for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls" (512) – but it underscores, even more than this, the imprisoning reality of her being. The fact that Gilman's narrator begins to study and analyze the wallpaper of her "nursery" becomes the utmost symbol of the madness to which the patriarchal structuring of marriage promotes. It is, therefore, this related idea between madness and chaos, symbolic in the color of yellow, that is associated with the imprisoning patriarchal narrative steering both Gilman and Levy's stories in ways that expose how not feeling

> at home in her family home is the beginning of the bigger story of society and its female discontents. If she is not too defeated by the societal story she has enacted with hope, pride, happiness, ambivalence and rage, she will change the story (16)

It is the frustrations of incarceration and the subsequent madness that force the two to begin their individual journeys of breaking with the traditional narrative. This is, after all, not stories of how to overcome chaos, but instead, stories of chaos. That is why one can read the desperation to tear of the wallpaper in Gilman's story, so to free the woman within the pattern (518), as an instance

of both complete madness but also of utter sanity, the same way it is a story of both freedom and imprisonment. The woman lurking behind Gilman's wallpaper is, in Levy's case, the "unthanked, unloved, neglected, [and] exhausted woman" (16) who has been forced to act as "the architect of everyone else's well-being" (16). It is herself – a doubling of her own imprisoned situation – that she sees in the symbolic wallpaper. A woman who is in desperate need of liberty, but it is also she who must struggle with the consequences of making such choices. The creeping towards the end of Gilman's short story has its price, so to speak, and the chaos of her reality goes beyond the dissection between day and night, symbolic of the rational and the irrational. Even though Levy is able to tear off the wallpaper of the family ideal and break free from her marriage, she is still forced to live in-between the maddening poles of imprisonment and freedom where she is both drowning within her marriage, but also experiencing great grief at the loss of it (8). Both women are thus exposing their ambiguous approaches to the patriarchal narrative, whereas Levy, in particular, describes it accordingly:

> When love starts to crack the night comes in. It goes on and on. It is full of angry thoughts and accusations. These tormenting internal monologues don't stop when the sun rises. This is what I resented most, that my mind had been abducted and was full of Him. It was nothing less than an occupation. My own unhappiness was starting to become a habit (10)

The chaos of Levy's existence manifests as a continuous battle of ambivalence, where she is trying to make the most of her writing all the while the smallest mementoes of either a set of fishing nets (17, 150-151) or a stem of herbs (92) are destructive "portals to the past" (150). This analysis of Levy's ambivalence is, moreover, supported by her own references to wallpaper and the color yellow. First in how she tears of the wallpaper of the family home (16), the same way one of her own students did to her "family house and [thus] slipped her hand inside the naked bricks to reach for something she knew was there" (101). There is, after all, a resemblance between Gilman's short story, the student who remains nameless and Levy in the sense that all take actions to change the imprisoning structures – depicted in the symbolic wallpaper – to find and write another narrative of being. Within the context of her new apartment, Levy paints the walls in the bedroom yellow only to find that it compels an utter madness (37). This is, perhaps, the reason why Levy, later in the story, compels her "male best friend" (62) to steer away from

getting married in his preferred "bright yellow jacket" (62). Not only is this male best friend a "serial husband" (63), but a true believer in the "symbolic protection" (63) of marriage. In spite of his judgements concerning Levy's decisions, he ends up in her apartment wearing the yellow jacket "which peculiarly still had the safety pin that had attached the wedding nosegay of blue cornflowers to its lapel" (168) in an attempt to flee from his newly wedded wife. This is, in fact, the only direct reference that Levy gives to Gilman's short story, seeing that there is a similar pattern between the ambiguous color of yellow, Gilman's narrator trying "to escape from her husband and from her life through the yellow wallpaper of the family home" (168) and her male best friend doing the same wearing the jacket that Levy refers to as "his Yellow Wallpaper" (168). All of these minor instances are, in fact, serving the greater purpose of remarking the major female condition of unspoken ambivalence.

The idea of writing amidst such chaos, then, reveals, in the case of the above-mentioned memoirs, a process of being that is fluidly evolving and ever-changing. How Levy lives with the consequences of her storm is, therefore, a central theme that connects all the memoirs in a powerful emphasis of the female reality. The cost of the female living cannot be separated from the vicious Victorian tradition that perceives woman as an "Angel in the House" to which the comforts of man and children are entirely her occupation. When tearing apart the established "truths", the narratives contribute to an increased complexity about the female condition that involves moving beyond the dichotomy of either-or, and instead embrace the fluid notion of both-and, which cherishes the in-between that is both madness and chaos.

