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## Female Visions of the City: An Exploration of Urban Literature Written by Women

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Female Visions of the City:  
An Exploration of Urban Literature written by Women

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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## PREFACE

Before I started to explore female visions of the city within literature I asked my friends to give me their own visions of the city.

Here is what they had to say:

“I feel connected to both LA and NYC in different ways. In LA, I am my most nostalgic and sentimental self. LA is comfortable, it doesn't challenge you, and it's easy. In New York, I feel the most connected to myself and my thoughts and emotions because I'm by myself most of the time. I walk around everywhere aimlessly all the time in New York just listening to music. But it's not comfortable, it's incredibly challenging. Every element of human life is hitting you all at once, and sometimes it's too much.” - Kara Grant, 21 (Barnard College)

“I have never felt personally threatened as a female in Portland. I started taking the city bus to school by myself when I was 11 and I never felt unsafe and this informed how I interacted with the city a lot.” - Cason Hall, 21 (Bard College)

“The minute I first visited NYC was such a crucial moment, I breathed the area and realized it was not full of traffic and smog, but it was full of diversity and acceptance.” - Arianna Aviram, 22 (Parsons)

“I've lived in two cities: Santa Fe, New Mexico and New York City. As far as cities being beneficial to women I would say it depends on the woman, but my heart and my instinct want to say YES! Because the city has always been where I get to explore new parts of myself and the world. It's always been where I feel the most independent and daring. It's always a contemplative experience and an inspiring one. And as cities tend to be hubs of progressiveness I think that makes them generally very beneficial to women.” - Natalie Marshall, 23 (Bard Alum)

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Everyone that encouraged and inspired this project, there are too many of you to name.

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## INTRODUCTION

This past summer I was given a copy of John Fante's *Ask the Dust* by my then boyfriend. He gave it to me under the impression that by reading this novel I would gain a better understanding of him and his relationship to Los Angeles as he insisted that this book had "changed his life." We shared a mutual love for our home town and spent the majority of our relationship exploring new parts of Los Angeles together. I assumed that he had given me the novel under the expectation that it would depict Los Angeles in the way I saw it and the way I thought he did as well - an urban mecca of diverse cultural communities and endless opportunities. Much to my dismay *Ask the Dust* was a rather bleak depiction of the place which I am proud to call home. Fante or his alter ego Arturo Bandini spends the novel as a frustrated writer who is too arrogant and self-loathing to actually go for what he wants. He quickly becomes jaded by the fantasy of Los Angeles and complains about its fumes, wind, and the nightly chills. Instead of exploring what the city might have to offer him, he spends the majority of the novel complaining about it, because he is too afraid to admit that his personal emotions and insecurities are the problem rather than the city itself. The same story plays out in many other novels I've encountered about Los Angeles written by struggling male writers. They depict the city from their depressed state of mind where they write more about their own problems than actually constructing a full vision of the city. *Ask the Dust* is no different, while it is set in Los Angeles, the city simply becomes the setting for, rather than the cause of Fante's depression. To say the least I hated the book and the introduction by Charles Bukowski only made my opinion of it much worse. When my relationship ended I questioned why



my ex-boyfriend was so attached to this novel. When I think of Los Angeles or any city for that matter I think of excitement, energy and opportunity. Cities free me from my own excessive introspection rather than intensifying it.

I grew up in a city and frequently travel to cities all over the world. Until Bard I had never spent a significant amount of time in a rural environment. I chose Bard knowing that living in upstate New York would be somewhat of a challenge for me. The day I arrived in Annandale-on-Hudson I could feel a shift throughout my entire body - my emotions, my energy, and even my self-confidence had changed. I thought that this feeling was temporary as I was in a new place with new people and about to spend the next four years of my life in a setting that I was completely unfamiliar with, but throughout my four years here those initial feelings never went away. Each time I traveled to New York City, back home to Los Angeles, or to any other urban environment I felt back to my normal self. Last year, I spent a semester away from Bard studying abroad in Berlin. The self that I feel when I am in New York and Los Angeles carried with me there. I was energized, excited to learn, and ready to explore what the city had to offer. To “fall in love with a city” is a term that I had never fully grasped until then. While I have loved my education at Bard spending time in Berlin made me realize that I feel a bit stuck when I am in a rural area. I thrive off of the constant commotion and energy of city life, but I know that this is not the case for everyone. After reading *Ask the Dust*, I started to question why Fante or my ex-boyfriend were too caught up in their own emotional turmoil to see the beauty in city life that I saw. Living in a city benefits my emotional health: my brain works better, my mood is lifted, and I am continually energized by the unexpected, the possibility of seeing new people, or exploring uncharted

territory. Cities offer us a certain type of energy, a diverse blend of people and places that is rarely found in rural areas. Cities offer us more job opportunities, art, access to education, and the ability to witness all walks of life in one single setting. While cities can be expensive and at times overwhelming, there is a beauty to city life that I find comforting. When I travel to new cities I can walk around anonymously pretending to be anyone I want and can dream of the person I actually want to become. Some may argue that rural areas are physically more beautiful, but the diversity of life in cities ignites the imagination, which to me is the ultimate form of beauty. A beauty that many male authors such as Bukowski and Fante sometimes fail to touch upon in their work. While I do not want to delineate their credibility or artistry as writers I cannot relate to their perspective on city life.

While texts written by Bukowski and Fante are commonly praised in the discussion of urban literature, there have been many female writers that have written novels of the same merit. However, their depictions of city life tend to be less bleak and more descriptive of the city itself. I personally feel that cities benefit women in many ways and I wanted to investigate what influence urban environments have over women: specifically, how cities have affected female writing. As sociologist Deborah Parsons poses the question in *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, “How are women writers situated, and how do they situate themselves, in the maps of urban location and literature?” (Parsons, 20). My investigation starts by looking at texts written by three female novelists: such as Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, and Elena Ferrante. Each of these women situates her narratives in cities — London, Los Angeles and Naples respectively —

within the context of various classes and time periods. What ties these texts together is their authors' personal connection to each of the cities, as inscribed in their writing.

My investigation consists of two parts. First I discuss my connection to each of these cities by writing my own narrative; then I analyze Woolf, Didion, and Ferrante's work in order to see how my vision compares to theirs. Each of these analyses are of their own separate entities and explorations as these writers' visions of the city stem from their personal relationship to time, class, and experience within these spheres. The cities in which they write about influence how they construct their narratives, portray their characters, and most importantly how they each address what it means to be a female within these spaces.

I explore Virginia Woolf's vision of London primarily through *Mrs. Dalloway*. The protagonist Clarissa Dalloway is an upper-class married woman living in a wealthy part of the city. Throughout the novel she expresses her love of the city while commenting on her place within society. Clarissa's love of London stems from Virginia Woolf's own attachment to the city. However, this praise is not expressed without pointing to the problems within the city as well. Though Mrs. Dalloway loves what London has to offer she is a bit insecure in her role as a wife, mother, and woman of the twentieth century. Woolf explores what it means to be a female in London after World War I. She compares Clarissa to her daughter Elizabeth and Elizabeth's teacher who is an independent working woman. She discusses three different women in the city and how they each navigate it. While Woolf depicts London as being beneficial for these women she contrasts their views with the view of a working class male citizen returning from the war. The commotion and sounds of the city remind Septimus of what he witnessed in

war, and he cannot seem to shake these visions from his memory. In *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf shows the advantages that London provided for females in the twentieth century, while discussing the disadvantages it had on many of its citizens at the same time. While *Mrs. Dalloway* is somewhat of an homage to London, Woolf is aware of the many problems that the city can entice which are especially prevalent after the ending of a war.

Joan Didion's depictions of Los Angeles in *Play it as it Lays* and *The White Album* somewhat resemble Fante and Bukowski bleak narration of the city, but from a standpoint that is more objective than emotional. In her personal essays it is clear that Didion is actually very fond of the city though she tends to point more to its flaws than its benefits. Unlike Woolf she does not commonly write about the beauty of its flowers, buildings, or landscapes, but rather Didion discusses the people that make up the city. She disapproves of many of her peers' decisions, but at the same time seems fascinated by them. She discusses Los Angeles in the 1960's from the point of view of a privileged woman who has the advantage of associating with celebrities and going to lavish parties. Didion is aware of her privilege and the unnecessary excess that it at times entails. Her novel *Play it as it Lays* also depicts a woman in 1960s Los Angeles, but an actress rather than a writer. The central character Maria Wyeth plays the role of the jaded and depressed narrator, but rather than attributing her mental state to the city itself, she blames her career and the people around her. Private concerns predominate over the urban setting, and the moments in which she finds the beauty in the city are when her personal emotions seem to vanish. *Play it as it Lays* is more of an investigation of the city rather than a critique. It stems more from Didion's own criticisms of actresses than the

city itself. She explores how actresses are hindered within the city due to their gender and lack of power within their career.

