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Exploring the Female Voice and Feminine Identity within Memoirs of the 20th and 21st Centuries

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Abstract

Memoirs have long been a valuable way in which individuals share and reflect on their past experiences. The genre of memoir writing especially had a tremendous impact on a range of American female writers. This thesis explores memoirs written by women throughout the 20th century. With the shift in women's roles during the 1900s and early 2000s, the memoirs examined emphasize the importance of feminine identity. The analysis provided within this thesis centers on each memoirist's unique path in determining her sense of self. Moreover, the memoirists each use the process of writing to relay the value of personal growth and transition to readers. The memoirs examined are *The Red Leather Diary* by Lily Koppel; *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou; *Girl, Interrupted* by Susana Kaysen; *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed; and *Julie & Julia* by Julie Powell.

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Memoirs and the "Everywoman"

Characterized as a written account of a person's past experiences, a memoir highlights an author's ability to relive memories through the written word. Unlike an autobiography which covers the majority of one's own life, a memoir chronicles an author's remembrance and reflection of a specific period of time. Written as a first person narrative, a memoir not only allows readers to become better acquainted with a certain period in history but also prompts audiences to view the world through the lens of the writer. Thus, in writing about previous experiences from their own perspective, memoirists often use writing as a cathartic tool to discuss previously repressed events. While often difficult to read and examine, through sympathizing with the author's experiences, memoirs allow readers to confront their own repressed memories. Because of this, readers have helped to make memoirs a key component to the American literary cannon.

Although memoirs influenced literature throughout time, readers became more interested in memoirists' works in the 20th century. During the 1900s, American literature broadened to encompass a wide variety of genres and topics. With the rise of technology and access to education, individuals across ethnic and socioeconomic boundaries created a larger literary readership in the United States. As a result, more writers from different backgrounds were able to become prominent literary forces as audiences grew interested in their works. Thus, when individuals from different genders, ethnicities, and economic statuses became published writers, readership grew as more audiences felt that their stories were being "told by Everywoman and Everyman" (Gornick).

The belief that one could "find" her or himself within a work of literature became a focal point during the 20th modernist century. Ultimately, the notion of the self emerged in American

society and eventually permeated the literature of the era. With the emergence of civil rights movements that began in the mid-20th century, previously oppressed groups, such as women, gays, and African Americans, gained prominence to speak out against the inferiorities they continuously faced. As Vivian Gornick states in her essay "Why Memoir Now?", these cultural and social movements allowed individuals the safety to discuss issues not often publically addressed, including problems with "alcohol, domestic violence, sexual disorder, [and] the premature death of children." Because more individuals were given an outlet to disclose their problems, a notion that was previously denounced in earlier societies, more Americans felt connected to others who had experienced similar situations. In this way, the memoir was truly birthed during the 20th century as audiences and writers alike found catharsis in being able to openly discuss their situations and thus feel more intertwined with others who shared similar experiences.

The 21st century continues to be fascinated with memoirs due to the element of truth embedded within the narratives. As Gornick states, "In memoir, the reader must be persuaded that the narrator is speaking truth," and the notion of the truth sells many memoirs in today's capitalistic society. In this way, Gornick describes the dynamic relationship between the truth and the memoir:

> Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that, the power of a writing imagination is required. The narrator in a memoir is an instrument of illumination, but it's the writing itself that provides revelation.

The element of the truth presents one issue regarding the legitimacy of the memoir. Because memoirists often reflect on a period of time that occurred many years before they construct their narrative, much of what actually happened during that time was lost. While many writers keep detailed accounts and diaries of their daily lives, the majority of memoirists rely on memory to reignite the past. However, as Gornick states, the importance of the memoir does not depend upon the retelling of events. Rather, the goal of the memoir is to allow the author to reflect upon these events and relay what she or he learned from a particular experience.

With the emergence of memoirs as a prominent feature of the American literary cannon in the 20th century, female writers experienced an emergence that transformed the way in which literature is regarded and studied. Beginning in the early 1900s, fiction writers such as Kate Chopin and Charlotte Perkins Gillman rose to prominence and began to detail the struggles and hardships faced by women. However, during this period, most female characters were white and often part of the upper echelons of society. Nonetheless, as the century progressed, women gained the right to vote and began to acquire jobs that existed outside of their homes. Because of this, more women not only sought equality within mainstream society but rose to prominence by being outspoken leaders for social change. In this way, issues that secretly plagued women were publically introduced and permeated the literature produced throughout the 20th century.

Through the outpouring of issues being addressed, female writers from different races and socioeconomic backgrounds began to use literature as a way to openly discuss their struggles. Authors including Toni Morrison, Isabelle Allende, and Amy Tan discussed the different hardships faced by women from ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Detailing topics such as marital problems, racial biases, and immigration, these female authors provided an outlet for women readers to openly discuss their hardships. Thus, the emergence of powerful female

voices and narratives within the 20th century allowed women writers to become an integral part of the current literary cannon.

With the rise of both memoirs and female authors, more women began to share their experiences through the written word:

> In the decades since 1900, American women's autobiography has proven to be an ever more vibrant compositional form than it had been in the past. To read the self-told stories from this span in history is to discover the shared triumphs and tragedies, writing traditions and revolutions, social movements and counter-movements that shape the American woman's contemporary cultural situation. As historical and social shifts made it easier for women to write and publish their life stories, the resulting volume and variety of work has had the effect of recasting autobiography as an enterprise in substantive ways: changing the definitional considerations in autobiography, reexamining the generic requirements or tendencies of the writing form, revisiting the rhetorical perils and possibilities of gendered autobiography, reseeing the nature and limits of language used to testify to life experience, and shifting notions of why personal narratives prove so compelling to writers and readers alike. ("American Women's Autobiography").

With the start of the 20th century, more women became compelled and liberated to share their past experiences through their memoirs. During this time that saw great political and social change, the reemergence of the memoir allowed women to illustrate their feelings of past marginalization in order to establish themselves as liberated individuals. In this way, memoirs caused the female voice to be heard as they sought to redefine their identities within society.

As a result of memoirs becoming a more prominent literary form in the 20th century, many women rose to fame for their detailed and inspiring works. One memoirist who became a celebrated American female author was Maya Angelou. During the 1960s, Angelou published her memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* that detailed her childhood and transition into adulthood. Published during a time in which women faced opposition for movements towards social equality, Angelou's memoir was highly applauded for detailing her young life as an African American. Highlighting the differences between races, classes, and cultures, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* discusses the many struggles that women, especially those of color, faced during the early 1900s. In particular, Angelou articulates how her experiences were shaped by her personal sense of beauty and how her inferiority stemmed from her race. Ultimately, Angelou's memoir was published at a time where African American women "were not heard and the violation and degradation they had undergone were still ignored" (Corrêa). Due in large part to her memoir, "the presence of African-American women in the autobiographical field was being constructed" (Corrêa). Thus, Angelou's odyssey in accepting her beauty as an African American woman allowed other marginalized women to embrace their racial identities.