5.3 The cost of living (in yellow)

> I was thinking clearly, lucidly; the move up the hill and the new situation had freed something that had been trapped and stifled. I became physically strong at fifty, just as my bones were supposed to be losing their strength. I had energy because I had no choice but to have energy. I had to write to support my children and I had to do all the heavy lifting. Freedom is never free. Anyone who has struggled to be free knows how much it costs (22)

The way Levy, like Didion and Winterson, and even like Gilman, cherishes the difficulties of chaos and madness as means of communicating an evolving self, closely resembles Moi's

feminist emphasis on deconstruction. It seems that Levy is actively trying to overcome the established dichotomies by deconstructing its very foundations, the same way Moi claims that "Derrida's analysis undermines and subverts the comforting closure of the binary opposition" (106). This is, in other words, an important emphasis that seeks to liberate an imprisoned idea of sexuality and bring about greater sexual difference. Doing so, allows Levy to expose a more complex, ambiguous and multifaceted portrayal of the female condition, instead of conforming to the idealized narrative. Deconstructing the patriarchal binaries of femininity and masculinity is thus the only way for Levy to escape. Her evolving sense of selfhood is, thereby, humorously described by the contents of her purse which include a compact mirror, "lipstick, electric screwdriver, fountain pen, torch and the small bottle of essential oil of rose" (84). The fact that Levy combines the traditionally considered masculine objects of an electric screwdriver and a torch, with the more feminine objects of compact mirror and lipstick, communicates not only a shift in her material living conditions, but also the governing binary logic that she tries to overcome as an important development of her self. Moi also emphasizes the similar project of bringing greater diversity to the imprisoned idea of gendered identity, whereas

> [i]f patriarchy oppresses women *as* women, defining us all as 'feminine' regardless of individual differences, the feminist struggle must both try to undo the patriarchal strategy that makes 'femininity' intrinsic to biological femaleness, and at the same time insist on defending women precisely *as* women (81)

It is, in fact, a statement of self that resembles Greer's statement that "[i]t is an essential part of our conceptual apparatus that the sexes are a polarity, and a dichotomy in nature. Actually, that is quite false" (27). Levy's deconstruction of the very notions of masculinity and femininity, allows a maternal and female plotline that is not concealed by the patriarchal rhetoric. Like Didion and Winterson, Levy's narrative comes with a cost that exposes the destructive continuation of gender hierarchy amidst the contemporary and neoliberal environment.

It seems, therefore, that a living external and internal chaos is precisely what Levy must emphasize to expose the greater diversity of both gender and of self. The binary components of the tempest – the safe, comfortable and silent juxtaposed with the rebellious, unsafe and active – indicate the costs of her living. As Levy's self is divided between the notions of imprisonment

and freedom, she exposes that writing a living autobiography in the present tense involves all the complex aspects of her ambiguous journey that is, in fact, life. The binary of the symbolic tempest expresses how the connotations between cost and living, found in the title, underscore the patriarchal implications on selfhood. While being forced to either pay the cost of conforming or rebelling, Levy stands up against a demand to choose between simply existing within the limiting environment that patriarchy allows or making a choice to live independently from the patriarchal hold. As she writes that "[f]reedom is never free. Anyone who has struggled to be free knows how much it costs" (22), she exposes the ideological consequences of the established patriarchal narrative, to which one can never fully escape.