Elena Ferrante's depiction of city life in Naples differs from Woolf's and Didion's due to her relative poverty. Ferrante discusses her physical struggles within the city rather than her internal worries. In *My Brilliant Friend*, Ferrante paints a picture of 1950s Naples in which two females are working to survive and create a better life for themselves in the city. The main character Elena constantly discusses the disadvantages she has in the city due to her class and gender, but is fearless in overcoming them. Her friend Lila shows her what it truly means to be a woman in Naples. Ferrante emphasizes female survival in the city and depicts a character who attempts to create a better life for herself despite the physical and emotional barriers that the city forces upon her.

## CHAPTER 1: THE NEW LONDON

### I.

London is a distant memory for me, but a place that I'll always remember. I remember the cold, the giant palaces, the expensive restaurants with strange food, the old telephone booths, and walking alone on the cobblestone streets. I have been to London three times. Each time I have stayed for no longer than three days. Each time I visit I create a new memory. Some good, others bad as my experiences there have been shaped from the stress of traveling with my family and our accustomed bad luck.

Every other year my family travels to South Africa for Christmas. To break up the twenty-two hour flight from Los Angeles to Cape Town, we always stop at a city in between, either London or Paris. The first time we stopped in London I was about ten years old. We stayed for one night. The only memory I can recall is sitting in a dark run down restaurant eating an undercooked British version of sausage and mashed potatoes called bangers and mash while I was fighting a 110 degree fever. I spent the rest of that night in the bathroom.

I was fourteen during my next visit to London, where we again only stayed for one night. That night I got lost in Harrods. I panicked. I cried. I told my parents I hated them for taking me there. Going to Harrods around Christmas time is not something I would advise anyone to do.

My last stop in London was four years ago. Four years ago a giant storm hit the city the day my family arrived. We unexpectedly had to stay in London for two more days; two more days more than we were used to. My parents were outraged. It was snowing. The temperature was around 10 degrees Fahrenheit. Our suitcases were filled with bathing suits, shorts, sunscreen, and flip flops as it was summer in South Africa. My parents insisted that they would not leave the room as it was too cold to go outside and we would get sick from our lack of proper winter attire. I, however, did not care about the weather, nor did I want to spend the next three days cooped up in a hotel room with my dysfunctional family. I wanted to see the city as I felt my last two trips to London did not leave a lasting impression. With a coat that was only warm enough for the coldest day in LA, I walked outside alone.

During my walk I passed by a large Christmas parade that spread along the cobblestone streets and felt the joy of the holidays come alive. In South Africa and even Los Angeles, there is no sense of holiday spirit as it is sunny and everyone goes to the beach on Christmas day. I was pleasantly surprised by the enthusiasm for the holiday season that filled the city. I then took a stroll along Oxford Street and admired the decadent shops that were decorated from top to bottom. My imagination soared as I looked at the shop windows and passed by families, couples, and single residents scrounging for last minute presents. I felt as if in this moment I could be anyone. I was an invisible pedestrian watching city life take place and I absolutely loved it. I was

enthralled by the Londoners colorful attire. I imagined myself buying the expensive outfits from the stores. I walked around the city in total anonymity forgetting about the stress of traveling with my family. I was free from their complaints, free from the stuffy hotel room, and experienced a pleasure in walking around the city alone that I never would have thought I could feel in ten degree weather.

I realized that complete anonymity in a city is something to be treasured. During this walk I discovered a side of London that I had never seen before. This was a new London to me. Far different from the London I had experienced in the past. London became a city that I actually liked rather than despised. After a certain point I forgot how cold it was.



## II.

“‘I love walking in London,’ said Mrs. Dalloway. ‘Really it’s better than walking in the country,’” writes Virginia Woolf within the first few pages of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Written in 1925, during post-First World War England, Woolf’s novel sets up a single day in which she takes her readers on a journey through the city primarily from the perspective of an upper class housewife, Clarissa Dalloway. Clarissa Dalloway’s enthusiasm for life in London mirrors Virginia Woolf’s own vision of the city. Throughout the novel Woolf creates diverse characters, particularly females, who have a strong attachment or affiliation with city life as they are excited by the new opportunities that the war has created for them. Woolf writes at a time in which women were able to roam around the city freely which was a fairly new concept in the 1920s. As her characters move through the city, she explores the relationship between her character’s ‘states of mind’ in correlation with the specific places that they go to. Though she emphasizes the importance of roaming around the city independently, she is aware that the city does not create the same effect on everyone. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf creates a new vision of London that is beneficial to most, but not all, as she centers the text around a metropolis with an awareness of time and historicity.

The majority of the females within the novel, especially the Dalloway women, have a strong affinity for the city, like Virginia Woolf does herself. This is made evident by the way in which they are able to separate the constraints they face within their private life at home from the public life of the city. While roaming around the city they get to think of the opportunities that are now available to them outside of their home. In Laura Marcus’s *Virginia Woolf* she claims that within Woolf’s novels, “women, specifically

entry into the public spaces of the city were used to mark their liberation from enclosure in the private, domestic sphere” (Marcus, 61). Woolf’s own love of London is primarily projected through the character of Clarissa way in which she expresses her enthusiasm for city life. Woolf depicts Clarissa as a flaneur, a stroller of the streets.<sup>1</sup> She is the central character in the novel that understands, participates, and portrays the benefits of living in London. Within her private life Clarissa is a party planner, mother, and boss of the Dalloway household, but when she is outside walking around the city on her own, she is allowed to take in the beauty of the city. Outside she becomes free of worry and responsibility. The beginning of the novel starts with Clarissa’s enthusiastic opinion of London as she strolls around her neighborhood, Westminster.

For having lived in Westminster - how many years now? over twenty, -one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or walking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influence) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it bloomed. First a warning musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on doorsteps

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<sup>1</sup> Parsons, Deborah L. *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, The City, and Modernity* (10)

(drink their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what loved; life; London; this moment in June (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 4).

This passage reveals Clarissa's joy in walking around the city independently, as she can reinvent herself while she wanders. Woolf describes Clarissa's state of mind as "positive, a particular hush, or solemnity" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 4). Clarissa is fairly optimistic about living in London, but does not interact much with the majority of people around her. She quietly takes in the beauty of London in a dignified and well respected manner. The way in which Clarissa navigates the city displays her need for independence and how the city affects her personal consciousness. The first line of the novel starts with "Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself," implying Clarissa's constant need to get out of her house and take in everything that the outside world has to offer, as her private world is at times a bit constrained (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 3). It is evident that for Clarissa the city produces, change, mystery, positivity, also beauty and love of life. There are a few moments in the novel where Clarissa is not as positive about the people and surroundings that construct her personal life, which is why she enjoys the freedom of wandering outside alone. The lengthy sentences that Woolf crafts within this passage

displays Clarissa's excitement for having "this moment in June" to be outside and absorb how beautiful her life is, especially her life as she is outside exploring the city. Clarissa is attached to this moment because she is going out to do something by herself, but the journey turns into something much more. She is able to relate to everyone around her; knowing or at least thinking that they see the same beauty in city life as she does. She even mentions how she has a fondness towards members of Parliament who run and shape the city because "they love life" - implying that they specifically love life in London. She mentions "men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what loved; life" to share the components of what makes draws her to the beauty of city life. It becomes evident that Clarissa believes that while one is free from their private responsibilities they can relish in the brief moments that they have as they walk around the city.

Clarissa is happy wandering around London on this moment in June because no one has to know exactly who she is. She incorporates her private life with the public by her confident presence and that way in which she dresses, but the majority of people she passes by do not specifically know her name or where she is from. The public may be able to infer her class, but they do not know her position as a mother or housewife. While wandering the streets of London, Clarissa can keep her private life anonymous. She is able to realize how she rarely does things for herself, which is why this particular day is of utmost importance. As she strolls she expresses within her inner thoughts that "much rather would she have been one of those people like Richard who did things for themselves, whereas she thought waiting to cross, half the time she did things not simply,

not for themselves; but to make people think or this or that” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 10). In this moment walking around London she does not have to make people think or do things for others, she can be anyone she wants. She enjoys walking around London by herself because her mind is free from the stresses of her life at home and she is able to think more about her own desires.