Similarly to Angelou's work, Susanna Kaysen's memoir *Girl, Interrupted* details her metamorphosis in claiming her female identity. Chronicling the two years she spent within an all-female psychiatric ward, Kaysen explores her experiences with her fellow patients in order to examine the dichotomy between sanity and insanity. In particular, it is the relationships she builds with the other women that ultimately mold Kaysen's own sense of self. Through reflecting on her early adulthood years that were marred by emotional trauma, the memoirist educates readers regarding the human psyche, particularly the female state of mind. Since she

was institutionalized during the late 1960s, Kaysen's memoir mirrors the second wave of feminism as its ideals clearly impact her experiences. Thus, *Girl, Interrupted* explores Kaysen's female gaze in how she defines the human psyche and comes to terms with her identity.

The notion of identity also plays a pertinent role within Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild*. In her narrative, Strayed documents her 1,100 mile hike along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), a journey she embarks upon in order to recover from her recent divorce, dependency on drugs and alcohol, and the death of her mother. While her journey proves to be physically and emotionally taxing, Strayed's travels alone negates the patriarchal stereotype that females are weak and incapable of being independent. In this way, *Wild* includes the female voice as an important force within the previously male dominated literary genre of travel literature.

Due to the personal yet universal issues highlighted throughout her memoir, Strayed became a prominent female figure with the publication of *Wild* in 2012. In several interviews, she discusses how her memoir allowed her to delve and come to terms with her past:

> I think most of us, at some point in our lives, think of picking up and going to a new place and escaping our lives. I think that's a part of life today. Maybe it always has been. But I feel like my hike was not about escaping so much as it was about going more deeply into life, my life. *Wild*, I think, is actually about the reverse of escape. It's about when I gave myself the opportunity to find some perspective and reflection, really discover for the first time what was true. It was a powerful experience for me, as I think it is for most of us, and in some way it's been happening since the beginning of time. Some of our most ancient narratives are about that journey. We go out into the unknown and we return changed. That's timeless. Even in American literature of the last 50 years or so, the books

> we think about as Great American Novels, most of them are about people who make a new home for themselves in a brand new world, casting yourself into a wider world, having a transformative adventure (Jensen).

In this way, Strayed's memoir ultimately centers on the idea of transformation as a way to discover one's identity. Prior to the beginning of her travels on the PCT, Strayed felt hopeless and a failure as a wife, daughter, and woman. However, she was ultimately able to become a person not only through her physical travel but also in writing about the emotional traumas and epiphanies she faced along the PCT. Because of this, Strayed's memoir is not only a key literary force within 21st century but further allows women to discuss the issues they face within their lives.

In addition to memoirs that centered on a single woman and her transformation in discovering her identity, double memoirs allowed readers to compare the journeys of two distinctive women. One example of a double memoir is *The Red Leather Diary* by Lily Koppel that explores the differences and similarities of women's lives in both the 20th and 21st centuries. The narrative details Koppel's discovery of an aged diary among other items in a New York City dumpster. The journalist soon learns that the diary belongs to a young woman named Florence and that its pages detail her life in New York City during the 1920s and 30s. Deciding to closely examine and reproduce the passages within her memoir, Koppel relates her own life and struggles with those written by Florence in her diary. Through this, Koppel presents a unique type of memoir as her life mirrors the young Florence's experiences despite the generational gap between them. It soon became Koppel's mission to not only find Florence but to also learn about her life since concluding her diary. Eventually meeting, Koppel explained the power of the red

diary that not only brought the two women together but helped them to find and establish their individuality:

> The red leather diary was a gift. It was a gift to Florence when she turned fourteen and needed to express her deepest longings. It was a gift to me when I found it at twenty-two, struggling with what I wanted to do with my life. Like Florence, I was searching. The diary found me. Again, the red leather diary was a gift to Florence at ninety (319-320).

Ultimately, the red leather diary functioned in similar ways for both Koppel and Florence. Despite their vastly different backgrounds, both women complete an odyssey in which they find their true purposes within their lives. Thus, Koppel's memoir highlights the importance of the female identity both throughout history and in modern society.

Much like *The Red Leather Diary,* the double memoir *Julie & Julia* by Julia Powell presents readers with a unique interpretation of a personal narrative. The work follows Powell as she attempts to make every recipe in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* within a year. Within her memoir, Powell credits Child as her inspiration in cooking but ultimately views her experience as being a pertinent aspect to her identity:

> I think everyone, well maybe not everyone but everyone I know, comes to a point in their lives where they feel locked into a life that they're not happy with, when they feel at sea, they don't know what the next choice is. (The book) is just chronicling my particular moment of breaking out of there, finding the crazy thing, finding the rabbit hole to go down to get to a new place. To me the book is about how everyone can do that. It's not so much about the cooking… It's an

example of a universal story…. I just did what everybody does at some point, which is break out and find a new way" (Boyes).

It is this "finding the rabbit hole" that Powell describes as her epiphany. While she maintains that her story in finding her true identity isn't fully centered on her cooking experiences, the memoirist emphasizes the universal idea that all individuals should find happiness within one's self. In this way, Powell highlights the element of self discovery that is not only intrinsic to memoirs but vital to all females as they find their true identities.

This thesis will explore the notion of identity and how it pertains to the females presented throughout each memoir. In addition, the stories discussed center on how each memoirist uses the process of writing to relay the value of personal growth and transition in determining her unique sense of self. *The Red Leather Diary* centers on the forging identities of both Florence and Koppel, especially focusing on the memoirist's career as a modern woman. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* focuses on Angelou's physical identity as an African American woman and the shift she undergoes in becoming a woman. *Girl, Interrupted* details Kaysen's developing female identity that is marred by her experiences within the all-female psychiatric ward. *Wild* examines Strayed's newfound identity based on her travels along the Pacific Crest Trail, specifically centering on how her physical journey, and subsequent writing of her travels, plays a key role in helping her to overcome her troubled past. Finally, *Julie & Julia* explores how Powell discovers the power of domesticity by, ironically, forgoing patriarchal values in order to find her true identity.