The cost of Levy's freedom manifests the "hard and humbling, profound and interesting" (22) process of making a new kind of living for herself and her daughters. In a "flat on the sixth floor of a large shabby apartment block on the top of a hill in North London" (19) the major costs of her decision involve that of a much simpler life, where she is alone in providing for herself and her daughters. Interestingly, while Levy's life is getting bigger, in terms of her expanding subjectivity, her material conditions are getting smaller. Levy describes her ambiguous approach to the conflicting notions of masculinity and femininity – imprisonment and freedom – saying

> [i]t was possible that femininity, as I had been taught it, had come to an end. Femininity, as a cultural personality, was no longer expressive for me. It was obvious that femininity, as written by men and performed by women, was the exhausted phantom that still haunted the early twenty-first century. What would it cost to step out of character and stop the story? (85)

By disclosing the idealized narrative of femininity to be "an illusion, a delusion, a societal hallucination" (87) that is impossible for any character to play, the references to "The Yellow Wallpaper" become all the more clear. Particularly because the outcome of this "phantom of femininity" (87) as Levy calls it, is madness. Like the narrator of Gilman's short story rips apart the wallpaper in an attempt to liberate herself from its hold, Levy also frees herself from the illusion and tries instead "to find new main characters with other talents" (87). The point of Levy's narrative, then, is to reveal that even though she breaks free, there is no doubt that the influence of the patriarchal narrative continues. She powerfully and humorously summarizes her

new lifestyle, combining motherhood with a writing career, in her description of a bike ride home from a manuscript meeting:

> That night as I cycled up the hill in the pouring rain, my bag split open and out of it spilled a book by Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, the charger to my electric bike battery (instructions: *do not expose to rain*), a lipstick, a torch, a screwdriver and five tangerines. The traffic had to stop while I looked for the chicken. It was lying like roadkill near the wheels of the car that had run it over, flattened but intact, its skin imprinted with the marks of the tyre. I picked it up and let the tangerines roll down the hill (91)

Her description seems infused with a neoliberal ideology that problematizes the combination of career and motherhood. It is particularly the neoliberal emphasis on the nuclear family, according to Garrett – with its subsequent traditional and gender-based structures – as well as Sharon Hays' notion of "intensive mothering", that compels the idea that women should be at home and take care of children and that working mothers are bad mothers (1-20). Levy's own difficulties are neatly summarized with reference to Garrett's point that

> [t]he intensive, privatized maternal role that is required for families to thrive within neoliberal culture is as stifling for women as the much-ridiculed 'Stepford Wife' post-war housewife and mother role (14)

While society is structured in such a way as to promote a gender hierarchy of separate spheres within the family structures – where women are still affected by the dominating idea that they are destined to domesticity – the cost of breaking such constructions becomes even higher. The quotation from Levy's memoir exposes, therefore, the near impossible task of combining motherhood, a writing career and being the sole breadwinner of the household. This is, moreover, an issue that she shares with the twentieth-century's French intellectual Simone de Beauvoir, who fought endlessly within second wave of feminism. With Levy's references to de Beauvoir, she remarks how they are both different in their ways of living and similar in their radical steps towards freedom:

> I had got off the train at a different stop (marriage) and stepped on to a different platform (children). She was my muse but I was certainly not hers.
>
> All the same we had both bought a ticket (earned with our own money) for the same train. The destination was to head towards a freer life (95)

Though living decades apart and in radically different lives – where de Beauvoir refused to marry or have children while Levy did – they do share a similar aim of freedom, and therefore of having to pay the price in search of such freedom. This includes the impossibility of fully separating themselves, and thereby escaping, from the powerful implications of the patriarchal society, defining them as "the second sex", so that de Beauvoir, as Levy notes,

> wrote, 'I could not live just for happiness and love. I could not give up writing and working in the only place where my writing and work may have meaning.'
>
> Surely she could write and have happiness and love and a home and a child? She didn't think so. I had found it quite tricky myself. All the same, I did know from a young age that if I chose to, I could take authorial control of my books (98)

Living amidst the 1950s where the communicated female purpose in life was that of wife- and motherhood, de Beauvoir radically proves her point by giving up happiness, love, marriage and children. She thus demonstrates that the costs of freedom for herself, and more importantly, for women to come, are worth these massive sacrifices. While freedom, to de Beauvoir, meant a life that rejected the patriarchal notions of motherhood altogether, her actions did, in fact, lay the important foundations to which others could follow. That is why Levy is in a position to use her individual experiences of marriage, motherhood and career to expose and critique the continued patriarchal institutionalization of motherhood and the infantilization of women altogether. This stretches to the polarized dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, where the combination of motherhood and career cannot align in a satisfactory manner, since it breaks with the traditional gender division of activity and passivity that society is built upon. This is further evidence that the price of breaking free is much higher for a woman than for a man, because the stereotyped and limited masculine imagination cannot allow a woman to combine the intellectual with the

emotional nurturing that she is destined to. While de Beauvoir's important remarks in the 1950s changed the feminist field, Levy is amidst the twenty-first century still battling with the costs of being a mother who is desperate to pursue her writing career, both as a way of sustaining her internal but also her external being. She sums up the patriarchal hold on women's lives by referring to George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant" (1936), which notes "that the imperialist 'wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it'. The [same way the] wife also wears a mask and her face grows to fit it, in all its variations" (112).