Virginia Woolf commonly explores her characters ‘states of mind’ and their relationship to the city.<sup>2</sup> The integration of Clarissa’s ‘state of mind’ and her relationship to London is explored as she walks around Bond Street; a street that “fascinated her” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 11). As Clarissa strolls along London’s most popular high end shopping area memories of the past and thoughts of herself are revealed as she passes by store windows and [flying flags] (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 11). During this walk, Woolf takes her readers on Clarissa’s journey through the street physically and mentally. As Clarissa admires the expensive store fronts she recalls memories from her past. She remembers “where her father had bought his suits for fifty years” and she then sees a glove shop which makes her think about how “her uncle used to say a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves;” projecting the old ideals of what how an upper class woman in London should present herself (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 11). While on this her journey Clarissa admits that she has an affinity for nice things such as “gloves and shoes,” but, at the same time, she wants to free herself from material desires within this moment. As she wants to free herself from the expected duties and appearances of an upper class house wife. As she continues walking along Bond Street it becomes clear that she thinks her implies her uncle’s theory is a bit old fashioned and silly. While Clarissa does care about her

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus, Laura. "Writing the City: 'Street Haunting' and Mrs. Dalloway." *Virginia Woolf*. Plymouth, United Kingdom: Northcote House, 1997. 61. Print.

appearance, including nice clothes and possessions, those things do not define her. Her excitement about wandering around London and letting her imagination soar prove that she takes more pride in her position as a flaneur rather than her affiliation as a housewife. Her thoughts while she wanders around the city rarely pertain to her responsibilities within her private life. They are thoughts of the past and thoughts about who she is and how she is perceived to the world outside. By being in an area surrounded by nice material objects Mrs. Dalloway comes to terms with her social stature and how she presents herself in public.

Due to the appearance of Bond Street, she starts to think about how the other women in her life that would not enjoy the street in the way she does. She thinks about Miss Kilman, her daughter's teacher and mentor whom she dislikes immensely. She remembers how she is always "dressed in a green mackintosh coat" and "how poor she was" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 12). Clarissa expresses that Miss Kilman always speaks to her as if she has some "superiority" over her, even when she is someone who would not feel superior walking along Bond Street as she cannot afford to purchase items from many of the stores, but also because she does not care for material items in the way that Mrs. Dalloway does. Clarissa also expresses how her daughter Elizabeth did not care "how she dressed" and "how she treated other people" in order to show how vastly different they are from each other (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 11). However, these comparisons shed some light on to who Clarissa is and it is obvious that she is a bit uncomfortable with her position in the world. Clarissa is happiest while independently wandering around the city, free from the stresses of her private life. Even though she expresses distaste for how the other women in her life conduct themselves, it is evident that she might be a bit jealous of

them. Bond Street symbolizes who Mrs. Dalloway is within London society; it is the one street she walks upon where the thoughts about her appearance are integrated with the appearance of what is physically around her. Bond Street resembles much of Clarissa's character.

Clarissa's affinity with Bond Street is contrasted with her daughter Elizabeth's admiration of The Strand. The Strand is the city center of London where all walks of life are represented. Instead of being aligned with fancy shops, The Strand is a street for the average pedestrian with office buildings, coffee shops, theaters, college, churches and souvenir kiosks.<sup>3</sup> By placing Elizabeth along The Strand, Woolf shows her desire to break free from her privileged lifestyle in London as she feels it is limiting to her. This is how Woolf differentiates Clarissa from Elizabeth; Clarissa embodies Bond Street, while Elizabeth emulates The Strand. When comparing Elizabeth to her mother Woolf writes, "she had a passion for gloves; but her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for either of them," which displays how little Elizabeth cares about her appearance, nor does she really fit into the social world in which she was raised (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 11).

Woolf contrasts Elizabeth Dalloway with her mother Clarissa in order to show how women were starting to move out of their stereotypical roles in the 1920's. Due to her older age Mrs. Dalloway has more traditional ideals about women, but her seventeen year old daughter Elizabeth sees a more progressive future for herself. This idea is explicitly shown as Elizabeth spontaneously decides to take the omnibus along The Strand, a street she claims that her family would never go to. While on the bus Woolf describes Elizabeth as "a pioneer, a stray, venturing, trusting," which depicts her as an

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<sup>3</sup> "Neighborhoods in Brief." *In London*. FrommerMedia LLC, 2015. Web.

example of the ‘new woman’<sup>4</sup> (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 137). This scene shows Elizabeth’s to free herself from her parents traditional views and from the constraints she feels within her home. She even states that, “her mother would not like her to be wandering off alone like this” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 138). Mrs. Dalloway does not walk far from the area in which she lives because she is fairly content with her life in Westminster, but also might be too afraid to venture out as far as Elizabeth does. Mrs. Dalloway walks up Bond Street while Elizabeth takes a bus along The Strand, which displays the different ways in which they choose to navigate the city. Elizabeth enjoys her time along The Strand, which presumably her mother would hate.

While Elizabeth explores The Strand Woolf specifically states that Elizabeth “took a seat on top” when she gets on the Omnibus proving her power in the making the independent decision to roam around in an unfamiliar part of town (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 135). Elizabeth is unafraid of where this bus might take her and is excited to take a temporary break from her life in Westminster in order to dream about her future aspirations. While Mrs. Dalloway roams around London in the beginning, she does not go so far as to take public transportation or go out of her comfortable area in the way that Elizabeth does. There is more chance of public interaction when taking public transportation; upper class citizens do not commonly take the bus in London. Elizabeth proves that she does not really care about titles or class and wants to experience the city on her own terms.

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<sup>4</sup> The New Woman was a feminist ideal that emerged in the late nineteenth century. The term "New Woman" was coined by writer Sarah Grand in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," published in the *North American Review* in March 1894. The term was further popularized by British-American writer Henry James, to describe the growth in the number of feminist, educated, independent career women in Europe and the United States.



Just as Mrs. Dalloway contemplates thoughts about her personal appearance and private life are triggered by her walk along Bond Street, The Strand causes Elizabeth to think about her future. When Elizabeth gets to The Strand she remembers what her teacher Miss Kilman had said to her earlier that day, that “every profession is open to the women of [her] generation,” and Elizabeth sees The Strand as the beginning of this idea (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 136). Many colleges were located along The Strand meaning that Elizabeth may be contemplating for a higher education, something that her mother did not receive.

Elizabeth heavily admires her teacher Miss Kilman, who although does not have a lot of money, received a college degree and became a working woman. It is clear that Elizabeth hopes to follow in her path, even though she is well off and does not necessarily need to have a career. Elizabeth’s desire to get a job and receive a higher education exposes the direction that women were moving towards during this time. In the 1920’s more women started to go off to universities in order to get a paid job. While this idea may seem a bit foreign to Mrs. Dalloway who is content with staying at home and planning parties for her husband, Elizabeth does not want to live the same lifestyle as her mother. Her teacher Miss Kilman prompts Elizabeth to think about class, especially class distinction within a city. Elizabeth states that until meeting Miss Kilman “she had never thought about the poor. They lived with everything they wanted, - her mother had breakfast in bed everyday,” showing the sheltered lifestyle she has grown accustomed to (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 131). Miss Kilman suggests that Elizabeth go to The Strand in order to see how the rest of the city functions, especially outside of Westminster. Elizabeth’s exploration of The Strand gives Elizabeth a different perspective on the reality of city

life, but also exposes her to new opportunities the city has to offer for women. The Strand inspires Elizabeth to think about her future. Elizabeth's willingness to be alone in this part of the city proves that she is able to break free of the stereotypes that are put on her due to the upper class environment in which she grew up.

Elizabeth does not want to be a housewife like her mother; she wants to be a woman with a professional career, which was a relatively new concept in post-World War England. She even states that she hates the expectations that people have of her and would much prefer to be "left alone to do what she liked in the country" rather than go to parties or be compared to her mother (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 134). As Elizabeth is exploring The Strand she comes to significant discoveries about her purpose in life and begins to realize the constraints she feels within her current situation at home. Just like Mrs. Dalloway, wandering around the city is freeing for Elizabeth, because she can forget about her private life, which she now sees is very secluded from the realities of the outside world. Her private life is a place in which she seems to not fit in or belong to, especially in comparison to her mother. While Elizabeth ventures along The Strand thoughts of the future, Mrs. Dalloway's walk along Bond Street prompts memories of the past; displaying the different mindsets these women are in during this time in their lives.

By contrasting these three different women in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa, Elizabeth, and Miss Kilman, Woolf displays how post World War London has something to offer for every type of female. Each of the Dalloway women represents different parts of the city. Woolf demonstrates how post-World War I London can benefit a woman who has the desire to enter the workforce and receive a higher education like Elizabeth, or a woman who simply wants to relish in her position as flaneur in order to temporarily

escape the responsibilities of her private life. She contrasts these women's values with the streets that they venture on which also embody their personalities and the type of women they see themselves as. In Deborah Parson's study *Streetwalking the Metropolis* she states that "The city has been habitually conceived as a male space, in which women are either repressed or disobedient marginal presences" (Parsons, 36). They can now create spaces for themselves that are specific to them as female. Miss Kilman wants to see a change in the way one views social and educational life in the city and the new opportunities have now been created for women. They each internalize a part of the city within their character and views on life. Clarissa loves the beauty and aristocracy of Bond Street, where Elizabeth sees her future along The Strand.