Once upon a time the diary had a tiny key:

The Double Narrative of Femininity in *The Red Leather Diary*

A written and personal account of one's life, a diary is often considered a "private memoir." Produced solely for a writer's personal reflections, a diary differs from a memoir in that it is rarely published and distributed for public audiences. Despite these differences, diaries and memoirs function in a similar way, namely that both center on the writer's reflections and intimate accounts of his or her life. It is because of this parallel that diaries can often be interpreted as memoirs, especially when personal journals unearth narratives of marginalized individuals. In this way, both diaries and memoirs play a key role in understanding the inequalities and struggles women have faced throughout history.

The Red Leather Diary by Lily Koppel functions as a "double memoir," one which the memoirist herself parallels her life to the experiences of a young female diarist. At the forefront, Koppel's memoir centers on the early 2000s in which she was a young Manhattan gossip columnist. Although she wrote articles for both *New York Times* and *Time* magazine, the journalist grew tired of interviewing celebrities and ultimately "wanted to report on life not found in the pages of glossy magazines or in news recycled at the end of each day" (6). Koppel eagerly sought to reinvent herself as a writer, as she confesses, "I was searching for a story that completely touched my life and those of other people. More than ever, I had no idea what to write about. What was I doing here?" (6). Through this reflection, Koppel not only began to question her career but sought to reshape her identity based on the need to feel better connected to both herself and others. Ultimately, the struggles Koppel faced are those of a "modern woman [who] must manage to be different people at different times, having loyalties which outrun any narrow circle and interests confusingly complex and manifold" (Heckscher). It is this notion of a

modern woman, one who must please others while also finding contentment within herself, that prompted Koppel to reevaluate her identity.

While she maintained her position as a gossip columnist, Koppel sought to write stories as a way to help her readers through their struggles, which, in turn, would reshape her life. Koppel's newfound interest in wanting to dramatically change careers is common amongst women of the 21st century. Because of suffrage and equality movements throughout much of the 20th century, women are no longer solely delegated to roles within the household. Instead, as Heckscher explains, "There remains what seems basic and inevitable: a shift in gravity as life goes on, a changing focus, and an alternation of careers." However, rather than men being the only ones privy to these changes, women in the modern era are able to shift between lives both inside and out of their domestic spheres. Because of this, women like Koppel are able to focus on their careers while juggling domestic duties. Thus, women within this modern age are much more readily able to redefine themselves and their identities based significantly on their ever-changing careers.

As she sought to redefine her career, Koppel embarked on an odyssey that ultimately impacted the way in which she viewed herself. Upon moving into a new apartment in New York City, Koppel's longing for a new career path came to fruition as she discovered an aged red diary among discarded items in her new building:

> The diary seems a particularly eloquent survivor of another age. It was as if a corsage once pinned to a girl's dress were preserved for three quarters of a century, faded ribbons intact, the scent still lingering on its petals. Through a serendipitous chain of events, the diary was given the chance to tell its story (2).

As she examined the diary, Koppel found that its owner is Florence Wolfson, a young woman who wrote consistently within the journal from 1929 to 1934. Immediately intrigued by its contents, Koppel began to leaf through the aged pages and found that the diary's "nearly two thousand entries painted a portrait of a teenager obsessed with her appearance and the meaning of her existence" (13-14). In particular, Koppel found that Florence's life during the early 1900s in New York City ultimately mirrored her own life:

> I couldn't help but read it as if it were a personal letter to me. Florence and I shared many of the same longings for love and the desire to cave out our own paths. Her entries confessing loneliness spoke to my insecurities about being single and on my own in New York. We were both writers and painters. We both felt the need to create lasting beauty out of our daily experience. Florence seemed so alive, intensely internal and fully engaged with the world around her (17-19).

In detailing her thoughts, experiences, and dreams within her diary, Florence had a tremendous impact on Koppel. While Florence wrote her journal with the intention that only she would view it, the diarist's unabashed insights and ideas caused Koppel to be "drawn into Florence's world" (19). In becoming completely engrossed with the diary's entries of a young woman living in 1920s New York City, Koppel viewed Florence's story "as a gift to me when I found it at twenty-two, struggling with what I wanted to do with my life" (320). Because of this, Koppel looked to Florence as a way to find her own identity through the struggles and triumphs as detailed within the diary.

On the other hand, *The Red Leather Diary* also centers on Florence and her journey in establishing her sense of self. While her experiences mirror aspects of Koppel's own life, Florence faced particular obstacles that ultimately molded her identity. Born in the early 1900s

to a privileged family from New York City, Florence began to question her existence. Using a red leather diary that she received as a gift for her fourteenth birthday, Florence details her shifting identity as she moves from being a teenager to an adult. While she wrote in her journal throughout much of her teenage years, Florence's first entry plays a particular importance to the value of memoir writing:

> "How often we try to remember matters of interest and importance from the past, and how frequently our memory fails! But an event recorded is one forever preserved. Let this book remember for you—that is its purpose. … These are mile stones of your life—worthy of recording—a satisfaction to be able to relive the past and compare year-by-year progress by reading your entries" (25).

With this start, Koppel begins to shed light on Florence's young identity as articulated through the diary itself. In particular, Koppel highlights Florence's profound interest in the arts as a key aspect to her sense of self, as the diarist states, "After a really absorbing day at school I 'created' for hours!...Cut out pictures, painted pictures, saw pictures, pasted pictures—Is this actually I?" (61). As Koppel explains, it is this questioning of her character through art that prompted Florence to bring "herself to life on paper" (61). Thus, Florence's identity begins to emerge with Koppel's as both use writing as a way of both self expression and self discovery.

In addition to their passion for art and writing, Florence's career path echoes Koppel's struggles in identifying herself as an established journalist. Upon finding a passage that details Florence's life after graduating college in 1934, Koppel notes how the young woman tries "to convince a cheap tabloid that an art column written down to the public would be a good thing" (228). Similarly to Koppel herself, Florence's burgeoning career within the arts speaks of her determination during a time in which women held limited public positions. Despite the

differences of time in which they lived, it was Florence's perseverance that convinced Koppel to pursue her dream in becoming a recognized author, a decision that culminated in the publication of *The Red Leather Diary.* Thus, it was Florence's words and wisdom that prompted Koppel to establish her true identity.

Ultimately, *The Red Leather Diary* functions as a memoir that accounts for the lives of two women who sought to forge their identities within their respective societies. Just as Florence's diary provided an outlet for Koppel to examine her life, the journalist's publication allows readers to connect with her struggles in defining herself as a modern woman. Because both Florence and Koppel's stories center on their maturing and coming of age, their narratives allow readers from different backgrounds to examine their own lives:

> By centering the narrative around a familiar or shared experience, the autobiographer joins with the reader in a mutual effort to make sense of it. The result is a cycle of remembering, composing their lives, engaging their readers, and reflecting together with other women about the underlying meanings of universal or widely shared experiences ("American Women's Autobiographies).