The societal and patriarchal mask that grows accustomed to the face it hides until the point where the woman hidden beneath loses herself completely, is, as the theories of Engels, Rich and Kilroy have already revealed, reminiscent of the capitalist mission of separate spheres, division and hierarchy. It is, moreover, also evocative of the woman behind the wallpaper of Gilman's short story, whereas the extent of her accustomed being underscores the fact that no one can really see her until the narrator herself stops and begins to inspect and analyze the wallpaper more thoroughly. It is only with the narrator's own unspoken problems of ambiguity and frustration at the "feminine mystique" (Friedan, 1-21), that the patriarchal narrative begins to crack and tear. While Gilman's narrator has no other language to communicate her reality other than tearing off the wallpaper and creeping around the nursery, Levy is, to a greater extent, set in motion to expose the patriarchal mask through a deconstruction of the established entities of masculinity and femininity, bringing about new methods of representing her self and the costs of her patriarchal betrayal.

This process of deconstruction, then, also includes an analysis of Levy's own mother – particularly studying a picture of her mother's younger self – to which Levy finds that her general ideas of motherhood have changed for the better while maturing:

> There is a kind of introspection in her expression that I now relate to the very best of her. I can see that she is close to herself in this random moment. I'm not sure that I thought introspection was the best of her when I was a child and teenager. What do we need dreamy mothers for? We do not want mothers who gaze beyond us, longing to be elsewhere. We need her to be of this world, lively, capable, entirely present to our needs. Did I mock the dreamer in my mother and then insult her for having no dreams?
>
> (118-119)

As the quotation reveals, it seems that Levy, as a child and teenager, fell into the dominating narrative of motherhood, being the only accessible model of understanding reality. Her perception of motherhood was, subsequently, influenced by the patriarchal linguistic tradition of objectification and otherness in which she, to a great extent, shares with Winterson. As she grows older, however, she begins to see how powerful and brave her mother truly was, since her courage defied the expected and dared make her dreams a reality: "[s]he escaped from the upper-class WASP family she loved and married a penniless Jewish historian" (122) who she met in their fellow battle for human rights in South Africa. With Levy's maturing self comes an increased awareness of both the difficulties and the ambiguities of motherhood, so that

> [l]ove did find its way through the on and off war between myself and my mother. The poet Audre Lorde said it best: 'I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers.' (135)

What Levy comes to discover, then, is a similar mirroring between mother and daughter as Luce Irigaray describes in her essay *And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other* (1981). The same way Irigaray addresses her mother in an attempt to compel a more differentiated and complicated language, Levy employs the symbolic images of birds and rain to communicate the co-existing divisions between death and renewal (100-102, 169-171, 175, 177-178, 179-182). While the images first appear in Levy's supervision of a student's writing, it appears both portray different perspectives of the female story. While the birds symbolize a sort of freedom that women throughout time have been striving effortlessly to gain, rain, on the other hand, symbolizes the complete opposite, namely the female struggles of imprisonment. This underscores Levy's suggestion that the student work with the symbolic idea of rain instead of birds, resulting in an employment of the famous Langston Hughes line "And I love the rain" (101) that exposes, moreover, the heartbreaking and tearful struggles of gaining female subjecthood. The distinction between the two is heightened in Levy's personal words to her mother, given only after her death:

> The small silver cactus with its arms pointing towards the ceiling looks like it is praying for rain.