While these women are happy when wandering around the city on their own, they all have struggles within their private life at home. Their strolls around London allow them to think about their past and future, while being an anonymous entity to the people around them. Woolf, herself, values this idea as well. She expresses in her short story, "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" that "as we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one's own room" (Woolf, 5). She says this in order to express that it is so easy to neglect your responsibilities at home or who you are seen within private life once you step out into the city on your own. One can be an "anonymous tramper" free of the constraints that are held within one's private sphere.

However, not all women in the novel have the advantages that Clarissa, Elizabeth, and Miss Kilman do. Changes in London after World War I benefit most of the

women within the novel, but not the ones who have deal with the aftermath being around someone who was in the war themselves. The wife of Septimus Warren cannot seem to separate her private and public life, due to poverty and her husband's vivid memories of war. "The war was over," Woolf writes, for those who did not partake, but for others, memories of the war were going to stick with them forever (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 5). Septimus Warren himself has the most difficult time with separating his private life while navigating the city. Woolf contrasts Clarissa's positive female vision of the city with Septimus's dark memories of the past. His past and visions of city life create a bold contrast from many of the female thoughts about London within the text. In Christine Wick Sizemore's "A Female Vision of the City," a sociological text about the use of London in novels written by females, she states that "Up until the twentieth century, it was the male imagination and the male experience that shaped the view of the city" (Sizemore, 15). Woolf shapes London through the lens of her female characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*, while Septimus sees the city from a more negative standpoint.

Each of the women in *Mrs. Dalloway*, except Mrs. Warren, sees the city as a place that has shaped them or will shape them for the better. They each enjoy the changes that are constantly taking place around them. However, Septimus and his wife view the city as static, nothing for them has changed. Septimus does not see London as a place where change will take place for him due to his social status and past traumas. By creating this divide Virginia Woolf inserts London as the female's city, a city that now caters to women in ways that it did not before. Perhaps Woolf creates the character of Septimus to show that while the city use to mainly pertain to the male imagination and

social consciousness; it has now become more open to women's experiences and their perception of life within an urban environment.

Now that the war is over Septimus cannot separate thoughts of his private life from public ventures out in the city. Woolf's descriptions of London when she writes about Septimus are far from the London that Clarissa describes. Their contrasting visions of the city are displayed the moment that Clarissa and Septimus unknowingly cross paths after they hear an explosive sound from a motor car outside of Mulberry's flower shop where Mrs. Dalloway was buying flowers.

Mrs. Dalloway, coming to the window with her arms full of sweet peas, looked out with her little pink face pursed in enquiry. Everyone looked at the motor car. Septimus looked. Boys on bicycles sprang off. Traffic accumulated. And there the motor car stood, with drawn blinds, and upon them a curious pattern like a tree, Septimus thought, and this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him. The world wavered and quivered and threatened to burst into flames. It is I who am blocking the way, he thought. Was he not being looked at and pointed at; was he not weighted there, rooted to the pavement, for a purpose? But for what purpose? (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 15).

This scene is the first section that interweaves two characters with vastly different perspectives on the city. As Clarissa is enjoying her life in London, Septimus is trying to figure out a way to escape his life altogether. Memories of the war haunt him as he roams through London throughout the text. In this passage, Woolf goes from depicting the city in a positive light creating a negative interpretation very quickly. Mrs. Dalloway is associated with images of “sweet peas” and “[a] little pink face” which are then contrasted with Septimus’s outlook. Woolf depicts London as a heavily mobile city in *Mrs. Dalloway*. These characters’ thoughts are moving around them as they move through the city. Once Septimus is mentioned, words such as “horror,” “terrified,” and “threatened” are used, conjuring up a London that is largely different from Clarissa’s. As Septimus looks at the center of the city “some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames” (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 15) Septimus’s time at war gives him a tragic view of the city as this was the city that forced him to go into war where he was forced to witness horrible images everyday, images that he cannot expunge from his mind. Even though, to Woolf personally, the city is full of vibrant images, she knows that not everyone feels the same way about London as she does. She uses the character Septimus to give the readers a different perspective on city life and to allude to the not so positive effects of post war London. Unlike the Dalloway women, Septimus cannot look past his private experiences and sees the city as cruel and uninviting. The city for Septimus has no opportunities; it simply drags him down.

Even when Septimus looks at something as simple as a motor car he depicts it in a depressing manner. He seems terrified by all of his surroundings. His daily life in the city

causes him emotional distress as the sounds and commotion remind him of the war. It seems as if Septimus would benefit from a quieter setting to reflect on his time fighting rather than have to be reminded of it. Woolf points out that while it may seem to some that as is easier in the city during this time, it did not feel this way to everyone, especially those returning from war. Throughout the novel she continually switches back and forth from Clarissa's state of mind to Septimus to show their contrasting visions on post-World War I London.

Septimus sees people enjoying the city around him, but he in no way can think of how to enjoy the city himself. Woolf writes, "he looked at people outside; happy they seemed collecting in the middle of the street, shouting laughing, squabbling over nothing. But he could not taste, he could not feel" (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 24). Saying that "he could not taste, he could not feel" his life or the exciting life that everyone else saw around him proves that due to his class and experiences London did not benefit him in any way. His depressing thoughts eventually lead to his suicide. Septimus's suicide is somewhat metaphorical for the end of the dark, meaningless, London that he saw, versus the London that Clarissa sees. In turn, his death also brings Clarissa back to reality. When Clarissa learns of Septimus's death she realizes that she does not love her life as much as she describes in the beginning of the novel. She loves being outside and walking around the city because she is not confined to her responsibilities at home. When she hears of Septimus's suicide she realizes that she has certain privileges in the city due to her class and past experiences that many others do not. His death makes her feel somewhat guilty for being nothing more than a privileged housewife. Though, she and Septimus never meet Clarissa seems to overly sympathize with his death. Woolf states,

Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them.  
But what an extraordinary night! She felt somehow very like  
him-the young man who had killed himself. She felt glad  
that he had done it; thrown it away. The clock was striking.  
The leaden circles dissolved in the air. He made her feel the  
beauty; made her feel the fun. But she must go back. She  
must assemble. (*Mrs. Dalloway*, 186)

Septimus's death makes Clarissa thankful for the life she has in London. She realizes that the city is suited to her wealth and social status, but lower class citizens and those who had to fight in war struggle to live in the city. This realization is a bit unfair, as Septimus fought in war to create a better environment for those in London, but yet created a worse one for him. While Woolf's primary goal is to show her readers how London was becoming a more progressive city, especially in terms of how it catered to women, she is aware that it is not yet perfect. Progress in London was starting, but Virginia Woolf does not mention the city's progress without pointing out that there is still room for improvement.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf constructs a city that is in the midst of change. Woolf's London is a female oriented sphere which was a novel concept at the time *Mrs. Dalloway* was written. She expresses to her readers how the city can benefit its female residents, while being aware of issues such as class and privilege that can shape one's perspective. As Clarissa walks around Westminster and Bond Street, Woolf gives the readers a vivid



and exciting evocation of what life in London is like. Clarissa's sees London from the perspective of an upper class housewife. She is able to walk around the city freely, knowing that she has some sort of power over the other citizens who do not have the same privileges as her. Her daughter Elizabeth sees the city as a place that will advance her future, as she discovers the various job opportunities that the city can provide her. Woolf intelligently contrasts Clarissa's and Elizabeth's positive visions of the city with Septimus's memories of war. Woolf constructs these varying perspectives to show what the realities of living in London really means as it is an expensive city that can only be fully enjoyed with access to certain privileges and opportunities.

## CHAPTER TWO: LOS ANGELES, THE “INVISIBLE CITY”

### I.

I have lived in Los Angeles my whole life. I have always lived in the same neighborhood in Los Angeles. I have always lived in the same neighborhood, but in three different places: an apartment, a townhouse, and a three story beach house. The beach, particularly Venice is far from the center of Los Angeles. My neighborhood is situated on a flat surface comprised of tall, colorful, European style buildings with exotic plants lined up and down the street. No other area in Los Angeles looks like this. I did not grow up in the house with the huge back yard and long driveway that is frequently seen in movies, but I had the beach and to me that was better than a home in Hollywood Hills. My neighborhood felt more like a small community rather than part of a big city, which is what I like most about Los Angeles. The city consists of little areas that are so vastly different from one another. However, these little communities tend to shape one's perspective of the rest of the city as one is either too comfortable with where they live or want something better. Growing up I had a hard time leaving my “beach town.” On a nice day there would be traffic caused by other Los Angelenos who wanted to spend a day away from their home on the hills by stretching out on the sand and escaping to the closest version of paradise that Los Angeles has.