The experiences that united Florence and Koppel speak to the power of the female memoir. Despite the generational differences between them, the two women faced similar issues and questions regarding their identity. As Koppel molded her own identity through Florence's diary, it was Florence herself that became inspired by Koppel when the young journalist returned the woman's diary. It was through meeting Koppel and being reunited with her diary that prompted the ninety year old Florence to state, "It has added zest to my life, it has brought back some of the passion of my youth and made me feel more alive than I have in years"(xi). Thus, the relationship between Florence and Koppel that is built on shared experiences and self discovery

relates to the importance of the female memoir as creating bonds among all women. It is memoirs like *The Red Leather Diary* that not only validate the strength of female bonds but celebrate the modern woman and her journey in establishing her sense of self.

I wanted to be a woman:

Marginalized Beauty and Self Recognition in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

Throughout the history of women's studies, the notion of feminine beauty has continuously been a focus for scholars and individuals alike. Due to changing ideas regarding women within modern society, the ideal of feminine beauty ranges in age, body figure, and ethnic background. However, despite these advancements, many cultures continue to view the white female as the epitome of feminine beauty. Often depicted with light eyes, hair, and skin color, the ideal white woman is viewed as a pure and lasting beauty. Because of this idealized feminine figure, non-white women were marginalized and disregarded for their seemingly inferior appearance.

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* became one of the most noteworthy memoirs of the 20th century due to her open nature in discussing her inferior identity. The memoir follows Angelou's childhood living predominantly in Arkansas during the height of nationwide racial tensions. Being an African American woman, Angelou discussed the inequalities and prejudices she faced, experiences which negatively impacted her young sense of self. However, as she grows older, the memoirist came to accept her physical appearance as an undeniable and empowering aspect of her identity. Thus, Angelou's memoir highlights the importance of embracing one's feminine beauty in order to establish self recognition and personal identity.

The importance of appearance and personal identity is immediately presented within the first lines of Angelou's memoir. In retelling her experiences as an African American girl, the memoirist places importance on her image as dictated by others. Because of her race that was deemed inferior by the majority within her society, Angelou viewed herself as being unworthy.

In reflecting on a poem that begins with the line "What you looking at me for?", Angelou illustrates her uncertainty in being a young African American girl, especially when she states,

> The truth of the statement was like a wadded up handkerchief, sopping wet in my fists, and the sooner they accepted it the quicker I could let my hands open and the air would cool my palms (3).

This admission reveals what Angelou could not ultimately ignore: she was different in comparison to her peers. Although she grew up in a predominately African American community, she reveals how her personal identity was marred because of her race. Her childhood was influenced by dominant views of white beauty as she sought "to look like one of the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right in the world" (4). In contrast, Angelou thought her skin was "dirty like mud" (4), and because of her dark complexion, she was also deemed inferior by her African American peers. Because of this double oppression that she faced from both whites and blacks, Angelou reflected on her childhood ideal in becoming a white girl:

> Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten? My light-blue eyes were going to hypnotize them…They would understand why I have never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang … Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother, who was understandably jealous of my beauty, had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil (4-5).

This double identity described by Angelou dictates what many children idealize: a life in which they can escape their troubles and fantasize about transforming into a completely different person. However, rather than dreaming about becoming wealthy or living in another country, Angelou writes that she believed her race was somehow a mistake, in that she would one day wake up from her "ugly black dream" to become a white girl. It was becoming a white female that Angelou held as an ideal so that she could overcome her inferiorities and insecurities. However, because she was unable to adhere to the ideals of both her immediate African American community and the overarching white culture, Angelou remained marginalized. It is with this start of her memoir that Angelou embarks upon the acceptance of her beauty and physical identity.

Much of Angelou's childhood perceptions on her lack of beauty stemmed from her family relations. Raised with an older brother, Bailey, Angelou recalls equating her older sibling with being God-like, explaining, "My pretty Black brother was my Kingdom Come" (23). Through equating her brother's appearance to holiness but failing to comment on her own beauty, Angelou minimized her identity as being inferior. Thus, the memoirist's early life was marred by her distorted personal lack of beauty, an idea that ultimately plagued her sense of self. Furthermore, Angelou's self perception failed in comparison to the physical beauty displayed by her mother. Described by others as "right pretty" and "a good-looking woman," Angelou deemed herself as inferior based upon her mother's appearance (46). Ultimately, it was her Uncle Tommy who explained to the young girl, "Don't worry 'cause you ain't pretty. Plently pretty women I seen digging ditches or worse. You smart. I swear to God, I rather you have a good mind than a cute behind" (67). While he failed to recognize her physical beauty, Uncle Tommy began to instill in Angelou that intelligence overshadows appearance, a sentiment that

ultimately shapes her identity as a young adult. However, it is her lack of beauty that causes Angelou to feel unloved, especially by her often absent parents. It is when she moves to St. Louis that Angelou's sense of self further becomes marred as she is sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend:

> Finally he was quiet, and then came the nice part. He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home. From the way he was holding me I knew he'd never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me (72).

Despite her perpetrator's horrendous acts against her, Angelou exhibited a victim mentality that directly related to her sense of self. As she felt unwanted by her parents and her community because of her appearance, Angelou found comfort within her abuser by believing that she would be loved unconditionally. However, when he ignored her in the weeks after his abuse, Angelou believed that she "had made him ashamed of me" (73). Because she was an outcast in both her family and community due to her physical appearance, the affection she seemingly received from her abuser left Angelou emotionally ashamed. Thus, Angelou's early childhood identity is negatively impacted due to her inability to be truly loved and valued.

Despite the inferiority and trauma she faced as a child, Angelou ultimately accepted her physical identity as a young adult. Rather than retaining hope that she will become a white girl, the memoirist denounced the seemingly superior culture and race:

> Let the whitefolks have their money and power and segregation and sarcasm and big houses and schools and lawns like carpets, and books, and mostly—mostly—let them have their whiteness. It was better to be meek and lowly, spat upon and abused for this little time than to spend eternity frying in the fires of hell (129).

In realizing the inequalities she faced at the hands of whites, Angelou came to the conclusion that she may never live a "white life," one that is full of privilege, wealth, and superiority. With this admission, Angelou accepted her African American race as she realized her race will eventually be redeemed due to the inequalities faced at the hands of whites. It is this full acceptance of her traumatic past and physical nature that allowed the memoirist to embrace her identity:

> The Black female is assaulted in her tender years by all those common forces of nature at the same time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black lack of power.
>
> The fact that the adult American Negro female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste, and even belligerence. It is seldom accepted as an inevitable outcome of the struggle won by survivors and deserves respect if not enthusiastic acceptance (268).