> And so am I. Every day is hard.
>
> *And I love the rain*.
>
> Thank you for teaching me how to swim and how to row a boat. Thank you for the typing jobs that put food in the fridge. As for myself, I have things to do in the world and have to get on with them and be more ruthless than you were (182)

Through her symbolic application of birds and rain, Levy represents a doubleness that is both personal and structural. The same way that she finds the continued visits of birds (181) to be a symbol of both death and renewal (181-182), her discourse also exposes the governing dichotomy of imprisonment and freedom, further supported by the symbolic use of the color yellow. Levy, then, tells the ambiguous doubleness of both the female condition in general, and of the mother-daughter condition in particular. Her discourse, moreover, resembles Gilbert and Gubar's comment that

> to be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story, like the life of Goethe's Makarie, is really a life of death, a death-in-life. The ideal of "contemplative purity" evokes, finally, both heaven and the grave (25)

This is, after all, the doubleness of Levy's reality – like the reality of all women choosing to either conform or rebel to the established feminine narrative. In relation to Gilbert and Gubar's claim, Moi contributes that "[t]heir critical approach postulates a *real* woman hidden behind the patriarchal textual facade, and the feminist critic's task is to uncover her truth" (60). This is precisely what Levy is doing in her portrayal of both Simone de Beauvoir and her mother, seeing them as a doubling of her own reality, though also individual human beings to which she must go even further than they ever did. These are co-existing emotions of life and death that she shares with these women, though her mother in particular. Levy's rhetoric highlights, therefore, a discourse of the ambiguous interconnectedness and separation in the mother-daughter-relationship. In stepping away from the traditional objectification of motherhood, Levy fulfills Irigaray's desire to speak in a way that discloses the mother as the source of life but also as an individual human being, saying "[a]nd what I wanted from you, Mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive" (67). It seems, therefore, that the discovery of her mother – and

even her relatedness to the feminist battles of de Beauvoir – enable Levy to be even more ruthless and go even further in finding language that can adequately represent the continued inequality of the female condition, saying that

> [w]hen a woman has to find a new way of living and breaks from the societal story that has erased her name, she is expected to be viciously self-hating, crazed with suffering, tearful with remorse. These are the jewels reserved for her in the patriarchy's crown, always there for the taking. There are plenty of tears, but it is better to walk through the black and bluish darkness than reach for those worthless jewels (186-187)

In sum, Levy's story employs a foundational ground of feminist thinkers and rebellions that give her shoulders to stand on to continue fighting for what is important. Her ambiguous narrative reaches out to compel the reader to dare step into the darkness that is reality, as the first step towards progress, in terms of overcoming the stereotyped and polarized patriarchal language that is filled with unrealistic dichotomies that falsely represent life and motherhood. The same way Levy's journey deconstructs the established entities of femininity and masculinity, and discloses the massive costs of doing so, her narrative is part of a similar narrative project as both Didion and Winterson. While all three female authors engage in the process of complicating the established by paving the way for the small narratives of the female existence to arise, all expose how different, multifaceted and difficult the mother-daughter-relationship truly is.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Since the contemporary ideal of mother- and daughterhood is permeated by the neoliberal ideology with roots in the nineteenth-century Victorian era of separate spheres and gender division, the individual stories of motherhood are essential contributions to the feminist cause. This is, after all, what Eliane Glaser demands in her work *Motherhood: A Manifesto* (2021), claiming that "[m]otherhood is feminism's unfinished business" (10). What she relates to this argument is the mixed and ambivalent reality of motherhood, which society and culture apparently prefer not to acknowledge (3). While time has passed since the nineteenth-century ideals of femininity, Glaser points out that "motherhood is still much harder than it needs to be. [In fact i]n some ways it has become even harder" (3). There seems to be little change in the demands of perfectionism and selfless dedication that was once evident in the image of the perfect housewife of the 1950s – an image that Friedan exposed drove women mad, being unable to recognize themselves or even communicate their internal ambiguities. The ideals of motherhood, as well as the female constructions of selfhood, are powerfully bound to the biological demands formulated by Rousseau. What such ideas fail to consider, moreover, is that this issue relates not only to the female population, but to all, because the patriarchal system not only forces women, but all of us, to fulfill an idealized falseness of being.

This thesis has thus been an investigation of how the domestic ideology of the nineteenth century influenced, and continues to influence, contemporary culture, by concrete investigations of the discourse of motherhood and female constructions of selfhood as manifested in Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011), Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (2011) and Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living* (2018). The analysis of these contemporary works has been based on a historical evaluation going all the way back to the Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, tracing how his demands of biologically determined spheres and roles in society can, to a large extent, be deemed an ideological illusion. As we have seen evidence of, feminist criticism has objected to the argument of naturally destined gender roles and undertaken studies of how ideological structures of power have been allowed to define the boundaries of gender. In fact, the domestic ideology proves to pervasively influence the contemporary neoliberal ideology, which effectively means that the biological argument of motherhood remains largely unchanged.