The idea of “escape” is heavily ingrained within the city. However, this idea is blocked by the excessive amount of traffic that goes along with the nature of how the city is structured. Since public transportation is very minimal everyone is in their car. This leads to hours of driving to a destination that may only be a couple of miles away. The

traffic, the distance, and the different areas sometimes hinders one from actually getting to where they want to be, which is why most resident in Los Angeles have never fully seen the whole city.

I used to be in a relationship with someone who lived in Pasadena, a town that is geographically not part of Los Angeles, but close enough so that its residents take offence when you refer to them as being from Pasadena instead of LA itself. Pasadena starts where the easternmost part of the city ends. I live almost where the westernmost part of the city begins. This meant that every of couple of days I would drive for about an hour and a half passing through five freeways, fifteen neighborhoods, and over 60 exits to get to the other side of the city. While the drive was exhausting, this was the first time out of my twenty two years of living in Los Angeles in which I had fully seen the city. During these drives I felt as if I had access to anywhere. If I got off at exit 42 C instead of 51 A-I would be in the liveliest part of Downtown LA where Latino families are bumping music up and down the street corners, instead of the privileged white Anglo Saxon protestant town that my boyfriend lived in. While my romantic relationship quickly ended my relationship to the city did not. I noticed the palm trees, the modern architecture, and the way in which the city is constructed. In LA people get so caught up in their little bubble of a neighborhood that the rest of the city is invisible to them.

## II.

Joan Didion identifies Los Angeles as the “Invisible City” a city in which people tend to get lost in mainly because some might argue that it is not really a city at all. There are different neighborhoods, boroughs, and towns, but no one is sure which sectors are actually part of the city or are their own region. Los Angeles encompasses 16 regions and 272 neighborhoods within a 4,000 square mile radius.<sup>5</sup> With a population of 18.55 million people it remains easy to be “invisible.” The invisibility not only comes from the vast land and the secluded neighborhoods, but also from the endless freeways or the smog and rapid winds that occasionally fill the city - the only sort of extreme weather that is seen within Los Angeles. In the celebrity and fame obsessed society that Didion focuses on, “normal people” tend to get lost as well.

Joan Didion’s view of Los Angeles is shaped by someone who did not grow up there, but as a woman who was part of a specific community within the city: Hollywood. Like other novelists who wrote about Los Angeles she was drawn to Hollywood by the promise of high salaries and steady work if she were to write screenplays as well.<sup>6</sup> Luckily, she found success in writing both movies and novels, while many of her other male contemporaries only gained recognition from their fiction. Didion is able to write about Los Angeles from an outsider’s view with an inside look on the entertainment industry; specifically Hollywood in the 1960’s. One should note that Hollywood is not

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<sup>5</sup> There are also 42 unincorporated areas that are collapsed inside of adjacent cities.

<sup>6</sup> Fine, David M. *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Original Essays*. “Introduction.” Albuquerque: U of New Mexico, 1984. 2. Print.

just a geographical neighborhood in Los Angeles; it also constitutes the group of people that Didion surrounded herself with. Didion's Hollywood is constructed by people who care too much about themselves and too little about the city and the people around them. To "Hollywood" the rest of Los Angeles does not matter.

In *Play it as it Lays*, the protagonist, Maria, has a difficult time coping with being a female in Hollywood, just as Didion was. She feels stuck in the Hollywood community — a place full of selfishness, isolation, and continual sexism. Even though, she is an actress it seems as if she is quite invisible compared to the people around her. She has to constantly answer and follow the directions of producers and directors, with several of whom she is emotionally involved. Throughout the novel Maria is used as a prop to fulfill the lives of those in charge of her. Didion's portrayal of Maria may in part stem from her personal decision to pursue writing instead of acting. In a 1977 interview with the *Paris Review* Didion stated that, "I was struck a few years ago when a friend of ours—an actress—was having dinner here with us and a couple of other writers. It suddenly occurred to me that she was the only person in the room who couldn't plan what she was going to do. She had to wait for someone to ask her, which is a strange way to live."<sup>7</sup> This is how Didion writes Maria in *Play It as It Lays*. She is an actress who seems to have no direction because she cannot plan what she is doing or where she is going next. Didion depicts Maria's struggle with herself in correlation with the confusing cluster of Los Angeles. At many times Maria feels lost within the "invisible city" because she is unsure of how to navigate it.

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<sup>7</sup> Kuehl, Linda. "Joan Didion, The Art of Fiction No. 71." *Paris Review*. The Paris Review, 24 Aug. 1977. Web.

*Play it as it Lays* begins with Maria laying down the “facts” of her life.<sup>8</sup> She recalls her child being taken out of her custody, her recent abortion, and her impending divorce. She does not have a steady job and she is solely controlled by the men in her life. She does not know why her life is shaped this way, but does not seem to want to question it. Maria’s only goal is to regain control over her life. Her first attempt at this control is when she when she drives on the freeway.

In the first hot month of the fall after the summer she left Carter (the summer Carter left her, the summer Carter stopped in the house in Beverly Hills), Maria drove the freeway. She dressed every morning with a greater sense of purpose than she had felt in some time, a cotton skirt, a jersey, sandals she could kick off when she wanted the touch of the accelerator, and she dressed very fast, running a brush through her hair once or twice and tying it back with a ribbon, for it was essential (to pause was to throw herself into the unspeakable peril) that she be on the freeway by ten o’clock. Not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard, not on her way to the freeway, but actually on the freeway. If she was not she lost the day’s rhythm, its

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<sup>8</sup> On page 4, Maria says that she needs to explain the “facts” so that the readers can understand why her life is comparable to nothing as she states in the beginning of the novel. The first line of the book is “What makes Iago evil? Some people ask. I never ask.” This suggests that she has not yet found why her life has accumulated to all of these tragic events and does not question what it means. She attempts to keep on living regardless of the facts about her life.

precariously imposed momentum. Once she was on the freeway and had maneuvered her way to a fast lane she turned on the radio at high volume and she drove (*Play it as it Lays*, 15).

For Maria, driving on the freeway gives her a “sense of purpose;” somewhere to go, something to do. She simply drives as a way to give herself direction or a sense of being. On a freeway one is free and invisible as everyone is in their own individual car. This is why Maria turns the radio to a high volume and drives fast. She is completely alone meaning that for once she has free will, which she does not have in the world of “Hollywood.” While on the freeway Maria drives to places outside of her normal route, which is why Didion emphasizes, “not somewhere on Hollywood boulevard.” Due to her profession it can be inferred that Maria frequently drives to the studios or within the areas around them. In this moment she goes to locations other than her normal route and seems to find temporary solace from her muddled state of mind.

This outer world starts to become less ideal as she explores parts of the city that are widely unfamiliar to her. As she continues driving Didion states, “Sometimes the freeway ran out, in a scrap metal yard in San Pedro or on the main street of Palmdale or out somewhere no place at all where the flawless burning concrete just stopped” (*Play it as it Lays*, 16). This is to say that while Maria has monetary independence and sense of purpose, she still ends up in a place full of nothing. This resembles how she feels about her life at the present moment. She has the time to drive all day on the freeway and turn around when she gets to place in which she does not want to be, whereas most people in

the city with normal day jobs do not have this time. The parts of the city that Maria comes to are areas of Los Angeles that are rarely explored by upper middle class residents such as herself. In this moment Didion shows how diverse and spread out Los Angeles actually is. These newly investigated areas are the “invisible” pieces of the city that Maria had not been previously aware of. The entertainment industry is a huge part of life in Los Angeles, particularly to Maria, but when she drives to these abandoned areas it seems as if that part of life is so miniscule when she sees how big the city actually is. In the moment Maria realizes in Los Angeles, while many of the people around her are lost morally, one can get lost geographically as well.

Didion concludes this scene by stating that, “Maria did not go back on the freeway except as a way of getting somewhere,” meaning that she could no longer endure driving on the freeway just for the sake of it (*Play it as it Lays*, 33). Maria realizes that driving with no direction is just as unfulfilling as having no direction in life. While driving gives her a sense of purpose at first, she gets tired of it when she realizes that she has nowhere to go. Driving almost makes her feel invisible because she has no reason to do it, presumably unlike the other drivers she passes. Maria’s most intimate moments in the novel are when she is behind the wheel because we see her attempt to figure out how the functionality of the city relates to her emotional being.

