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Reclaiming the Female Suicide Narrative: Rebirth, a Plunge, and the Absurd

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**RECLAIMING THE FEMALE SUICIDE NARRATIVE:
REBIRTH, A PLUNGE, AND THE ABSURD**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR ARTS**

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Abstract

This thesis looks at female suicide in literature from the 1890s to 1970s in the novels *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin, *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf, and *Play It As It Lays* by Joan Didion. Looking at these female-penned novels in comparison the canon of Western literature, they all clearly indicate a change in the treatment of female protagonists suffering from loss. In *The Awakening*, suicide is represented as a rebirth. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the protagonist suffers from a fragmentation of the self. In *Play It As It Lays*, the protagonist finds life through the Absurd.

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Introduction

Throughout history, suicide has permeated the genre of tragedy. Think of any classical Greek play, Shakespeare tragedy, or Tolstoy novel and one can find a case where one takes their own life.

Suicide is historically considered a masculine behavior, with eighty percent of fatal suicides carried out by men (Leach 10). However women are more likely to attempt suicide, participating in non-fatal suicidal behaviors two to four times more frequently than men (Leach 50). These women may not have killed themselves, but their self-destructive behaviors indicate the possible lasting effects and complex nature of their mental state.

Despite the statistics of what happens in reality, there is a disproportionately high rate of women who commit suicide within literature. Within Greek mythology there are at least sixty-five female suicides (Garrison). Due to this frequency and often a similar trope depicted, scholar Elizabeth Patnoe created the term, “female suicide masternarrative”, which is described as, “A typical pattern for the fictional story of a woman’s suicide that arises... across the class of female suicide narratives from the last two centuries... The masternarrative’s protagonists are young adults who are detached from their children; financially secure, but dependent on men for that security; and heterosexually passionate. They rarely seek help, indicate their suicidal feelings or intentions, fear, resist, or plan their suicides; and they die after interrelational rupture with men, impulsively, during their first attempts, and almost always at

the end of the narrative” (Patnoe 2-3). This trope is exemplified in famous male-penned narratives crossing centuries including the suicides of Dido, Juliet, Ophelia, Cleopatra, Anna Karenina, and Madame Bovary. Although Patnoe’s term is broad, it raises the question of who is writing these narratives and why they are unable to depict honest representations of suicidal women.

When women write their own narratives, we are able to see a shift from this model. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin exhibits a suicide as a rebirth as her protagonist swims out into the womb of the sea. Virginia Woolf depicts Mrs. Dalloway as a woman who committed a fragmented suicide in her youth, and continues living on in a purgatory state. Joan Didion’s character in *Play It As It Lays* rejects suicide and embraces the idea of nothing. These perspectives shift perceptions of women and create an honest and thought provoking look into the female psyche.

Chapter I

The Awakening or Rebirth

Published at the turn of the 19th Century, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* shocked readers into protest with its scandalous content consisting of adultery and a woman committing suicide in the nude. The Southern author published a tongue-in-cheek retraction later that year:

“Having a group of people at my disposal, I thought it might be entertaining (to myself) to throw them together and see what would happen. I never dreamed of Mrs. Pontellier making such a mess of things and working out her own damnation as she did. If I had had the slightest intimation of such a thing I would have excluded her from the company. But when I found out what she was up to, the play was half over and then it was too late. (Chopin, 159).

Chopin wasn't shy to ruffle a few feathers. In fact, her novel prompts her readers to awaken to a new reality: a woman in possession of her independence who is not afraid to break social codes, reject the idealized notion of motherhood, and even engage in moral sin to find Romantic transcendence.

The woman in question is Edna Pontellier. The twenty-eight-year-old Kentucky Presbyterian is wife to a member of New Orleans Creole society, Léonce Pontellier, a kind wealthy man, whom she married because her father did not approve of him. Together they have children, yet Léonce is one of the rare fathers that their child would run to first after falling. “In short, Mrs. Pontellier was not a mother-woman... who idolized their children, worshipped their

husbands, and esteemed it was a holy privilege to efface themselves and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin 10). She rarely engages with her own children and has never been in love with her husband. In contrast, her dearest friend, Adèle Ratignolle, is the ideal mother figure, beautiful, womanly, and nurturing to a fault. With the open culture of the Creole, influenced by the French courts, Edna has also bonded with Robert LeBrun, a single young man who openly flirts with her in front her husband without any social repercussions.

Although she has begun her integration into Creole culture, Edna is a shy prudish woman who possesses a reflective interiority that she must retreat into. “At a very early period she had apprehended instinctively the dual life—that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions” (Chopin 15). These inward thoughts reveal Edna’s progress towards self-awareness as well as her fragility. After her husband carefully reprimands her for not noticing their son had a fever while he was away, she leaves to another room to cry as, “an indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul’s summer day” (Chopin 8). Her husband, though a kind man, embodies a shield from the sea in his embodiment as mist.

Chopin’s writing possesses a strong influence from the Romantics, frequently facilitating nature as a powerful force of representation or inspiration for Edna. On a visit to the beach with Robert, Edna nears a new understanding of the world in her excitement.

“In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually please to vouchsafe any woman” (Chopin 15).

In this passage, Chopin is clearly indicating the power of nature, particularly the sea upon Edna’s psyche. Unlike the Catholic Church-based Holy Spirit, nature does not judge Edna for her womanhood. Instead, “the voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation. The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace” (Chopin 15). This personified call from the sea is infectious to Edna. Even watching the sea can take her back to her childhood home “as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (Chopin).

It is this return to home that makes the sea so important to Edna. In her introduction to the book, novelist Marilynne Robinson discusses the novel’s romantic consciousness and says, “The sea in *The Awakening* is clearly abetted in assuming its seductive forms by Edna’s own consciousness, her motherlessness, her predilection for an intense interior life, which intersects powerfully but randomly of those around her and which has a secretiveness as a persisting characteristic” (Robinson xxi). Although the sea could represent something

entirely different perspective for a Romantic work like Melville's *Billy Budd* or Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", it is transformed into a womblike solace for Edna. After finally learning how to swim, Edna enters the water at night after a party with the light of the moon overhead. "But that night she was like the little tottering, stumbling, clutching child, who of a sudden realizes its powers, and walks for the first time alone, boldly and with over-confidence" (Chopin 28). Upon entering the water alone, she is reverted to the state of a child under the light of the feminine moon and caressed by the waves. She then turns seaward and "as she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself... A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses" (Chopin 29). In this moment, Edna sees a vision of her future suicide. The call to swim endlessly remains within her, yet she is unprepared to accept death.

Throughout the rest of the novel, Edna searches for understanding and freedom. Robert, who she falls in love with, leaves on business to Mexico as a way to deny his feelings. She attempts to reach transcendence through painting, but ultimately fail. She engages in an affair with a New Orleans man Arobin, but is not in love with him. Edna even leaves her beautiful home to a smaller bungalow in order to distance herself from her unhappy marriage. Robert eventually returns to her and expresses his love to her, yet ultimately rejects being with her due to her marriage. Edna realizes after seeing Adèle's graphic birth that her only option is to return to the womb of the sea. "There was no human being

whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized the day would come when he, too, and thought of him would melt out of her existence.