In the intersection between the idealized narrative and the authentic narrative, the literary works in question problematize how governing idealizations of women generally, and of mothers specifically, influence female constructions of selfhood. Attempting to overcome the patriarchal binary of masculinity and femininity, the memoirs all encompass an endeavor to tell a freer and more complex story of being. This involves the multifaceted process of finding and formulating language as a means to capture and communicate a fragmented self that is always evolving. While both Didion and Winterson compose such a narrative from the wisdom of hindsight, Levy writes in the present tense. Even though all of them expose individual relations to the past (Hirsch 132-133), particularly in terms of how it influences both present and future, all of them end up with a similar deconstructed, fragmented and open ending. This deconstruction of the established order of binaries underscores the flaws of the governing discourse altogether. This extends to Winterson and Levy's memoirs as both communicate their individual difficulties of the imprisoned life within the house, as well as the perhaps even greater complications of the liberated life outside the house. Though both break free from the imprisoning structures of the home, it seems impossible to be fully free, however. While the three memoirs expose the actualities of pursuing a writing career, it is only Didion and Levy who are able to intersect this desire with motherhood. This manifests, yet again, how the governing dichotomy of masculinity and femininity, with its subsequent separate spheres and roles, still greatly influences a female and maternal construction of selfhood. Within the contemporary environment, mothers are still dealing with the limiting idea that they live solely for the purpose and well-being of others, and that work outside the house is ultimately damaging to the precious child. It seems, therefore, that even though the three authors try to liberate themselves from the limiting structures of society, they cannot be fully liberated as the attempts to write a freer narrative of being still takes place within the paradigms of patriarchy.

With the governing demands of the idealized narrative always lurking in the background, it becomes more important than ever before to expose the maternal ambivalence provoked by the divided reality at the core of the female and maternal identities. What Winterson's mother subtly displays is a maternal ambivalence that there is no adequate language to fully communicate. Resorting to expose her anger instead, Winterson falls for the temptation of portraying her by employing the mythical trait of the wicked stepmother, instead of questioning the context which prompts her anger. To a greater extent, Didion describes her maternal ambivalence in relation to

the neoliberal demands of perfect motherhood. Falling short of the ideal, by pursuing her writing career while also being a mother, she clearly depicts her attempts to overcompensate for her maternal failures. This is, according to Garrett, a result of the societal intolerance for maternal ambivalence (62). There is, moreover, also a clear class distinction between the mother that Winterson presents and Didion and Levy. While Mrs. Winterson suffers greatly under poverty, both Didion and Levy expose life on the other side of the class hierarchy. Though Levy breaks away from the wealth of her husband, her role is, nonetheless, connected to that of a wealthier middle-class life than Mrs. Winterson. Highest in the seemingly invisible hierarchy is Didion, who gives a solid depiction of her riches to which she employs to give her daughter the best. This is, in other words, also a fulfillment of the neoliberal portrayal of motherhood, where Mrs. Winterson inhabits the category of poor mothers, referring to those which are "[u]nable to access the raft of privatized health and educational services required to produce a successful offspring" (Garrett 72). It seems that part of the reason why Winterson portrays her mother as a wicked stepmother relates to the underlying neoliberal tendencies that Winterson has unconsciously internalized. Even though her idea of motherhood changes towards the end of her memoir, to the point where she recognizes her mother's ambivalence being much like her own, the polarized portrayal remains unchanged. "She was a monster but she was my monster" (229), Winterson writes, suggesting that she loves her mother despite the fact that she is mad and "wicked". While she fails to give her mother a voice of her own, one can only imagine that the great domestic pressures of motherhood, correlated with the earlier Victorian ideal of motherly purity and calmness, drove Mrs. Winterson to the point of madness, something that Winterson herself fails to contemplate.