While she was discredited by both whites and those within her community because of her appearance, Angelou found power within herself as she breaks from the inferiorities she faced. Citing a "tripartite crossfire" that victimized every aspect of her being, the memoirist realized that she can overcome her marginalization as an African American and woman. Because of this, Angelou became empowered by accepting her full identity, a notion that continues to liberate for present and future readers of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

She lit the match:

The Psychological Self Discovery in *Girl, Interrupted*

The presence of the human psyche within literature, specifically works of nonfiction, allow readers to grapple with their own personal questions and mindsets. Autobiographical works, such as memoirs, especially provide readers with an in-depth and firsthand account of the author's psychology as he or she reflects on previous experiences. During the 20th century, female memoirists exposed the psychological traumas they faced due to restricting patriarchal ideals. It was ultimately the feminist movement of the 1960s that allowed women to speak against the societal notions which previously hindered their identities.

Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* quickly became one of the most discussed memoirs of the 20th century due to its haunting portrayal of the female psyche. Published in 1993, Kaysen's memoir details her experiences during the late 1960s in which she became a patient at McLean Hospital, all-female psychiatric clinic. As she reflects on the two years spent within the hospital, Kaysen illustrates how her treatment facility, especially the patients and doctors within it, defined her identity as she transitioned from a teenager to a woman. In this way, much of Kaysen's memoir centers on the female psyche as she exposes readers to the psychological struggles many women faced as a result of the second wave of feminism and their changing roles within society.

The strength of *Girl, Interrupted* lies predominately in the numerous insights that Kaysen provides regarding mental illness. In particular, Kaysen's focus on psychology allows her to recount her past feelings of depression that led to her hospitalization:

> People ask, How did you get in there? What they really want to know is if they are likely to end up in there as well. I can't answer the real question. All I can tell them is, It's easy.
>
> And it is easy to slip into a parallel universe. There are so many of them, worlds of the insane, the criminal, the crippled, the dying, perhaps of the dead as well. These worlds exist alongside this world and resemble it, but are not in it (1).

The way in which Kaysen is hospitalized due to severe bouts of depression relate to the power struggle among men and women during the 1960s. Upon meeting a doctor to discuss her mental well-being at the age of eighteen, Kaysen describes the odd interaction between herself and the male doctor that ultimately left her powerless in submitting herself to a psychiatric ward. The memoirist notes how the doctor began to adamantly question her about a pimple on her face, telling her, "You've been picking it" (7). Through this observation, Kaysen personifies the growth on her face, noting how it was "yearning for release" (7). Ultimately, this sensation of release directly relates to Kaysen's identity and the transformation she endures as a patient within the psychiatric ward. For instance, while she ultimately agrees with her doctor that she needs "a rest" (8), Kaysen reflects on the moments before her identity was completely stripped from her:

> I have thought often of the next ten minutes—my last ten minutes. I had the impulse, once, to get up and leave through the door I'd entered, to walk the several blocks to the trolley stop and wait for the train that would take me back to my troublesome boyfriend, my job at the kitchen store. But I was too tired (8).

It was these defining "ten minutes" that Kaysen illustrates not only the change in her identity but the loss of her free will due to her male doctor. In debating her return to her life, one

that includes her "troublesome boyfriend" and her job, Kaysen is compelled to stay with the doctor due to her exhaustion. Through this admission, Kaysen validates that her inability to live her life effectively prompted her to be admitted within the psychiatric ward. However, the influence of her male doctor on her decision to enter the hospital echoes the struggles women faced due to domineering masculine values. When he assures her that her stay at the hospital will only be a few weeks, Kaysen states that she would admit herself sometime in the near future. It is then that her doctor, against her wishes, forces her to enter the hospital. Stating that he looked "triumphant" (8) in his decision for her, Kaysen reflects on how her doctor "took me by the elbow—pinched me between his large stout fingers—and steered me outside. Keeping hold of my arm, he opened the back door of the taxi and pushed me in….Then he slammed the door shut" (8-9). Through both his physical and emotion dominance, Kaysen emphasizes her loss of voice, one that prohibited her from choosing when she could admit herself into the ward. It is through this interaction that marks the start of Kaysen's transition into womanhood, one which is ultimately marred by her mental health.

Once admitted into the psychiatric ward, Kayen's identity becomes intertwined with the other young female patients. In particular, Kaysen explores how both she and the other patients long for both physical and psychological freedom independent from the confines of their hospital. It is through comparing herself to her fellow patients that Kaysen prompts herself to evaluate her own verging identity. For instance, Kaysen devotes one chapter of her memoir to a burn victim named Polly. Singling her as the "one girl among us [who] had set herself on fire" (16), Kaysen becomes frightened by Polly's appearance, noting, "She used gasoline. …I couldn't look at her without thinking about it" (16). It is this horror that she sees within Polly that prompts Kaysen to examine her own psyche:

> I had an inspiration once. I woke up one morning and I knew that today I had to swallow fifty aspirin. It was my task: my job for the day. I lined them up on my desk and took them one by one, counting. But it's not the same as what she did. I could have stopped, at ten, or at thirty. And I could have done what I did do, which was go onto the street and faint. Fifty aspirin is a lot of aspirin, but going onto the street and fainting is like putting the gun back in the drawer.
>
> She lit the match (17).

Through this comparison to Polly, Kaysen creates a dichotomy between herself and the burn victim. While she failed to take the fifty aspirin in order to commit suicide, Kaysen values both Polly's determination and courage in psychically pushing herself to an ultimate extreme. However, while she elevates Polly's character above her own, Kaysen realizes the severity behind the young woman's identity, as she states, "We might get out sometime, but she was locked up forever in that body" (19). Thus, as she begins her hospital stay, Kaysen compares herself to the fellow patients as a way to understand both her past and future identities.

The way in which Kaysen comes to an understanding about her identity is largely dependent on her self-destructive nature. In a chapter entitled "My Suicide," Kaysen reveals her dark past in order to create a future for herself both within and separate from the confines of the psychiatric hospital. Calling suicide a "premeditated murder," Kaysen reveals how a "successful suicide demands good organization and a cool head, both of which are usually incompatible with the suicidal state of mind" (36). In this way, Kaysen reveals how her unfocused mindset ultimately led to her failed suicide attempt, as she states, "My motives were weak: an American-history paper I didn't want to write and the question I'd asked months earlier, Why not kill myself?" (36). With this state of mind, the memoirist describes how her identity, one that was

marred by indecisiveness and weakness, led to both her suicide attempt and eventual institutionalization. Thus, as she reflects on the moment in which she was forced to be admitted, Kaysen ultimately relates her feminine identity to her hospitalization:

> The doctor says he interviewed me for three hours. I say it was twenty minutes. Twenty minutes between my walking in the door and his deciding to send me to McLean. I might have spent another hour in his office while he called the hospital, called my parents, called the taxi. An hour and a half is the most I'll grant him.
>
> We can't both be right. Does it matter which of us is right?
>
> It matters to me. But it turns out I'm wrong (71).