Edna disrobes as “she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her... She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known” (Chopin 113). Swimming out into the sea, she returns to the imagery of her home and can die in a newborn sense of disillusionment.

Chapter II

After the Plunge in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* is not only famous for its groundbreaking stream of consciousness style, but also for its ability to delve into the suicidal mind. Woolf scholars have intensively analyzed the death of Septimus, a soldier fraught with mental illness after returning from war and dealing with reoccurring visions of his friend Evans' death. Many popular critics have viewed his suicide as the catalyst that saves Clarissa Dalloway, the titular character of the novel, from her own depression and contemplations of death. In Vereen Bell's "Misreading Mrs. Dalloway", she highlights quotes from various sources over the years that attempt to capture this happy ending: "It is a day marred by suicide, yet what emerges triumphant is Clarissa's love of life", "It is the men surrounding the women who fall apart' and that it is 'women who are strong, who choose life, who survive'" (Bell 92). Yet this death is far from a savior for Mrs. Dalloway. Instead, it provides a moment of recognition of the fragmentation of self that she continues to bear.

Clarissa Dalloway is an example of a woman who has committed a fragmented suicide, a trauma inflicted upon oneself, either through action or deliberate inaction, which destroys the potential for a complete expression of one's true self. Although the body may remain unharmed, the self is permanently altered, remaining in a purgatory-like state that cannot be escaped until natural death. Born into a privileged society, Clarissa suffers this loss when she chooses

to marry Richard Dalloway while at Bourton. This decision rejects her pure homosexual love for her friend Sally Seton as well as the potential for a more fulfilled romantic relationship with Peter Walsh in favor of a higher social standing and secure future. After the marriage, she loses her sexual drive, suffers from illness, and falls into a state of isolated depression. Clarissa continuously alludes to her “plunge” at Bourton; recognizing the sacrifice she made that continues to haunt her existence. She lives on as a character that fits within the standards of society, performing her chosen duty as a wife and entertainer and receiving superficial satisfaction. Throughout the novel, which takes place in a day, Clarissa must encounter the lost characters of her youth, her foil, Miss Kilman, and the suicide of an unknown man, Septimus, as she attempts to throw a party, a celebration of life. I will argue that when she learns of Septimus’s suicide, Clarissa’s grand epiphany is not an embrace of life, rather an acceptance of the fragmented suicide that she committed long ago. She envies his ability to take a physical plunge into complete death, but must accept the purgatorial state of living she plunged into. With a fractured self, Clarissa is neither dead nor fully alive. In this state she is trapped with the choice she made in her youth to play the part of the perfect hostess, and is unable to reach personal fulfillment. Instead she must wait out the passage of time until her natural death. Clarissa is resigned to assemble and carry on with the “the fun” she experiences in her indeterminate state.

In a 1928 introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf wrote that, “in the first version, Septimus, who later is intended to be her double, had no existence; and

that Mrs. Dalloway was originally to kill herself” (*Reader* 11). Instead, she came upon a way to capture the struggle that the majority of suicidal women face instead of death. With this action, Woolf skirts her novel away from capturing Elizabeth Patnoe’s “female suicide masternarrative” (Patnoe 2). Clarissa Dalloway does not fit the narrative’s criteria of a young heterosexual woman that kills herself without warning at the end of a novel after an interrelational rupture with a man. She is middle aged, more homosexually inclined, and through the peek into her psyche in the stream of consciousness style, the reader can easily learn of her desires for death through her neuroses. In her youth at Bourton, Clarissa may have the mold of the narrative more closely, yet she only commits a fragmented suicide.

In order to see the roots of this derivation from the masternarrative, it is important to look towards the author. Virginia Woolf, an author burdened with her non-heteronormative sexual identity, illness, and deep depression, possessed an acute awareness of the constant struggle between desire, independence, and societies standards for women in early 20th century England. In her 1928 book-length essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf clearly illustrates her frustrations and the necessity of financial security and independence for female creativity and progress, stating “a woman must have money and a room of one’s own to write fiction” (“Room of One’s Own” 19). Without it, a woman had to resolve to be seen in relation to men. Woolf criticizes the paradox in classical literature that woman “dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger” (“Room” 91).

Her works captured the experiences of the later, with honest contemporary portrayals of women that experienced suffering, subjugation, and sacrifice.

While Woolf was privileged enough to have artistic independence, she encountered the trauma of illness, both physical and mental, that altered her relationship with herself and the exterior world. She wrote the essay “On Being Ill” for T.S. Elliot’s *The New Criterion*, detailing the alienation that follows the trauma.

“‘I am in bed with influenza’—but what does that convey of the great experience; how the world has changed its shape; the tools of business grown remote; the sounds of festival become romantic like a merry-go-round heard across far fields... while the whole landscape of life lies remote and fair, like the shore seen from a ship far out at sea, and he is now exalted on a peak and needs no help from man or God, and now grovels supine on the floor glad of a kick from a housemaid—the experience cannot be imparted” (“On Being Ill” 34-35).

Her insight into the state of illness and the lasting presence of disconnecting from the “landscape of life” ties into her portrayal of Clarissa Dalloway. There are further limitations to interpersonal conversation during and after illness, yet one’s interior monologue may capture the new sensation of an alienated and nostalgic distance from life. Woolf implements this in her novel, both in the form of her own writing and in the mind of her protagonist. Although I argue that Clarissa’s fragmented suicide is what triggers her loss of self, it is her illness that deepens her sense of isolation. Woolf would critique the implementations of the suicide

master narrative, arguing that they discredit and improperly characterize the experiences of women.

Clarissa's fragmented self is a constant presence in her life. From the first page of the novel, Clarissa muses, "What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 3). Upon first glance, this statement has no context for the reader. However Woolf places the act of fragmented suicide in the form of a flashback from the very beginning of the story to represent how ingrained and vital this loss is for her self. This is the first passage that brings the reader into Clarissa's psyche, moving fluidly from the present to the past, while illuminating the reader not only to the moments that continue to play an influence in her life, but indicate her presence on the line between life and death. The word plunge is used multiple times throughout the novel, surging Clarissa forward from that moment years ago at Bourton where she felt "the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen" into the context of her life at age fifty-two (*Dalloway* 1). "As if to catch the falling drop, Clarissa (crossing to the dressing-table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there—the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings... collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself" (*Dalloway* 37).

The initial plunge is a pervasive presence in Clarissa's reflection. While looking in the mirror, Clarissa finds herself composed as if all time had been compressed from the plunge until this very moment. In addition to time, she still feels the weight of the pressure placed upon her. She sees at once the exterior, her title, and her self. The word plunge not only refers to Clarissa's decision at Bourton to marry Richard Dalloway, but it is also used as her double Septimus jumps from the window to his death. In "Clarissa Dalloway's Respectable Suicide", Emily Jensen states, "the word implies there is no difference between his leap into death and hers into the life she has chosen; both are suicidal" (Jensen 168).