The freeway system distinguishes Los Angeles from most other cities; it is the primary mode of transportation. Didion believes that “the freeway system ... is the only secular communion Los Angeles has” (*The White Album*, “Bureaucrats,” 83). While most metropolitan areas have buses or a metro system that connect one neighborhood to another, Los Angeles has freeways. Minor public transportation notwithstanding, the



freeways are the only transportation network that can get you to every single area within Los Angeles. For Maria driving on the freeway means participating in something that is only applicable to residents of the city. Rather than isolating herself as she does throughout most of the novel, this is the first and only instant in which she is an active member of Los Angeles as a whole. When she ends up in unfamiliar territory she realizes that there is more to the city than the little bubble that she is consumed by, which is something that members of Hollywood frequently forget.

It is interesting to note that Didion did not enjoy driving on the freeway herself. In an article written about Didion in *Vanity Fair*, titled “How Joan Didion the Writer Became Joan Didion the Legend,” writer Lili Anolik includes a quote from Didion that says “Actually, I don’t drive on the freeway. I’m afraid to,” which she said to director Sam Perkins onset of the film version of *Play it as it Lays*. Didion’s own fear of participating in the freeway system is reflected in Maria’s drive on the freeway. Maria drives for hours and still ends up nowhere. It is evident that Didion believes that freeways are mainly for people who do not really have a set destination and that she may have a fear of lacking purpose in the city as well. She points out that “anyone can “drive on the freeway, and many people with no vocation for it do, hesitating here and resisting there, losing the rhythm of the lane change, thinking about where they came from and where they are going. Actual participants think only about where they are” (*The White Album*, “Bureaucrats,” 83).

In the beginning of *Play it as it Lays* Maria acts as what Didion refers to as an “actual participant.” She has no concern for where she is going nor does she think about where she came from as she wants to forget about her personal grievances within this

moment. She attempts to drive for as long as she can without stopping. She discusses wanting to have “control” and feeling the “weight of the becalmed car beneath her” (*Play it as it Lays*, 16). She even brings a hard-boiled egg with her so she does not have to stop for food. Maria confesses that “she could shell and eat a hard-boiled egg at seventy miles an hour,” which requires pure resilience and concentration; more than most participants on the freeway have (*Play it as it Lays*, 16). The shelling of the egg resembles the oppression she feels when she is not in control. Her drive on the freeway helps her let go of the stresses from her personal life until she realizes that she has nowhere to go. Didion’s own fears of losing purpose and disillusionment within the city seem to be projected through Maria’s strange drive across the city.

While Didion may not have participated within the freeway system, she was an active member of Hollywood. In the 1960’s she lived in a house on Franklin Avenue, a fairly well known street in the Hollywood Hills.<sup>9</sup> Besides actually living in Hollywood Didion and her husband John Gregory Dunne wrote many screenplays including one for *Play it as it Lays*, and other notable films such as *Panic in Needle Park*.<sup>10</sup> In essays from *The White Album*, Didion emphasizes the fact that she and her husband fully immersed themselves within the entertainment industry. While Didion loved the celebrity filled world she was a part of, it is clear that she also saw many of its flaws and at times felt out of place. *The White Album* begins with a doctor's note that was given to her in the beginning of the sixties stating that the patient lived in “a world of people moved by strange, conflicted, poorly comprehended and, above all, devious motivations,” which is

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<sup>9</sup> She mentions this house many times throughout essays in *The White Album*.

<sup>10</sup> A 1971 cult classic starring Al Pacino

exactly the type of world Maria is placed in *Play it as it Lays* (*The White Album*, “The White Album,” 18). Maria’s qualms about Hollywood seem to come from Didion’s own personal beliefs as well.

Maria’s frustration with the entertainment industry is displayed through her disappointment with her career and the people that surround her. She believes that the people closest to her do not have the best intentions, which in most cases is true. When Maria goes into see her agent she notices how little he actually cares about her or her career. She proclaims, “Only people in trouble came unannounced to see their agents. If Freddy Chaikin thought she carried trouble with her he would avoid her, because trouble was something no one in the city liked to be near. Failure, illness, fear, they were seen as infectious, contagious blights on glossy plants” (*Play it as it Lays*, 22). Everyone in Hollywood wants to live in a perfectly constructed world, without being bothered by the problems of others. Hollywood people do things primarily for themselves and nothing for others. In this moment Maria realizes how little support she has from the people that are closest to her. She knows how to conduct her life for the benefit of others, but cannot figure out how to live for herself. It is ironic when Didion writes “trouble was something no one in the city liked to be near,” because within Maria’s vision of the city it seems as if she is constantly surrounded by trouble, which induces her ongoing state of paranoia that is displayed throughout the novel.

In an essay about Didion’s construction of Los Angeles, writer Eric Avila states that Didion depicts Los Angeles as the “paranoid capital of the world,” which is shown through Maria’s own personal paranoia which is instigated by the people she surrounds

herself with and her role as a woman.<sup>11</sup> She spends most of the novel in the presence of men who constantly remind her of how little power she has within the industry as a female. She has very few female friends and the one female friend she does have is sleeping with her husband. Maria has every right to be paranoid about the people within her life, even though she is told otherwise. BZ, her producer, points out Maria's paranoia while discussing her marriage and career. BZ tells Maria to, "stop thinking Carter designs every move expressly to thwart you" and that she should "start thinking like Carlotta" (*Play it as it Lays*, 26). His comment poses two problems. First it proves that BZ cares little about the way Maria is treated by her husband and disregards the way she feels about her marriage falling apart. BZ focuses Maria and Carter's relationship towards her career rather than personal affairs. Even though, Carter is in fact cheating on Maria with Helen throughout the novel, who is ironically BZ's wife. While Carter may not be trying to destroy her career, he does not have the best intentions within their marriage and the way that he treats her, which BZ does not seem to care about. Secondly, when BZ says to start "thinking like Carlotta," who is his mother, it shows how much women are disregarded in the entertainment industry. Maria explains that Carlotta spent most of her life "engaged in constant litigation with her estranged husband" something that Maria does not wish to do (*Play it as it Lays*, 26). It is clear that Maria wants to cut her ties with Carter, but unfortunately she would not have career without him. She is limited in her profession as an actress and a female, but cannot figure out how to create a different path for herself. BZ's blatant sexism shows Didion's own reservations about

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<sup>11</sup> Avila, Eric. "Essaying Los Angeles." *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*. By Kevin R. McNamara. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010. 184. Print.

acting and makes it even more apparent that it is an undesirable career within Hollywood especially as a female.

While Didion, herself, seems more content with her life in Los Angeles than Maria does they both question the actions of the people they surround themselves with. In *The White Album*, Didion relentlessly discusses her time spent with famous figures. However, she never heightens the experience nor brags about it, pointing out their illogical decisions caused by fame and power. In the beginning of *The White Album*, Didion mentions that “spending time with music people was confusing, and required a more fluid and ultimately a more passive approach than I ever acquired” (*The White Album*, “The White Album,” 26). Stating that she takes a more “passive approach” insinuates that she stands in the background watching the morally dubious actions promulgated by these Hollywood stars, but never actually participates in them. She discusses a moment when musicians John and Michelle Phillips have their limo detour to pick up a friend on their way to the hospital for their child’s births. She follows this anecdote by stating, “This incident, which I often embroider in my mind to include an imaginary second detour, to the Luau for gardenias, exactly describes the music business to me” (*The White Album*, “The White Album,” 26) Didion shows her disapproval of the situation, but at the same time is fascinated by their ridiculous habits. Didion has the advantage, as a writer removing herself from most of these events, making herself almost “invisible” to the actions that take place in front of her so that she can write about it later. Since she is not an active participator she can see the imperfections in the people that dominate the city. She is intrigued by their excess and stupidity, which may be part of why she truly likes Los Angeles - she has the ability to point out its residents flaws.

Maria does not have the advantage that Didion has as a writer to express her feelings towards the ignorance of the people in Hollywood. As an actress her feelings have to be kept to herself or else she would be out of work. There are many moments in the novel where Maria does not want to partake in the activities of the people around her. When BZ forces her to go to Anita Garson's party she inwardly expresses her distaste for the people there. She tells the readers that the party "was large and noisy and crowded with people she did not much like," but she has to act like she is enjoying herself as it is part of her job (*Play it as it Lays*, 35). While she seems to not like any of the people there she primarily expresses how she feels about the men at the party. When overhearing a fairly sexist exchange between BZ and Larry Kulik, Maria's agent. Didion writes that "Maria twisted the napkin around her glass. She already smiled too long and she did not want to look any more at Larry Kulik's careful manicure and expensively tailored suit and she did not want to consider why Larry Kulik was talking to BZ about the girl in the white dress" (*Play it as it Lays*, 36). Her description of Kulik attests to how she feels about the entertainment industry as a whole - fake and sexist. While Larry Kulik may look nice to an outsider, he is just as insecure and mean as everyone else. In that sense she feels invisible as she seems to be the only one in this moment that can look past the constructed realities of these people's lives. Maria does not want to spend time engaging with people who she knows do not have her best intentions at heart. In the end it is clear that BZ sees this as well. His despair with the people and the city are what cause his suicide. While Maria starts becoming more aware of the bubble she lives in than others are, she does not feel as threatened by "Hollywood" as BZ does. Even though for most of the novel it seems as if she feels more pressure than anyone.