Through this admission, Kaysen implies that it was both her mental health and gender that prohibited her from determining her own fate. In stating that was "wrong" regarding the length of her meeting, Kaysen acknowledges the lack of power she previously possessed as a young woman within a patriarchal society. Ultimately, as she unwillingly submits herself to the doctor, Kaysen illustrates how her psyche was impacted by her depression as well as her inferiority as a woman. It is because of this interaction with her doctor that prompts Kaysen to reevaluate how both herself and her other female patients fit within the cultural constructs of their male dominated society.

Despite her being institutionalized for two years of her early adult life, Kaysen comes to a full understanding of her female psyche and identity when she reemerges within her society. In particular, Kaysen relates her identity to art as the painting *Girl Interrupted at Her Music* by Johannes Vermeer prompts her to compare her sense of self prior to her hospitalization and after her release. The first time she viewed the painting as a seventeen year old student, Kaysen

recalls how the female figure within the painting seemed to "warn" her, as she explains, "Her mouth was slightly open, as if she had just drawn a breath in order to say to me, 'Don't!'" (166). This ominous admission not only relates to Kaysen's journey within the psychiatric hospital but also to the struggles she faced as a result of her gender. In this way, after being released from the clinic and returning to view the painting once again, Kaysen compares her current identity to the female figure within Vermeer's work:

> Interrupted at her music: as my life had been, interrupted in the music of being seventeen, as her life had been, snatched and fixed on a canvas: one moment made to stand still and to stand for all the other moments, whatever they would be or might have been. What life can recover from that? (167).

As she reflects on her past, Kaysen ultimately reaches the conclusion that her identity was negatively impacted by both her mental state and patriarchal values. Similarly to the young woman within the painting, Kaysen's life was "interrupted" when her male doctor admitted her to the psychiatric hospital. Thus, Kaysen's memoir concludes on somber note as she realizes that despite the progresses made for women during her early adult years, she nonetheless fell victim because of her gender. It is through this realization that causes Kaysen to evaluate her current identity as being related to patriarchy as well as her subsequent hospitalization. In this way, *Girl Interrupted* validates feminism as being imperative to the female psyche.

There was nothing to do but go on:

Self Discovery from the Body in *Wild*

Along with an internalized sense of self, the notion of the physical body is a key component in constructing one's identity. For many memoirists, it is the exploration of their physical identity that defines their overall identity. While both genders face changes with regards to their physicality, the female body is often highlighted as facing more distinctive transitions during puberty and pregnancy. These changes ultimately allow female memoirist to "explore their physical as well as their emotional power" (Koven 175). Thus, memoirs that center on a woman's physical transformation help to validate the importance of the female identity.

In her memoir *Wild*, author Cheryl Strayed documents her arduous travels along Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), a journey marked by an eventual transformation as she becomes a stronger and more independent woman. Through her hiking alone along the PCT, Strayed comes to the realization that her journey fully molded her current identity. Strayed discusses her identity prior to her travels on the PCT and how her journey ultimately aided her in healing from her traumatic past. For instance, Strayed begins to reflect on her life before her travels on the PCT, stating, "It seemed like years ago now—as I stood barefoot on that mountain in California—in a different lifetime, really, when I'd made the arguably unreasonable decision to take a long walk alone on the PCT in order to save myself" (5). Through this statement, Strayed explains how she used her journey on the PCT to "save" herself from the heartbreak and struggles she previously endured. Before she began her travels, Strayed began to abuse drugs in order to cope from a recent divorce and the death of her mother. Strayed believed that her hike along the PCT would help her to not only become clean but could allow her to "find" herself once again, as she explains, "Hiking the Pacific Crest Trail was my way back to the person I used to be" (17).

The only possible way in which Strayed could return to the person she used to be required both perseverance and physical strength, both of which she cultivated over the period of her travels. In reflecting on her mindset prior to the start of her journey, Strayed notes, "I believed that all the things I'd been before had prepared me for this journey. But nothing had or could" (5). Referencing the losses she endured prior to trek along the PCT, Strayed believed that the strength she could garner from her experiences would aid her on her journey. However, she quickly learned that life on the PCT was starkly different from the life she left behind, explaining, "Each day on the trail was the only possible preparation for the one that followed. And sometimes even the day before didn't prepare me for what would happen next" (5). In this way, Strayed came to the realization that the PCT, like life in general, cannot be planned as every day presented new and unforeseen obstacles. While the struggles she faced prior to her journey certainly helped her to overcome the hardships she faced on the PCT, Strayed cultivated a resiliency and fortitude that allowed her to survive the arduous conditions she encountered. Strayed's courage and stamina not only aided her in becoming physically stronger over the course of her journey but also helped her to reach a state of emotional understanding regarding her life prior to her experiences on the PCT. Most specifically, Strayed discusses her relationship to God, especially in relationship to her mother's illness and eventual death, as she states,

> I prayed fervently, rabidly, to God, any god, to a god I could not identify or find. I cursed my mother, who'd not given me any religious education. Resentful of her own repressive Catholic upbringing, she'd avoided church altogether in her adult life, and now she was dying and I didn't even have God. I prayed to the whole wide universe and hoped that God would be in it, listening to me. I prayed

> and prayed, and then I faltered. Not because I couldn't find God, but because suddenly I absolutely did: God was there, I realized, and God had no intention of making things happen or not, of saving my mother's life. God was not a granter or wishes. God was a ruthless bitch (23).

In her refusal of religion and God, Strayed explores the two relationships that failed her prior to her travels on the PCT. On a lesser, but nonetheless significant, level, she explains her resentment towards her mother. While she explained that her mother did not emphasize religion because of her upbringing, Strayed harbors hostility towards her for her dying state. Knowing she will be unable to aid her mother in recovering from her terminal cancer, Strayed begins to examine her relationship with her mother, especially with regards to her identity in being a daughter, as she notes, "I wanted my mother to say to me that I had been the best daughter in the world. I did not want to want this, but I did, inexplicably, as if I had a great fever that could be cooled only by those words" (23). Through this, Strayed sought validation as being both a good daughter and strong woman. However, when her mother passed away and she was unable to receive this validation from her, the memoirist looked for a physical journey that could explore her emotional state, as she writes, "I would want things to be different than they were. The wanting was a wilderness and I had to find my own way out of the woods" (27). It was through her journey on the PCT that presented Strayed with a type of odyssey, one in which she became more cognizant of both her physical and emotional strength.