Clarissa is a dual figure as she resides within this purgatory state, describing that "she felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day" (*Dalloway* 8). Clarissa possesses omnipresence similar to what Woolf described as one's relation to the world after illness. At once she is far out at sea, yet grounded within the city. She is in a constant state of alienation after she loses part of her self, so her outside perspective makes her feel as if she can see deeper into minds of others. Yet at the same time, she floats within the threatening waters that instill a mix of loneliness and fear in her life. This passage is similar to the representation of the sea in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Edna also finds peace and clarity in the solitude of the sea and eventually returns to the body of water as she experiences rebirth before she commits suicide.

As one who has already committed metaphysical suicide, Clarissa constantly resides within this sea in her own mind in a state of rebirth and reflection. She remains isolated and cold, physically distancing herself from the possibility of human connection with her husband.

“So the room was an attic; the bed narrow; and lying there reading, for she slept badly, she could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet... She could not see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together. For *that* she could dimly perceive”

(Dalloway 31).

Through the rejection of the heat she experienced in her youth in her moments with Sally Seton, Clarissa dooms herself to a celibate existence devoid of desire and sexuality. Even after experiencing sex and childbirth, she is still shrouded with her virginity that shielded her in girlhood. Within the cold immaculate bed, she rests as if she is in a coffin, yet is unable to completely fall asleep and embrace death. What resides dimly within her is the feeling of warmth from real pleasure that comes from human connection, yet she has always been deprived of that human experience. It is here in her alienated state that Clarissa may reflect upon her past love Sally, as well as the capability that she still possesses within her to find intimacy and “feel what men felt” *(Dalloway 32)*. As she rests in her isolated attic room, Clarissa recalls seeing Sally the night that they kissed and

thinking “if it were now to die ‘twere now to be most happy” (*Dalloway* 35). She sees Sally as Othello saw Desdemona, at once joyous in his love and fearful of losing it. It is this moment that Clarissa has captured and replayed constantly as her pure image of Sally. Yet the interruption from Peter Walsh, like the meddling of Iago and Cassio, disrupts the couple and gives Clarissa her first glimmer of tragedy: “It was like running one’s face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!” (*Dalloway* 36).

Despite the cold pain that pervades Clarissa in her regret, she is resilient in proving she made the best choice for herself in her marriage to Richard and acceptance of her life of adhering to social structure. She has pride in the parties she throws and invests her emotions into their success. Yet when Clarissa encounters Miss Kilman, her daughter Elizabeth’s tutor that is a religious poor intellectual, she is posed a reflection of herself that prompts anger and a resurgence of remorse over the possibility of a freer life. Elizabeth may be in love with Miss Kilman, further uprooting a sense of regret and jealousy.

“For it was not her one hated but the idea of her, which undoubtedly had gathered in to itself a great deal that was not Miss Kilman; had become one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants; for no doubt with another throw of dice, had the black been uppermost and not the white, she would have loved Miss Kilman! But not in this world. No” (*Dalloway* 12).

Miss Kilman is a personification of the possibility Clarissa had in her life if she had embraced love and not subjected herself to the pain and sacrifice of her marriage. Miss Kilman is a woman with a room of her own with the potential to create, inspire, and love, while Clarissa is a woman trapped within the mistakes of her past and society. It is ironic that Clarissa grows self-conscious and feels the need to defend herself against her presence, while Miss Kilman in turn possesses her own anxiety about Mrs. Dalloway. In her limited view of her mind, she cannot see any good in Clarissa due to her privilege and hypocrisy, but still envies her wealth and conventional comfort. The two women are foils to each other that provoke anger and reflection because they are able to recognize within each other their own deep desires that can never be fulfilled.

When faced with conflict or the recognition of her own death, Clarissa turns to a line from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*,

“Fear no more the heat ‘o the sun
Nor the furious winter’s rages” (*Dalloway* 9).

In Shakespeare's play, the line is sung at a funeral for a woman disguised as a boy, who is actually alive and merely under the guise of death from a sleeping potion. Caroline Webb argues that the phrase invokes “peace for the dead boy (Fidele) who represents her youth, and implicitly, hope for the live woman (Imogen) she has become” (Webb 291). This phrase is repeated as a mantra, often just as “fear no more”, to give Clarissa courage to continue on in her life as time passes and the sun continues to rise and fall, yet it also is a blatant recognition of her dual nature. She lies not only on the boundary between life and death, youth

and adulthood, but also between the masculine and feminine. As Woolf writes in her essay “A Room of One’s Own”, “It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (“Room” 198). Clarissa does not possess a complete grasp upon either gender. Her sexual desires for Sally make her feel as though she possesses the traits of a man, yet she has killed the potential for her to act upon them. She can now only rely on the hope that the woman within her will awaken. The phrase also comes to her in moments of brief internal solitude,

“The whole world seems to be saying ‘that is all’ more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall” (*Dalloway* 39-40).

Once again the sea appears as an image of her solitude and suicide, yet paired with “fear no more”, the meaning of the Shakespearean line changes. In this thought, it appears that Clarissa reads, “Fear no more” as a call to embrace death. She would be free of her damaged self and absence of love, and succumb to the waves and renewal within the sea, plunging one last time to a more concrete death. However her heart still remains under the heat of the sun, passing time on the beach away from the water. The lack of connection between her desire and her body illustrates the purgatorial state that she fell into through her metaphysical suicide.

The young soldier Septimus works as a complement to Clarissa, like a Fidele to her Imogen. While the boy dies, the woman must continue to live. Septimus had been surrounded by death in his youth in the trenches, yet the trauma of war is what brings him life. "I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still; he begged" (*Dalloway* 69). Unlike Clarissa, who lost a part of her self in her metaphysical suicide, Septimus experienced an expansion of the self that made him perceptive to the natural world to an overwhelming degree. "He felt himself drawing towards life, the sun growing hotter, cries sounding louder, something tremendous about to happen... We welcome, the world seemed to say; we accept; we create." (*Dalloway* 69). Septimus is surrounded constantly by imagery and communication from elements of nature, constantly feeling its presence and the potential for creation of poetry or song even within the sphere of the city. His narration, which seamlessly blends between thought and speech, possesses a freedom that arrives only when one is disconnected completely from convention and sanity. Septimus wears no mask. Whereas Clarissa is shielding her fractured self from the world through performance to appear whole, Septimus is unable to control the life and imagination within him. The largest weight bearing down on Septimus's psyche is the death of his friend from war and possible lover, Evans. While Clarissa rejected Sally's love in favor of a normal life, exterior forces of war took Evans away from Septimus. Jensen argues the hallucinations he sees of Evans that bring him to madness represent the conflict in denying his homosexuality and losing the opportunity to come to terms with his relationship within society.

Septimus too speaks of the heat of the sun like Clarissa, yet does not look at it with any hesitation.

“Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more. He was not afraid” (*Dalloway* 139).