People who are not part of Hollywood generally have a misconception about what it is like.<sup>12</sup> Not everyone lives in a mansion like Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*.<sup>13</sup> The actual area of Hollywood is not perfect and neither are the people in it. The nice homes in Hollywood are heavily constructed to look good, but nothing is natural. Most of these homes are up on hills hidden from main streets like Sunset Boulevard and Hollywood Boulevard. The main area of Hollywood itself is in reality heavily run down and trashy. Beauty is utterly transparent in Hollywood as it is a sexist, fake, and selfish world. However, it is only a tiny segment of the city itself. Occasionally Didion will mention little moments in Hollywood where she finds its beauty, but then contrasts these images with the actual reality of the area and community. There are several moments in *Play it as it Lays*, where Didion constructs a scene in which the problems of Hollywood are mentioned while discussing the physical beauty that is actually around them.

She sat on the rattan chaise in the hot October twilight and watched BZ throw the ice cubes from his drink one by one into the swimming pool. They had already talked about Helene's week at La Costa and they had already talked about an actress who had been admitted to UCLA Neuropsychiatric with her wrists cut (the papers said

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<sup>12</sup> I know this from my own experience with living in Los Angeles and interacting with people who are part of the entertainment industry. Actors look much better on screen than they do in real life and their lives are not as perfect as everyone makes them out to be. Tourists are also highly disappointed when they see how run down landmarks such as sunset strip are.

<sup>13</sup> A 1950 classic American comedy/drama film noir that is named after the boulevard that runs through Los Angeles and Beverly Hills, California.

exhaustion, but BZ knew things like that, knew about people, that was why she had called him) and now it was the hour when in all the houses all around the pretty women were putting on perfume and enameled bracelets and kissing the pretty children, goodnight, the hour of the apparent grace and promised music, and even here in Maria's own garden the air smelled of jasmine and the water in the pool was 85 degrees and it was always clean (*Play it as it Lays*, 24).

In Maria's world beauty is illusory. Maria is more concerned with the psychosis of the city rather than the constructed beauty of it. Maria's vision of Los Angeles contrasts with Clarissa Dalloway's view of London in *Mrs. Dalloway*, where she emphasizes the physical beauty of the city. In this passage Didion discusses the disillusionment of Maria's environment. She and BZ seem to especially pinpoint the women this environment has affected and the destructive nature of the people around her. They discuss an actress who was admitted to a neuropsychiatric which Maria seems more interested in than anything else that is going on. However, it is contrasted by the end of the passage where the discussion of constructing an appearance comes into play. Though many people know that Los Angeles can be a damaging environment they go out and dress up stereotypically. While Maria is aware of all the destruction that is going on around her Didion mentions how her life looks from the outside. By stating that "even here in Maria's own garden the air smelled of jasmine and the water in the pool was 80



degrees and always clean,” she points to how Maria’s life looks from an outside perspective. She lives in a nice house, in a nice neighborhood, where everything looks and functions well. All in all it seems as if her life is not that bad. It is the secluded environment in which she is consumed by the very attitudes that she despises. Even when she is in the confines of her own home she does not forget about the destructive world around her.

Didion seems to have the same feelings about Hollywood superficiality as Maria does. In fact there is a passage in the *The White Album* that almost mirrors the passage about Maria sitting by her pool.

There was a jasmine vine grown over the verandah of the big house on Franklin Avenue and it the evenings the smell of jasmine came in through all the open doors and windows. I made bouillabaisse for people who did not eat meat. I imagined that my own life was simple and sweet, and sometimes it was, but there were odd things going around town. There were rumors. There were stories. Everything was unmentionable but nothing was unimaginable. This mystical flirtation with the idea of “sin” - this sense that it was possible to go “too far,” and that many people were doing it - was very much with us in Los Angeles in 1968 and 1969. (*The White Album*, “The White Album,” 41)

Didion's description of her life in Hollywood is similar to that of Maria's. She claims that her private life is fairly simple and rich. The air always smells of jasmine just as it does in Maria's home. Jasmine is a scent that is often used for women's perfumes which may be why Didion frequently writes about the smell.<sup>14</sup> It is a smell that is common and considered attractive. While the air privately smells good - the outside world is quite dirty. Didion is comfortable within her private life at home, but like Maria still thinks about her outer environment. This is the main problem she relays. From the outside it seems as if all members of Hollywood lead these perfect lives, but in actuality they are consumed by the idea of sin and destruction. She contrasts her "simple" and "sweet" life, with the the Sharon Tate murders that happened fairly close to her home, Didion proclaims that "no one was surprised," which attests to how Didion sees Hollywood: as a place where destruction is somewhat invisible because everyone is too concerned about themselves. Many of these Hollywood figures fame and fortune was not going to last forever (*The White Album*, "The White Album," 42) In turn, Didion witnesses the rise and fall of many of the celebrities she discusses within her essays and seems to be hidden in the shadows of them. She is completely aware that these people have no good intentions or morals. She uses the Sharon Tate murder as her prime example. Many people care more about who they see then where they are, which allows Didion to simply watch from the sidelines and witness their downfall. Didion's writing is most compelling when she depicts the constant rollercoaster that these figure seem to be on. Her readers constantly see her witnessing these destructive lives, but she stays fairly

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<sup>14</sup> From the English word for the climbing plant with fragrant flowers which is used for making perfumes. It is derived from Persian name Yasameen.

uninvolved. Maria tries to stay uninvolved as Didion does, but at times can be just as destructive due to her personal tragedies, however, she seems to be much more aware of herself and environment than the other people do around her.

The paradox that Didion portrays in Hollywood also attributes to Los Angeles in general. In *Play it as it Lays* and within *The White Album* we see Maria and Didion make frequent trips to the beach and desert, which are both vastly different from the environment that they live in. This makes the readers see how different areas in Los Angeles can be. In an essay written by Charles L. Crow titled “Home and Transcendence in Los Angeles Fiction,” Crow states that, “the paradox of Los Angeles, is that it is situated between a seacoast and desert, and it is easy to access both of these environments” (Crow, 212). The images of these places are not as picturesque as one might imagine though, especially the beaches. Driving becomes a projection of Maria’s inner drama; it helps her escape her own life and problems. She is drawn more towards the desert, but her trips to the beach give the readers a sense of what beaches in Los Angeles are truly like. During Maria’s second trip to the beach moment Didion writes “that there was oil scum on the sand and a red tide in the flaccid surf and mounds of kelp at the waterline. The kelp hammered with flies. The water lapped warm, forceless” (*Play it as it Lays*, 65). By using phrases like “oil scum,” “flaccid surf”, and “mounds of kelp,” Didion makes the beaches in Los Angeles sound fairly unappealing. Her use of language makes it clear that the beach is not the escape that Maria had in mind, she just liked the idea of it. She wanted to enjoy herself in paradise, but rather found an area full of dirt and flies. When Didion mentions that the water is “forceless,” it is evident that this beach really had no impact on Maria, nor does it make her feel better within this moment.

Didion's description of the beaches in Los Angeles is fairly accurate. Unless one is going to the beach in Los Angeles on an extremely warm day they are not all that enjoyable.

The beaches are quite dirty compared to other beaches in California and the beaches tend to be much colder than the rest of Los Angeles. Since Maria is not too impressed by the beach within this moment she quickly drives back home, which also shows how accessible each area is in Los Angeles. Maria shows how sometimes the idea of "escape" in Los Angeles is not always as paradisaical as it sounds.