When she begins her journey, Strayed adopts a nomadic lifestyle, a decision that impacts her overall character and identity. Prior to the start of her adventures on the PCT, Strayed purchases a variety of equipment, making her feel as though she became "a backpacking expert" (41). However, she quickly comes to the conclusion that she has much to learn in order to

become a backpacking expert, as she writes, “It was only as I stood gazing at that pile of meticulously chosen gear on the bed in my Mojave motel room that I knew with profound humility that I was not” (41). Rather than abandon her plan to travel along the PCT, Strayed’s resilience prompts her to embark upon her journey, reflecting,

> How could I carry a backpack more than a thousand miles over rugged mountains and waterless deserts if I couldn’t even budge it an inch in an air-conditioned motel room? The notion was preposterous and yet I *had* to lift that pack. It hadn’t occurred to me that I wouldn’t be able to. I’d simply thought that if I added up all the things I needed in order to go backpacking, it would equal a weight that I could carry (43).

Citing the emotional “baggage” that prompted her to embark upon her PCT journey in the first place, Strayed compares her life to the backpack she must carry. Similar to how she could not escape her mother’s death, Strayed realizes that she must start and finish her journey in order to cultivate her identity. In this way, while she comes to a fuller understanding about the difficulties in being a backpacker, Strayed reflects upon the emotional struggles she faced within her life. This ultimately marks the start of Strayed’s physical and emotional journey, one in which she transforms into a stronger woman.

While on the PCT, Strayed overcomes many obstacles that contribute to her odyssey of self discovery. Nicknaming her backpack “Monster” due to its weight, Stayed explains, “Every part of my body hurt. …I saw no one, but, strange as it was, I missed no one. I longed for nothing but food and water and to be able to put my backpack down” (70). Because of the physical pain, Strayed comes to a predicament while on her travels:

> As the notion of quitting settled in, I came up with another reason to bolster my belief that this whole PCT hike had been an outlandishly stupid idea. I’d set out

> to hike the trail so that I could reflect upon my life, to think about everything that had broken me and make myself whole again (84).

Through contemplating to end her journey, Strayed comes to the realization that the PCT will ultimately save her. Despite the grueling physical challenges presented on the trek, Strayed ultimately finds that testing her body and mental fortitude will help her to reclaim her identity and become "whole again." Thus, Strayed's willingness and strength in overcoming her obstacles ultimately mold her in becoming a stronger and more resilient woman.

It is only when Strayed completes her trek that she is able to fully understand the strength associated with her female identity. During her journey, she recalls how she had "been fielding questions whether I was afraid to be a woman alone—the assumption that a woman alone would be preyed upon" (296). While she faced only hospitality by her fellow hikers, the memoirist praises the world by providing her with the strength to preserve:

> *Thank you*, I thought over and over again. *Thank you.* Not just for the long walk, but for everything I could feel finally gathered up inside me; for everything the trail had taught me and everything I couldn't yet know, though I felt it somehow already contained within me. …It was my life—like all lives, mysterious and irrevocable and sacred. So very close, so very present, so very belonging to me. How wild it was, to let it be (310-311).

In comparing the end of her hike to her future, Strayed relates her experiences to her identity. While she began her journey lost and without a clear purpose for her life, Strayed's arduous travels along the PCT prompted her to accept both her failures and triumphs in order to reclaim her sense of self. In this way, *Wild* emphasizes the power of the human body, especially the feminine

Hacking the Marrow out of Life:

A Return to Domesticity as Femininity in *Julie & Julia*

The emergence of feminism within the latter half of the 20th century prompted many women to trade their domestic duties for lives within the public sphere. As more women became strong societal forces outside of the home, those of both genders abhorred domesticity and the limitations it can inflict. However, a cultural and social shift occurred during the 21st century in which women returned to domestic roles as a way to counteract their identities within the workplace. In this way, the idea that women "could have it all" permeated American society as many sought to maintain a balance between their public and private roles.

A memoir published during the mid 2000s, *Julie & Julia* by Julie Powell explored the trend of women returning to domestic roles as a way to both liberate themselves and form their individual identities. Similarly to Koppel's *The Red Leather Diary*, Powell's memoir presents a double narrative as she explores both her life and the experiences of the renowned French chef, Julia Child. While facing personal crises, Powell finds Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* and decides to cook all 524 recipes within it over the course of one year. As she becomes inspired through Child's passion for cooking, Powell embarks upon a journey of self discovery which ultimately leaves her with a newfound identity.

The notion of identity is immediately prominent within the opening pages of *Julie & Julia*, especially as Powell and Child's lives begin to parallel one another. Powell includes passages from Child's own memoir *My Life in France* which centers on her transition from housewife to prominent chef during the 1950s. Prior to becoming a culinary idol, Child was a thirty- seven year old housewife who moved to Paris, France due to her husband's job with the United States government. Faced with a new culture and society, Child decided to enroll in

cooking classes, a decision which ultimately changed her identity and provided her with a newfound purpose for her life.

Similarly to Child, Powell reflects on how cooking allowed her to cope with major transitions which were impacting her life. In particular, she describes how her sense of identity is ultimately marred by her society's perceptions of her. Prior to beginning her journey in recreating all of Child's recipes, Powell recalls how her gynecologist gave her the "Pushing Thirty speech" (6), one that highlighted her decreasing opportunities in starting a family. In addition to her unfulfilling job, Powell begins to lose passion for her life as she realizes her days are filled with monotonous duties. However, it is when she discovers the *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* that Powell can begin to reclaim her life and identity:

> I felt like I'd at last found something *important*. Why? I bent again over the book's passages, searching for the cause of this strange feeling. It wasn't the food exactly….No, there was something deeper here, some code within the words, perhaps some secret embedded in the paper itself.
>
> I have never looked to religion for comfort—belief is just not in my genes. But reading *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*—childishly simple and dauntingly complex, incantatory and comforting—I thought this was what a prayer must feel like (15).

In comparing her discovery to a religious experience, Powell highlights her feeling of enlightenment, a moment in which she can establish her true identity. Rather than placing emphasis on the recipes themselves, Powell views Child's cookbook as a way in which she can find happiness within her life once again. Through viewing the cookbook as a "prayer" that allows her to redefine her life, Powell begins to use cooking as a way to liberate herself from the

ideals placed upon her by her society. Thus, Powell embarks on her path of rediscovery through the guidance of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*.