The image of him floating in the sea is not one of fear; rather it shows Septimus finding himself in a state of peace and knowledge completely distanced from the populated shore. He is not afraid of the heat of the sun, the passage of time, if it is able to take him away from the ordered human world. His body and heart both lie in the sea ready for suicide. “Unlike Clarissa, Septimus does achieve communion with nature-actually floating on the waves and hearing the dogs barking-admittedly by an utter distortion of reality that is nonetheless real enough for him that he will kill himself to protect it” (Jensen 173). While he wants to stay living and value his mind’s growing and fluid interpretation of the world, taking in the beauty and meaning he finds within it, the threat of human nature, embodied within the psychologists Holmes and Sir Bradshaw who wish to enact a sense of rigid “proportion” upon him, forces Septimus to turn towards fatal suicide. As he sits on the windowsill, the narrative flows into his consciousness:

“He did not want to die. Life was good. The sun was hot. Only human beings—what did *they* want? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and stared at him. Holmes was at the door. ‘I’ll give it you!’”

he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer's area railings" (*Dalloway* 149).

As the old man, a vision of a potential future, stops to rest upon his figure and Holmes, an embodiment of human nature, appears, he must respond. This scene of physical suicide ripples throughout the rest of the novel, succeeding in Septimus's goal of communicating his frustration with human nature and the beauty of preserving one's life in death. Septimus cannot stand the idea of living into old age within parameters set up by society that would force him to lose his ability to create and see the beauty of nature. The sun may be hot and life may be good, yet human beings deny him the freedom to love and explore his self.

Clarissa retreats to her own window after she learns of this death, leaving behind the celebration of life in her very own home. In a hushed "shelter of common femininity", Lady Bradshaw reveals the details that her husband's patient, a young man, has killed himself. Alone, Clarissa expresses her anxiety that death was brought to her party, yet becomes consumed as she processes Septimus's death, feeling herself his plunge from the window. Yet she wonders if he "had plunged holding his treasure" (*Dalloway* 184). Had he been like herself, plunging from the window at Bourton while holding tight to the sense of freedom and love that came in her youth? Did he commit suicide to preserve his loyalty to his entire self? As she moves throughout her thoughts, Clarissa reveals her envy of Septimus who may have preserved his life in death, while she must face "her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress" (*Dalloway* 185).

Clarissa acknowledges that she sacrificed herself to her celibate marriage, yet tries to convince herself that with Richard she is happy. “No pleasure could equal... this having done with the triumphs of youth, lost herself in the process of living, to find it, as the sun rose, as the day sank.” (*Dalloway* 185).

Clarissa searches for that sensation of her youth as she walks to the window and parts the curtains, seemingly to take yet another plunge. Yet she stops in surprise when she pulls back the curtains to see an older woman in her own window looking straight at her, as the old man did with Septimus. Earlier in the day, Clarissa watched this old woman, who remained unaware of her gaze, as she stood looking out her window. Then at the strike of Big Ben, the old woman would “move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was it had something to do with her... She was forced, so Clarissa imagined, by that sound, to move, to go-but where?” (*Dalloway* 127). The structured movements of this woman appeared completely dependent on the fall of the clock’s arm, moving up and down her stairs according to the time. Yet when Clarissa views her in the evening, she contemplates if the old woman is looking back at her. In this moment, Clarissa faces recognition of her future. This old woman is also a slave to the heat of the sun, closing her blinds at the exact moment of the fall of the clock’s arm, and retreating as the night continued on for the rest of the world.

“The young man had killed himself but she did not pity him; with the clock striking the hour one, two, three, she did not pity him with all this going on. There! the old lady had put out her light! the whole house was

dark now with this going on, she repeated, and the words came back to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them”

(Dalloway 186).

As time moves on, the old woman must retreat to sleep. The plunge of the Big Ben, which serves to mark the process of life for all inhabitants of London, forces Clarissa to dismiss her fantasy of mirroring Septimus in her own attempt of fatal suicide. With her fractured self, Clarissa remains in purgatory and cannot fully escape into the sea she wishes for. In a moment of recognition and denial, Clarissa realizes her limitations, at once envying and dismissing Septimus’s suicide as a pitiless action. The resounding bell of the clock pushes Clarissa to return downstairs, as if she was the old woman who mechanically moved with the passage of time. She finds small satisfaction knowing that unlike the older woman, she had her party to return to. Yet she also possesses an awareness of her future. This old woman is another example of someone who had committed a fragmented suicide.

Although it can be interpreted that Clarissa as merely having a revelation and new embrace of life as she retreats to her life of “fun”, I see this moment as a complete recognition of her fate. Just as she argues that she was happy for giving up her youth, Clarissa exclaims her joy to return to the party and “must assemble” as a way to minimize the pain of her decision long ago (Woolf 186). Jensen believes “she has in fact committed one of the most common suicides for women, that respectable destruction of the self in the interest of the other, firmly convinced that in this world where dice fall with the white on top, ‘that is all’ that

is possible” (Jensen 178). This suicide is an optimistic sacrifice of passion and potential, where one falsely believes that it would bring about simplistic resolve, “that is all”. The old woman is further down the line from her initial moment of suicide, slowly retreating from the public eye as time moves along. Clarissa may be a living being that can still engage with the world, but she is still limited and must follow the trajectory of her initial plunge. Her thoughts are free to ponder the past and the possibility of escape, yet like many women of her time displaced by the trauma of WWI and lasting patriarchal structures, she is trapped within a purgatory state between creativity and stasis, freedom and societal convention, illness and health, love and security. Although she dismisses his actions, Septimus’s suicide did succeed in communicating with Clarissa. “He made her feel the beauty. He made her feel the fun” (*Dalloway* 186). For Septimus, “beauty, that was the truth now” (*Dalloway* 69). Clarissa can not only see the truth in her fate, yet also *feel* the beauty and fun embodied within her as she was able to connect and identify with Septimus and the old woman on a human level. Although she may have destroyed the potential for her innate self to fully come to fruition, Clarissa’s new awareness gives her the possibility of seeking out and appreciating moments of truth and beauty. Fragmented suicide leaves little room for movement after one commits themselves to their fate, yet unlike a fatal suicide, there is still the potential to experience life within a new scope of one’s self.

Chapter III

Play It As It Lays: The Absurd Suicide

As the icon of new Journalism, Joan Didion depicts reality through a personal and subjective lens. In her essays written in the 1960s, many of which are anthologized in her groundbreaking *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Didion is a present, yet absent narrator, moving through spaces as she observes the world and depicts it with an honest and critical eye. Her identity allows her access into many spaces, yet she maintains the power of passive anonymity that comes with her gender and age. She is immersed within the Hollywood elite, but sees herself as an other within the space. She lives on both coasts, but can only see her small central California birthplace as home. She writes personal essays, but as a woman who admits that even her personal notebooks teeter from reality, it is likely that her narratives are fictionalized. Almost a character herself, elements of Didion's persona translates into the protagonist of her novel *Play It as It Lays*. Maria Wyeth also resides within this ambiguity of space between action and inaction. Her narrative shifts between her own journal while she is at a sanatorium and an omnipresent third-person narrator who captures the fragmented interiority of Maria's psyche. The Hollywood actress holds titles including mother, wife, daughter, but is incapable of playing these roles due to loss and her inability to engage with the world. She can only find peace in movement between places as she ritually drives the California freeways. Maria is a woman who has endured metaphysical suicide, yet her experience greatly differs from what Virginia Woolf depicts in *Mrs. Dalloway*. Maria's suicide of the self is not a plunge, but comes

from a true understanding of “what nothing means”, which ultimately lets her “keep on playing” (*Play It As It Lays* 214).