It is clear, however, that regardless of class, all three mothers battle with a sense of inadequacy and ambivalence. It seems, therefore, that a governing construction of female selfhood is closely related to a biological idea of maternal destiny and maternal, as well as filial, experiences of never being good enough. Motherhood, seen either from the eyes of the daughter or from those of the mother, seems to be an institution based on feelings of constant inadequacy and guilt, to which the notion of the wicked stepmother lingers in the background, prompting the mother to overcompensate even more. This ambiguity is, as seen in the memoirs of Didion and Levy, clearly related to the incompatibility between motherhood and paid work outside the home that Garrett claims is one of the main attributes of the ideology of intensive mothering (65).

What this thesis has sought to analyze and expose is not only the destructive continuation of an idealized narrative, but, even more than this, the necessity of highlighting works able to communicate the double voice of mother and daughter (Hirsch 197), or what Hirsch refers to as "the mother's contradictory double position" (198), as well as the complex and ambiguous realities of female selfhood. With this focus, this thesis has found a field within feminist discourse that is under-communicated and should be highlighted and addressed even further so that the societal rhetoric and perception of women in general, and motherhood in particular, can be radically altered. What we have seen throughout this thesis is, in fact, various representations of female identities that are in the process of evolving either due to loss, the desire to be found or radical life-altering decisions. While the three memoirs share a common narrative project of revealing the complicated, the ambiguous and the previously unspoken maternal and female realities, they also complicate the seemingly romanticized discourse of self. Each of them exposes a self that is broken-down, divided and drowned in chaos and madness, and one that also uncovers the complexities of life at large.

While this thesis has investigated the discursive implications of the domestic and neoliberal ideology within Western culture, there are also other perspectives that could have been productive to consider, particularly how the discourse of motherhood and female constructions of selfhood is dealt with in cultures other than that of the West. This involves a further exploration of notions such as class, culture and ethnicity, and especially the manner in which notions of selfhood and the mother-daughter-relationship might be different in various geographical, social and cultural contexts. This examination would take its point of departure in Garrett's exposure of the neoliberal "belief that 'intensive' mothering is 'good mothering'" (10), claiming that such rhetoric fails to grasp the nuances of maternal experiences and establishes, instead, a stereotyped idea that "the 'successful' intensive mother is (…) more likely to be white and middle-class" (10). Under the idealized narrative of motherhood, mothers are not only isolated from chasing educational or career aspirations outside the home, but they are also limited to an ideal that completely neglects such variations as those mentioned above. Since the problems discussed poses mainly as a "white" problem, it would be interesting to extend the analysis towards that of post-colonial texts of both African-American and immigrant women, and include explorations of works such as Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), or Natasha Brown's *Assembly* (2021). As mentioned

above, other important perspectives are those of class. Relevant books in this context could have been Douglas Stuart's *Shuggie Bain* (2020), Patrick Gale's *Mother's Boy* (2022) or Doren Perkins-Valdez's *Take My Hand* (2022). While the glorification of motherhood restricts female agency and imagination to the point where the individual female narrative is completely silenced, one cannot fail to notice that this is also a social and structural problem of gender identity at play here. Subsequently, the patriarchal narrative suppresses not only women, but all of us, to an essentialist, stereotyped and false idealization of identity that is intertwined with perceived biological capacities. As such, it could be interesting to explore the works of male authors that deal with issues of parenthood, identity and the family, such as Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (2009), Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019) or Genzaburo Yoshino's *How do you Live?* (2021).

What we have seen throughout the thesis is the small narratives of female selfhood and motherhood that have been able to challenge, undermine and sometimes even support a destructive continuation of the grand narrative, with its subsequent unrealistic feminine ideals of angelic purity and selfless subordination within the sphere of the domestic. The same way Toril Moi celebrates the authenticity of a split self that is "decentred, fragile, [and] always threatened by disintegration" (177), the memoirs expose individual female characters whose identities are multifaceted and never-ending ambiguous processes. This fact should be embraced rather than hidden in false and destructive idealizations. It involves acknowledging, moreover, that the subject cannot be separated from its "unconscious ideological allegiances" (Moi 177), so that literature must be exposed as an area that both enhances and challenges ideological constructions of self simultaneously. This is, furthermore, proof of how complicated the act of writing the self truly is – being itself a sort of symbol of the ever-changing and multilayered understandings of selfhood altogether. It seems, therefore, adequately argued that the only way to overcome the essentialist, polarized and simplistic rhetoric of women and motherhood is through the complex deconstruction of both self and writing.

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