Over the course of her memoir, Powell faces many trials that nearly convince her to abandon her year-long project. While she learns to recreate the many difficult recipes detailed within Child's cookbook, the struggles Powell faces at the end of her journey cause her to reevaluate her identity. In reflecting on both her project as well as relationship to her husband, Eric, Powell comes to a realization about her character:

> I should just get that scarlet *L* branded on my chest now, because I'm a big LOSER. And then there's Eric. "Maybe part of the Project is that you don't finish everything." Where has he *been* for the last eleven months? Doesn't he *get* it? Doesn't he understand that if I don't get through the whole book in a year then this whole thing will have been a waste, that I'm going to spiral into mediocrity and despair…? (266).

Regardless of her sarcasm and over dramatization, Powell exposes the realities facing women within modern society. In promising both herself and others that she would complete all of Child's recipes, Powell begins to view herself as she realizes her goals may not be accomplished. By looking to her husband for support and not receiving the advice she expected to hear, Powell's value in her sense of self decreases. Thus, the struggles that Powell faces echo the trials of the modern woman. With the rise of feminism throughout both the 20th and 21st centuries, women were encouraged to succeed in all aspects of their lives, both inside and outside of their homes. It is this notion of success that women began to equate with happiness as the failure of their goals would reflect poorly on their public and interior identities. In this way, as she tries to finish all of Child's recipes, Powell equates her identity to her successes within the

kitchen. While she eventually cooks all of the recipes inside *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, Powell's insecurities highlight the struggles that continue to plague women as they shape their identities within the modern world.

Ultimately, Powell comes to the realization that the struggles she faced along her journey directly influenced her sense of self. In particular, the final chapters of her memoir center on her personal relationship with Julia Child. When asked about Powell's project and sudden rise to fame, Child denounced the chef and failed to find merit within her work. While she was distraught that her culinary idol disapproved of her experiment, Powell reaches a conclusion regarding her journey and the female chef that guided her along the way:

> I liked the Julia in my head—the only one I really knew, after all—just fine. And what's more, the Julia in my head liked me just fine too…
>
> And that was it, really. A secretary in Queens risked her marriage and her sanity and her…welfare to cook all 524 recipes in *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* … all in one year. The same year she turned thirty. It was the hardest, bravest, best thing a coward like her ever did, and she wouldn't have done it without Julia (297).

In using the image of Child as her guide, Powell was able to not only complete her project but she was also able to establish her confidence and courage as a woman. Despite Child's opinions regarding her character, Powell ultimately realizes that without the chef's cookbook, she would have been unable to completely transform her life and identity. In this way, Powell's memoir illustrates the current state of the female role within society. As women attempt to balance every aspect of their lives, Powell's journey reminds female readers that self discovery and growth is

the most imperative to one's identity. Thus, *Julie & Julia* empowers women to pursue their own goals and paths in order to establish their sense of selves.

Retaining Relevance in the Memoir and the Woman

Despite the rise of published memoirs throughout the 21st century, the literary genre has faced criticism from scholars and readers alike. Because a memoir is written as a retelling and reflection on specific experiences, many argue that they present readers with an unreliable narrative. Since writers receive more revenue if their stories are based on true events, many memoirists have intentionally fabricated and embellished elements of their works to gain notoriety. It is these unethical writers that have caused memoirs to be on the precipitous of "the fuzzy line between nonfiction and fiction" (Cowles 20).

The main element of memoirs is reconstructing a past, not only for readers but also for the writers themselves. In doing so, many memoirists, intentionally or inadvertently, deviate from the truth as based on their memories:

> Even nonfraudulent memoirs, by scrupulous writers making good-faith efforts to reconstruct their pasts, are by nature unreliable—as tenuous and conditional and riddled with honest error as memory itself. And done right, that's exactly what makes them so thrilling (Cowles 20).

It is ultimately through the memoirist's attempt to recreate the past that causes individuals to discredit the entire genre of memoirs. Though this process can be deemed as unreliable, the act of reflection provides the memoirist with key insights regarding her or his identity and life. Thus, all memoirs, regardless of their supposed accuracy, contain universal themes of humanity that cannot be discounted.

Of the memoirs discussed in this thesis, only one gave mention to the unreliable nature of the literary genre. Julie Powell's *Julie & Julia* is ultimately presented with caution as she provides readers with an author's note that reads in part:

> For the sake of discretion, many identifying details, individuals, and events throughout this book have been altered. Only myself, my husband, and certain widely known public figures, including Julia and Paul Child, are identified by real names.
>
> Also, sometimes I just made stuff up ("Author's Note").

This introduction provides audiences with the most often ignored aspect of a memoir: it is ultimately a story. Because of this, artistic license is employed to add details or change names in order to create an engaging work. However, as Powell explains in her author's note, details regarding Child's life are sensationalized but based on diary entries and documents written by the chef herself. Although many of criticized Powell for this admission, her statement ultimately does not make her memoir, or other memoirs, purely fabricated or contrived. Rather, Powell's honesty shows the reader's interest in discovering stories that are not only based in fiction but are enticing and interesting to read. Thus, whether or not one agrees with her decision to fabricate aspects of her memoir, Powell's story is viewed for the overall theme and journey she embarks in forging her own identity.

For each memoir, the notion of female identity widely influences the experiences and epiphanies embodied by each memoirist. In particular, each memoir highlights the transitions faced by women on their paths to self discovery. For Lily Koppel within *The Red Leather Diary*, the discovery of Florence's diary allowed her to find herself and pursue her goals for her career. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* emphasizes the shift Maya Angelou faced as a young woman in which she begins to value her physical identity. The transformation Susanna Kaysen documents in *Girl, Interrupted* occurs when she disregards patriarchal ideals that previously hindered her psyche. Cheryl Strayed's journey in *Wild* freed herself from the burdens that previously

hindered her, a process that allowed her to become a stronger woman. *Julie & Julia* illustrates Julie Powell's developing sense of self as she used cooking to find herself at a time of uncertainty within her life. Ultimately, each memoirist uses writing as a tool to further liberate herself as she documents her struggles and triumphs in finding her identity. In this way, the memoirists both emancipate themselves and their readers as they reach a better understanding of their female identities through writing.

The presence of female memoirs within the literary community continues to impact the ways in which women are viewed in today's society. Through the thoughts and experiences of female memoirists, readers are better able to examine the role of women both within past societies and in current times. It is because of this female lens that stories of the oppressed come to the forefront as a way for readers to better understand their own identities. While inequalities continue to plague women across all countries, these memoirs highlight the liberation women have faced and the progresses that impact current societies. Overall, it is through these memoirs that the female identity is celebrated as unique and imperative to our world today.

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