The narrative begins in the present from her own written perspective in a chapter titled “Maria”. After she is placed in a sanatorium following a breakdown, she is instructed to record her experiences in a personal journal. Her doctors insist Maria captures her thoughts because when they ask her any questions, she only responds, “Nothing applies”. In her journal, Maria provides the facts of her present: “My name is Maria Wyeth. This is pronounced Mar-eye-ah, to get it straight from the outset... Age: thirty-one. Married. Divorced. One daughter, age four” (*Play* 4). She then begins delving into the surface details of her past. Maria grew up in Silver Wells, Nevada, a road-stop town her family owned which no longer exists, with her constantly gambling father and her mother whose “yearnings suffused our life like nerve gas” (*Play* 7). Her two lessons from childhood that held up were “*that life itself was a crap game*” and “*overturning a rock was apt to reveal a rattlesnake*” (*Play* 200). After leaving for New York City to become an actress and model, Maria learned that her mother died in a car crash alone on the road, possibly by suicide. Yet she doesn’t return home to reconnect with her family. Instead, she falls into a state of passive engagement with the world as she becomes involved with a manipulative lover Ivan Costello, loses weight, and develops the mindset that “the tulips on Park Avenue looked dirty” (*PIAIL* 9). After falling out with Ivan, she marries Carter Lang, a prominent experimental filmmaker that captures her in a film titled *Maria*, and moves out to Los Angeles with him.

The narrative jumps out of Maria's perspective to her life as she drove the freeway during "the fall after the summer she left Carter (the summer Carter left her, the summer Carter stopped living in the house in Beverly Hills)" (*Play* 15). She sleeps outside on a rattan chaise by the pool with beach towels for blankets since they "signified how temporary the arrangement was", since sleeping outside "could be construed as the first step towards something unnamable (she did not know what it was she feared)" (*Play* 15-16). Subsequently each chapter jumps to new scenes, some in the past from the chronological standpoint of the narrative, highlighting Maria's fracturing relationships with Carter, her occasional lover Les Goodwin, her friends BZ and Helene, and Kate, Maria's institutionalized daughter. The novel's format mirrors what Didion believes resides in the mind of one who lacks self-respect: "To do without self-respect... is to be an unwilling audience of one to an interminable documentary that details one's failings, both real and imagined, with fresh footage spliced in for every screening" ("On Self Respect" 143-144). Each chapter underscores Maria's passivity and the detrimental effects it plays upon her relationships and psyche. However when she is with Kate, Maria exhibits an extreme amount of love and attention. The child serves as a simple image of hope, even though Maria cannot fully connect with her mentally. Maria becomes pregnant with a child by Les Goodwin, and Kate becomes Carter's bartering chip to force Maria to get an abortion since he has primary custody. The procedure is severely traumatic upon Maria's psyche and she becomes more of a recluse as she is plagued with nightmares and flashes of the event.

Throughout the rest of the novel, Maria keeps on living through forced interactions and power struggles in her relationships. She goes to parties with BZ, only to feel used and out of place. She travels to New York to divorce Carter. She sleeps with an actor after a party and steals his Ferrari, later to be picked up by the police. At one point, she even drives to Las Vegas and spends two weeks alone wandering through the city. Eventually Carter forces Maria to come live on set with him in a desert town similar to her old home. The novel then switches chapter by chapter between Maria's journal at the institution, indicated by italics, and the plot, leading up to BZ's suicide next to her as he does not "feel like playing any more" (*Play* 212). This suicide induces her breakdown. Maria ends the novel with a journal entry that says, "*I know what 'nothing' means, and keep on playing. Why, BZ would say. Why not, I say*" (*Play* 214).

Maria's story is a revealing glimpse into the mind of a woman who continually loses facets of her identity. Constantly manipulated by those close to her, she retreats to her routines, passivity, and suicidal behaviors through alcohol, prescription drug abuse, and fasting in order to find a sense of escape from her life. Although it appears that she lacks agency, Maria has a decisive albeit impulsive character. She will run or drive away when she is confronted with an attack in search of her past home and security. Each attempt, whether she is looking for information about her mother from an old family friend, or rushing into the arms of a former lover, is often unfulfilling and leaves her in a deeper state of depression. At times, it is a simple act of escape, like going to a hypnotist or breaking social code. Yet often this drive to escape transcends reality or

borders on suicidal. The year her mother died, “every time she looked at food the food would seem to arrange itself into ominous coils. She had known that there was no rattlesnake on her plate but once the image had seized her there was no eating the food” (*Play* 60). The image of a rattlesnake is an embodiment of unknown evil that one can find lingering beneath the surface. Maria feels guilt for leaving her mother behind and an overwhelming desire to understand what drove her off the road. Yet she is only left with a hunger.

Maria’s feelings loss not only comes from her self, but are augmented by the natural world. While visiting Kate, Maria feels like she lacks any control over daughter and “realized that she expected to die” (*Play* 73). She had failed in her role as mother and “Maria did not believe particularly in rewards, only in punishments swift and personal” (*Play* 73).

“That night the house crackled with malign electricity. A hot wind came up at midnight and the leaves scraped the screens, a loose storm drain slapped against the roof. Sometime in the night Maria wrote three letters which, before dawn, she tore up and flushed down the toilet” (*Play* 73).

It is implied in this situation that Maria wrote suicide notes, yet could not act upon her intention. This scene not only reveals Maria’s destructive tendencies, but also the strong influence that nature plays upon her emotions. In the essay “Los Angeles Notebook”, Didion explains the Santa Ana, a seasonal dry hot wind, that starts wildfires and historically correlates with a rise of depression, headaches, and nervousness (“Los Angeles Notebook” 218). She writes, “the violence and unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles,

accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are” (“Los Angeles” 221). Maria has a direct response to the wind, and is pushed to the brink of her existence. In its aftermath, “the air seemed to rob everything of its perspective, seemed to alter all perceptions of depth” to the point that Maria is forced to re-familiarize herself with the freeway that once served as her comfort (*Play* 76).

Maria has experienced such an extreme amount of loss that an attempt to commit suicide would not successfully destroy her self. For even she realizes that something has already left her: “Sometimes at night the dread would overtake her, bathe her in sweat, flood her mind with sharp flash images of Goodwin in New York and Carter out there in the desert with BZ and Helene and the irrevocability of what already seemed to have happened, but she never thought about that on the freeway” (*Play* 18). On the physical boundary between places on the freeway, Maria is in a purgatory. She remains protected within the four walls of her car as she follows her driving schedule and blocks pain from her mind with movement. She methodically peels and eats hardboiled eggs as a way to avoid stopping along the road because “to pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril” (*Play* 15). Within the car, Maria cannot think of anything apart from the road she is on. This is because the car is a not purgatory after death, rather a return to her mother’s womb where she knew nothing. When Maria visits a hypnotist who wants her to visualize herself in the womb, she cannot picture what he is describing. He asks what she’s doing instead. “‘I’m driving over here,’ Maria said. ‘I’m driving Sunset and I’m staying in the left lane because I can see the New Havana

Ballroom and I'm going to turn left at the New Havana Ballroom. That's what I'm doing.'" (*Play* 124). Maria has found her own ways to temporarily forget her loss, and reconnect subconsciously with her mother, but when enters back into reality, she is overwhelmed by her emptiness. Throughout the majority of the narrative, Maria does maintain some remainder of her self. It is present in her emotions, agency, and movement. She has motivation and a deep desire to find home with the people she can still reach. Yet once Maria understands nothing, she actively destroys her relationships and the identities she created for each. "*Fuck it, I said to them all, a radical surgeon of my own life. Never discuss. Cut. In that way I resemble the only man in Los Angeles County who does clean work*" (*Play* 203).

Playing the game may seem like an act of hope for her future, yet Maria states in her journal: "I was raised to believe that what came in on the next roll would always be better than what went out on the last. I no longer believe that, but I am telling you how it was" (*Play* 5). From the beginning, Maria's life was always seen as a game. "From my mother I inherited my looks and a tendency to migraine. From my father I inherited an optimism that did not leave me until recently" (*Play* 5). Maria was taught that all her family owned, including their home, came from gambling, and she was lucky enough to be "holding all the aces" (*Play* 10). Maria would spend time as a child pretending to run the cash register at her father's side of the road tourist attraction, clarifying in her journal, "I say 'pretend' because there were no customers" (*Play* 6). As her mother Francine looked for an escape for Maria and herself, she encouraged her daughter

to model and use her body as chip in the game. Once Maria chooses to become an actress, she sets up a career based upon playing other characters. She temporarily possessed the motivation to continue her work, yet is blackballed after walking off set when Kate is newly institutionalized.

Maria's methods of pretending slowly turn into fantasy, revealing her fracturing self after she experiences the loss of her abortion. In her dreams, she is tasked with children as they enter gas chambers, and she senses flesh in the plumbing while awake in her home. When she merely sees a nurse wheeling along a patient on a sidewalk, "Maria closed her eyes and imagined the woman coming towards her with a hypodermic needle" (*Play* 131). In order to block her dark fantasies and reality, Maria creates stories in her mind of anesthetization or escape.

"... to erase it from her mind she fixed her imagination on a needle dripping sodium pentothal into her arm and began counting backward from one hundred...When that failed she imagined herself driving... straight on into the hard white empty core of the world. She slept but did not dream" (*Play* 162).

Maria possesses the strength to combat the trauma with further delusions.

Although these hallucinations could indicate schizophrenic behavior, "her sickness is metaphysical, a manifestation of her difficulty in adjusting to her newly discovered consciousness of absurdity" (Geherin 71). Drugs and alcohol can alleviate this consciousness, but eventually she must confront the relation between her self, her body, and the exterior world.

Maria comes closest to this point of understanding when she drives to Las Vegas and fails to leave for two weeks. She was “on some business but she could not seem to put her finger on what that business was” (*Play* 170-171). At first, Maria attempts to contact her godfather Benny Austin, who sent her a letter saying that he wanted to reconnect and give her father’s deeds to her. However the number he gives is out of service and the P.O. Box from which he addressed his letter is not his own, leaving Maria uncertain about where her last trace of home lies. She continues to stay in Vegas, but since her room at the Sands is painted and decorated entirely in purple— “her mother had once told her that purple rooms could send people into irreversible insanity”—Maria rarely returns to sleep (*Play* 165). Instead she remains in a constant state of motion, walking, driving, moving in and out of hotels to feel the physical shock of the air, and absorbing the overheard fragments of people and conversations like a blank tape. Eventually Maria grasps that what she is looking for is transcendence:

“By the end of the week, she was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between *Maria* and *other*. She had the sense that if she could get that in her mind and hold it for even one micro-second she would have what she had come to get” (*Play* 170-171).

Maria desires the consciousness to clearly understand her meaning within nature. She once saw a woman in motion “that seemed to her then that she was watching the dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing”, yet in order to find nothing, she needs to see herself from the exterior (*Play* 67). Maria

possesses a changed sense of awareness once she returns from Vegas, finishing questions with periods and exhibiting extreme passivity to the point that Carter would attempt to instigate fights with her “to find out if you’re alive” (*Play* 196).

One of the greatest complexities of this novel is Maria’s ability to survive after understanding the idea of nothing, while both her mother and BZ turn towards fatal suicide. The cause of Francine Wyeth’s death is ambiguous, but her intentions seemed clear. She was a woman who always dreamed of escape, yet remained trapped in the desert along a highway that stretched to Las Vegas. One evening she runs her car off the road near Tonopah and “the coyotes tore her up before anyone found her” (*Play* 8). Maria is overwhelmed with the possibilities of what might have happened, whether her mother meant to die, and if she did, why she did not call Maria to explain why. Perhaps it was an accident, yet Francine’s depression served to undercut that notion. The desert also plays an important role in her death. Didion wrote her essay “On Morality” from her own perspective while staying a truck stop motel in a town similar to Silver Wells. There, she describes how “every now and then I imagine I hear a rattlesnake, but my husband says that it is a faucet, a paper rustling, the wind... There is some sinister hysteria in the air out here tonight, some hint of the monstrous perversion to which any human idea can come” (“On Morality” 161). The desert is a symbol of isolation and death, with a natural power similar to that of the Santa Ana winds. It toys with the mind and conjures a lingering sense of moral evil within its expansive emptiness. Those who live in the environment are “people whose instincts tell them that if they do not keep moving at night on the desert they will

lose all reason” (“On Morality” 159). Francine remained subject to the desert’s influence her entire life as it progressively instilled in her a stronger awareness of nothing. However unlike Benny and her husband Harry, she is unable to deny its presence.

As a woman, Francine faces a greater burden. These plights are revealed through Maria’s own practices of anxiety. Her mothering impulse induces nightmares based on news stories of “the child in the abandoned refrigerator, the tea party with Purex, the infant in the driveway, rattlesnake in the playpen, the peril, unspeakable peril, in the everyday” (*Play* 100). Multiple times, Maria finds herself “staring into a hand mirror, picking out her mother’s features. Sometime in the night she had moved into a realm of miseries peculiar to women and she had nothing to say to Carter” (*Play* 62). The act of looking in a mirror encompasses a search for the self, a critique, and a reflection of the past, opening up endless potential for pain. This past is not only a woman’s personal narrative, but that of her mother and of all women. Recognizing one’s own female gender sparks a subconscious awareness of patriarchal power and transfers the weight that women have carried into one’s self. With these overwhelming encumbrances and her environment, it is highly possible that Francine opened up to fully understand the meaning nothing and took her own life as a response. Or, she could have merely had a migraine on the road and lost control. Either way, her ambivalent cause of death serves as a postmodern device that provokes Maria to question and construct her own relative perception of her mother’s psyche and her own self.

While Francine's death is a mystery, BZ's drive for suicide permeates the novel and attempts to pull Maria along. He lacks a real name and physical description apart from an image of his tanned skin "gleaming, unlined as if they had an arrangement with mortality" (*Play* 46). The nickname BZ is a coded abbreviation for benzodiazepines, a sedative found in Valium, yet "it also suggests a parallel with Beezlebub, a Satanic tempter who seeks to corrupt Eve from her innocence" (Geherin 73). Through this lens, Maria is an innocent that he is attempting to corrupt with the knowledge of nothing. BZ first sees her in *Maria*, the first, and undistributed, film she stars in. It is an art-house documentary that follows Maria around New York. Although she is sometimes aware of the camera's presence, Maria never learns the purpose of Carter's filming until he begins cutting the footage in Los Angeles.

"The picture showed Maria doing a fashion sitting, Maria asleep on a couch at a party, Maria on the telephone arguing with the billing department at Bloomingdale's, Maria cleaning some marijuana with a kitchen strainer, Maria crying at the IRT. At the end she was thrown into negative and looked dead... Maria did not like to look at it" (*Play* 20).

The film is a projection of her self from the subjective gaze of the artist. It even mimics her progress through life from a hopeful woman to a body residing in negative space. The film is unsettling because it not only exhibits Carter's objectification of Maria and his own perception of her fragility, but also takes away her agency as someone in possession of her own story. She hates any public showing of the film because "she disliked their having seen her in that first

picture” (*Play* 20-21). BZ owns all copies of the film and screens it while Maria is at his home, prompting her to become physically ill. In this act, BZ gains power and knowledge through possessing this representation of her self.

In her second film *Angel Beach*, Maria plays a girl raped by a motorcycle gang. Once again, her character, though fictional, is a portrayal of her self from her husband’s perspective. However while watching this film, Maria does not “have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself” (*Play* 19). After her trauma, the girl denies her loss meant anything and moves on with her life with a lack of hope. Maria prefers the ending of the studio cut, which shows the girl walking across a campus as if she “had a knack for controlling her destiny” (*Play* 20). However “Carter’s original cut ended with a shot of the motorcycle gang as if they represented some reality not fully apprehended by the girl Maria played” (*Play* 19). Based on Carter’s own projections, Maria does not possess the ability to comprehend reality and develop an understanding of her depression. Yet when Maria first meets BZ after he watches the original cut, he tells Carter that he missed the point of the film. “‘Meaning,’ BZ said, ‘how did Maria feel about the gangbang... did she get the sense they’re doing it not to her but to each *other*, does that not *interest* her, you don’t get that, you’re missing the story” (*Play* 111). BZ’s argument reveals his own belief that trauma is the result of people attempting to derive pleasure or incite harm upon others. He has seen *Maria* and assumes that she too can understand the realities of loss, while Carter only looks to his own creation of what Maria is.

BZ manipulates Maria because he sees himself in her character and desires her as a companion to share his pain. He is an extremely charismatic man and maintains an ability to calm and tempt Maria with stories, particularly those of suicide. “BZ knew things like that, knew about people, that was why she had called him” (*Play* 24). He recognizes that “the notion of general devastation had for Maria a certain sedative effect (*Play* 104). This is where BZ finds common ground with Maria. BZ can also be a violent figure, deriving sadistic satisfaction in both mental and physical abuse of those close to him. Eventually, he has Maria engage in abuse with him. After a night of excessive drinking, Maria wakes up with no memory at BZ and Helene’s home. Helene has a bruised cheekbone, and rejects Maria’s notion that she does not remember what happened the night before. After arguing, BZ hits Helene as Maria screams for him to stop. “BZ looked at Maria and laughed. ‘You weren’t talking that way last night,’ he said” (*Play* 164). In this moment, Maria recognizes her own susceptibility and mental parallels to BZ. Although she engaged in violence in an unaware state, it shakes her to the core that she may possess an absence of morality or may be an instigator of another’s loss. This event is what prompts her to escape to Las Vegas in search of her self. When the pair reconnect on location in the desert, BZ and Maria exhibit a new relationship as they recognize the emotional void within each other. Although BZ puts on a performance for others, while alone with Maria, he shows his vulnerability, coaxing her towards acceptance of nothing. The “two trees in town, two cottonwoods in the dry river bed,” represent their presence in the state, “but one of them was dead” (*Play* 188).

One afternoon, Maria speaks with a local woman who invites her to visit her home—a trailer on an expanse of concrete surrounded by a split rail fence and hundreds of miles of drifting sand. As sand blows through the fence and settles onto a chair and the concrete, Maria begins to cry.

“The woman picked up a broom and began sweeping the sand into small piles, then edging the piles back to the fence. New sand blew in as she swept. ‘You ever make a decision?’ she said suddenly, letting the broom fall against the fence. ‘About what.’ ‘I made my decision in ’61 at a meeting in Barstow and I never shed one tear since’ ‘No,’ said Maria. ‘I never did that’” (*Play* 199).

The woman is an embodiment of Camus’s absurd Myth of Sisyphus, continually sweeping away a never-ending flow of sand to her home. At first, Maria sees the constant stream of sand as an overwhelming and impossible burden. Camus writes, “One always finds one’s burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well... Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world (Camus 154-155). Once the woman decides to never shed a tear, she possesses the power to continue on without any suffering or obligation to a higher power. She remains aware of the past that led her to this point, but embraces the absurdist belief that all is well, and redefines her fate. The sand she must constantly sweep is not a weight upon her, rather it embodies a source of potential to form the world.

Maria's encounter with the woman is what ultimately brings her to choose to live her life in relation to nothing. In the late afternoon, she sits in the motel "looking out at the dry wash until its striations and shifting grains seemed to her a model of the earth and moon" (*Play* 201). BZ comes to her with news that Helene and Carter are having an affair, yet Maria does not reply. Instead, she returns to the window to watch the empty river bed, noting to herself the change of light and a plan to station a camera on the wash for twenty-four hours. "'What matters,' BZ said. 'Nothing,' Maria said" (*Play* 202). While BZ may believe Maria is moving towards taking her own life, it is in fact the opposite. The dried up river bed, a negative space in the earth, is the site of nothing. Within this world of nothing, the wind moves the sand over time. Each grain is like a unique element of the world at play, constantly creating, destroying, and redefining the formation of the space. The sand is neither right nor wrong, and no higher power controls it. Like Maria, the living cottonwood tree exists within the space of nothing. Maria makes the decision to keep playing the game because she understands how nothing applies to everything in her life. She chooses not to see it as a burden or to question its purpose. In capturing her own film from a purely objective view, Maria would reclaim ownership of her fate, showing the world in motion about the tree.

Although Maria decides she can live on while understanding nothing, BZ takes the opposite stance. In the final chapter in the third-person, he comes to Maria's room dressed in a blazer and tie, holding a bottle of vodka and Seconal, prepared to take his own life. BZ asks Maria to join him, yet she says no. "'You're still playing.' BZ did not take his eyes from hers. 'Some day you'll

wake up and you just won't feel like playing anymore.'" (Play 212). BZ fails to recognize the difference between Maria and himself as he falsely believes that her suicide is inevitable. Through owning the copies of *Maria*, manipulating her to commit violence, and, in his mind, influencing her to say nothing matters, BZ believes he has complete awareness and control over her fate. Maria does not argue against him, even though she maintains complete control over her actions. Instead she takes on a nurturing maternal role, similar to her dream of calming children entering a gas chamber, holding his hand and calmly stating the question "Why are you here" (Play 212). He replies, "Because you and I, we *know* something. Because we've been out there where nothing is. Because I wanted—you know why" (Play 212). BZ has experienced nothing as well, but it is not the same absurdity that Maria now comprehends. He feels the burden of the world piling up against him to the point that he is numb. Even though he has unfulfilled desire, BZ has no hope to continue living. Maria continues to hold his hand as they lie in bed together, until she feels the shift of his weight in bed as he grabs the pills. With her eyes still closed, the interjection "*Don't*" escapes her lips as a final action before leaving everything to the will of nature (Play 213). After leaving half the bottle for Maria, BZ says, "Don't start faking me now", as a last plea for her to join him, but eventually turns off the light and asks her to hold his hand and sleep (Play 213). Maria's final words to BZ are "I'm sorry" before he dies in his sleep (Play 213). It is an apology for not dying with him, for his inability to find a point to living, and for not telling him that he could make a decision to never feel the weight again.

After her breakdown, Maria plays despite understanding what nothing is. At this point, the world to her is nothing but fact. Her last residual delusion that remains is her idea that “What I play for here is Kate (*Play 4*). Yet with both of their mental instability and Carter’s legal control, it is impossible for Maria to gain custodial rights. From a Lacanian perspective, Chip Rhodes argues, “Within the narrative, Maria’s devotion to Kate is always figured as something that cannot be articulated in a way that coexists with more practical concerns. But it is an empty space that represents only negation” (Rhodes 136). Thereby, her desire for Kate is not a desire at all, rather a story that reveals a truth about her lack of self. What Maria truly plays for is her privileged perspective of the world. Knowing that nothing is the answer to all questions gives Maria the power of complete certainty and an alleviating respite from anxiety.

Maria’s acceptance of the absurd is like a suicide. Although she writes of her understanding nothing, it is not philosophy she wishes to share or explain. In fact, she fears that those close to her will discover that nothing applies to everything as well. She writes:

“...you will note after everything I remain Harry and Francine Wyeth’s daughter and Benny Austin’s godchild. For all I know they knew the answer too, and pretended they didn’t. You call it as you see it, and stay in the action. BZ thought otherwise. If Carter and Helen aren’t careful they’ll get the answer too” (Play 210).

This passage is an important glimpse into Maria’s beliefs. Understanding nothing is not a success. Rather it marks a complete loss of hope. Maria expresses a fear

for Carter and Helen that they may understand nothing, because she has seen the fatal effects of nothing on BZ and her mother and understands how privileged she is to be able to keep on playing. Although she did not completely understand the cause of her mother's suicide, the language of a conversation with Benny when she was young reveals her family's relationship to the idea of nothing: "Your mom's O.K., don't worry about your mom... Believe me it's nothing.' 'What's nothing? What's the matter with her?' 'Nothing on God's earth, Maria, that's what I'm telling you'" (*Play* 86). This conversation comes to Maria as a memory shortly after the traumatic loss she experiences from her abortion. It is possible that this reflection may give a name to the experience Maria is trying to understand, or that she can now recognize the hidden struggle that her family faced. The exchange has an incredible amount of subtext, revealing how her family possesses an awareness of nothing, yet also use it as a form of denial. Maria later asks Benny over the phone if he remembers that day, but she realizes that over time it "ceased to exist, had never happened at all: she was the one left who remembered it" (*Play* 151). Benny may have remembered the exact day, but Maria realizes that his optimistic nature would force him to suppress any possibility that he understood the concept of nothing.

Maria understanding of nothing denial of morality. This is exemplified with the opening line of the novel, "What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask" (*Play* 3). This line indicates both Maria's reticence from judgment, but also her own identification with the villain of *Othello*. Iago performs his last line before giving himself up to captivity, declaring, "Demand me nothing. What you

know, you know. From this time forth I never will speak word” and responds with silence to the inquiry, “What, not to pray?” (Shakespeare 5.2.216-218). The novel is set within a frame that morality and religion do not exist nor should they even be put into question. In Didion’s essay “On Morality”, which was written near the publication date of *Play It As It Lays*, the author questions the word, but only to argue that it cannot be used as a form of self-deception. Didion explains:

“You see I want to be quite obstinate about insisting that we have no way of knowing—beyond that fundamental loyalty to the social code—what is ‘right’ and what is ‘wrong,’ what is ‘good’ and what ‘evil’... Because when we start deceiving ourselves into thinking not that we want something or need something, but that it is a *moral imperative* that we have it, then is when we join the fashionable madmen, and then is when the thin whine of hysteria is heard in the land, and then is when we are in bad trouble” (“On Morality” 162-163).

Didion illuminates how moral judgment prevents people from coming to terms with the truth and incites superstition and pain. In a sense, she reflects her own form of the absurd. Yet Maria goes further than a rejection of moral principles. She maintains complete unquestioning denial of religion, want, and feeling. After realizing nothing matters while watching the dry river bed, Maria learns of a man who went out on a walk to talk to God and was found dead with a rattlesnake bite. She asks if Carter believes God answered the man, but he doesn’t respond and walks out of the room. That night, an underground nuclear blast detonates under Silver Wells, entirely erasing the existence of her childhood, the birthplace of her

optimism, into sand and dust. “Maria got up before dawn to feel the blast. She felt nothing. ‘I’m giving this one more chance,’” Carter said when he saw her sitting by the window. ‘Tell me what you want.’ ‘Nothing’” (*Play* 204-205). In her final moment of loss, Maria finds that nothing applies. With no past to escape to, no God to turn to, and no man to understand her, Maria can no longer feel or want anything.

Absurdity is at once a strength and a weakness for Maria because she at once recognizes that human life has no meaning, yet continues to search for it. She writes, “I am what I am. To look for ‘reasons’ is beside the point” (*Play* 3). “To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason” (Camus 48). She is merely a body within space that exists for the role of playing. Maria describes her life as a matter of facts, barely delving into her questions or looking for answers, rather explaining her self in relation to others and observing the world as it is. Maria writes, “Everything goes. I am working very hard at not thinking about how everything goes. I watch a hummingbird, throw the I Ching but never read the coins, keep my mind in the now” (*Play* 8). There are two facets to this passage that work in contradiction to each other. First, Maria puts in excessive effort to not question how things go in order to avoid questioning her own meaning. Yet Didion has argued that through writing, “... our notebooks give us away, for however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable ‘I’” (“On Keeping a Notebook” 136).

So what are the ultimate implications of this state of contradiction? Camus argues that, “Living is keeping the absurd alive. Keeping it alive is, above all, contemplating it” (Camus 70). Thus, through the act of creation, Maria is more than a passive character. She is truly living.

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