Didion herself seems to have fairly similar feelings towards the beach as Maria does. In her essay "Quiet Days in Malibu" Didion contrasts her opinion of Hollywood with that of the beach. She realizes that the beach is not perfect either, but it is a much more idyllic living environment than Hollywood. Didion proclaims that, "I had accepted the conventional notion that Malibu meant the easy life, had worried that we would be cut off from "the real world," by which I believe I meant daily exposure to the Sunset Strip" (*The White Album*, "Quiet Days in Malibu," 222). This is true in many ways. Malibu is quite far from the Hollywood that Maria and Didion live in. Everyone has a different mind set there. People are not consumed by destruction and sin, they just want to relax and live an easy life free of problems. In Los Angeles, Malibu is a common place for the rich and successful to retire to. The energy of the city is left behind and there is little talk of Hollywood. The problem with Malibu, just like Hollywood, is that it is still a world filled with wealth and excess. It is also only a small sector of the city that is hard to leave, however, the residents of Malibu are not as destructive as Hollywood residents. While Maria discusses the flaws of the beach she continually mentions how she wishes to

someday live in a house by the sea. Living in a house by the sea means starting over and escaping from the destructive world of Hollywood.

In real life Didion does move to Malibu once the sixties are over. Didion was too overwhelmed by the never ending drama of the Hollywood lifestyle that she too needed an escape. Like Maria, she sees the imperfections in beach towns. When describing Malibu to her readers she says that, “the hills are scrubby and barren, infested with bikers and rattlesnakes, scarred with cuts and old burns and new R.V. parks. For these and other reasons Malibu tends to astonish and disappoint those who have never before seen it, and yet its very name remains, in the imagination of people all over the world” (*The White Album*, “Quiet Days in Malibu,” 209). She sees the grittiness of it, but also mentions how other people perceive it. Just like Hollywood, Malibu is not known for its location, but rather its name. While the destructiveness of Hollywood is not there, Malibu is still a place where the stars go to retire so the idea of fame is very evident, the people are just not as vicious anymore. In Malibu everyone is fairly isolated from those around them. You cannot really walk around Malibu, especially if you live on the coast which makes it hard to interact with neighbors. Malibu is a place to live a quiet life in complete solidarity. Didion makes it seem like a place where people no longer have vicious motives. However, Didion ends up leaving Malibu in the end. The relaxed life seems to get boring after awhile, which it probably would for Maria as well. Malibu is highly contrasted with Hollywood and it seems as if Didion and Maria need to find a happy medium between the two.

Another misconception about Los Angeles presented through Didion’s writings concerns the weather. Los Angeles is known for its sunny skies and seemingly perfect

temperature, which is why many people are drawn to it. While Los Angeles arguably has much better weather conditions than many other areas there are rare instances in which the weather can destroy the entire city. In her essay “Los Angeles Notebook” Didion states that “In fact the climate is characterized by infrequent but violent extremes: two periods of torrential subtropical rains which continue for weeks and wash out the hills and send subdivisions sliding toward the sea; about twenty scattered days a year of the Santa Ana, which, with its incendiary dryness, invariably means fire” (Didion, 486). The Santa Ana winds cause fires throughout the city which destroy the landscape. Many of the houses in Malibu are on hills of dirt making it easy for brush fires to occur. These winds have shaped Didion’s view of the city as she has probably witnessed the destruction of many homes and much real estate around her. When she mentions that Los Angeles is “invisible,” physically these winds come to mind. When they occur they do not only destroy the landscape, but the functionality of the city as well. After a fire that occurred in 1957 due to winds that lasted for “14 days” the city completely shut down. Didion mentions that schools were shut down, one of her neighbors refused to leave their house, and one could see the fires along the freeways. She describes the wind as “weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse.” She says “the winds shows us how close to the edge we are,” meaning how close we are to the destruction of life (Didion, 486). While the city is a place full of life Didion sees Los Angeles as a city that shows us that life will not continue uninterrupted. Los Angeles is generally slow, peaceful, and relaxed, but when the winds occur the whole city is out of order.

In *Play it as it Lays*, Didion draws comparisons between Los Angeles’s unpredictable weather and Maria’s state of mind. Maria is constantly on edge and seems

as if she will explode at any minute. While Los Angeles's weather may be intrusive, life still goes on. This is how it is in Maria's world. Maria and the people around her destroy many aspects of their lives, but Maria keeps on living. When the winds, smog, and brushfires stop one can see the city clearly which is actually a rare occurrence in Los Angeles. In one moment of *Play it as it Lays*, Maria really sees the city clearly for the first time.

In the aftermath of the wind the air was dry, burning, so clear that she could see the ploughed furrows of firebreaks on distant mountains. Not even the highest palms moved. The stillness and clarity of the air seemed to rob everything of its perspective, seemed to alter all perception of depth, and Maria drove as carefully as if she were reconnoitering an atmosphere without gravity. Taco Bell's jumped out at her. Oil rockers creaked ominously. For miles before she reached the Thriftmart she could see the big red T, a forty-foot cutout letter which seemed peculiarly illuminated against the harsh unclouded light of the afternoon sky (*Play it as it Lays*, 77).

Once Maria gets a clear view of Los Angeles, Didion points to the city's imperfections. She says that it "seemed to rob everything of its perspective," implying that the city may look better when one's view is obstructed. Maria does not mention the palm trees, the sun, or the bright blue skies. She talks about famous American chains such as

Taco Bell and the Thriftmart. While these references might allude to how fake everything is, they also might resemble Maria's perception of the city within the moment. She may not be able to see the beauty of it due to how she feels. In this moment Didion gives her readers a view of Los Angeles that is rarely mentioned throughout the novel. She relates the city to most other American towns. While the city contains unique features, Los Angeles has many ugly sides to it as well. The city is full of restaurants, businesses, and structures that one can find anywhere in America which may make the city a little more relatable in a way. By discussing the occasional bland scenery and weather weather Didion shows how "invisible" Los Angeles can be.

To Didion Los Angeles is invisible because many aspects of life in the city tend to get blurred by the people within it, the way in which it is structured, and the unconventional weather. The rules of a typical city do not necessarily apply in Los Angeles, which explains Didion's fascination with it. Everyone is stuck in their own little bubble of a neighborhood where public interaction is not a dominant feature. In *Play it as it Lays*, Didion constructs a character that cannot seem to handle the disorganization of the city, but still accepts it in the end. Maria feels invisible because she sees and feels things that those around her do not. Due to her gender and especially her profession as an actress she constantly gets taken advantage of. She is hindered by issues that her male acquaintances cannot relate to. As Maria drives through the city in order to figure out her sense of self, she finds places outside of "Hollywood" that help free her muddled state of mind, but quickly realizes that she has no purpose to be there. Didion depicts Hollywood through Maria's problems - she creates an addictive world that people tend to leave, but always come back to in the end. Everything in the city seems to contradict itself which is



why Maria cannot find solace. As the title suggests, the city in *Play it as it Lays* is like a game, which is hard for Maria to win, but easy for Didion to control as a writer since she seems to have a fairly good grasp on the people around her.

Through *Play it as it Lays* and her personal writings, Didion displays the dark reality that the city creates for many of its residents, especially those involved in Hollywood. However, Didion herself is drawn to the city's toxic characters and unexpected drama because it gives her great materials for her stories.<sup>15</sup> At the end of her essay "The White Album," she quotes her neurologist who advises her to "lead a simple life," in which Didion follows "In other words it was another story without a narrative," implying that if she were to "lead a simple life" she would no longer have interesting stories to tell (*The White Album*, "The White Album," 47). Didion uses the negative aspects of the city to highlight the parts she actually enjoys. Joan Didion loves Los Angeles, which is why she has had a hard time living anywhere else, however, her love for the city is in part due to its flaws. As a writer, she too is often invisible, but the remarkable scenes that she witnesses within the city make the invisibility beneficial to her rather than hinder her.

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<sup>15</sup> Anolik, Lili, and Vanity Fair Magazine. "How Joan Didion the Writer Became Joan Didion the Legend." *Vanity Fair*. Condé Nast, 2 Feb. 2016. Web.

### CHAPTER 3: TWO GIRLS IN NAPLES

#### I.

It was the summer of 2015. My friend Caitlin and I were traveling around Europe after our spring semester abroad in Berlin. We were nearing the end of our trip when we decided to venture over to Naples after spending a couple of days in Florence. We hopped in the first cab we spotted and told the driver to take us to the train station.

“Where are you girls going?” He asked.

“Naples,” I said.

“Naples, why?”

“For the pizza” I jokingly replied.

He paused for a moment with a concerned expression on his face. He didn’t seem to find my joke all that humorous.

“I hope you ladies have a knife on you.” He started laughing.

“Excuse me?”

“Or a gun.” He started laughing more.

Caitlin was silent.

“What do you mean?” I asked just as we were pulling up to the train station.

The driver stops the cab and takes a good long look at both of us. He lets out a creepy smile.

“Naples is no place for two girls like you” he says.

We take our bags and quickly get out of the cab. We walk over to the train station without saying a word. We both know exactly what the other is thinking.

“He was probably trying to scare us because we’re American” I said to Caitlin.

“I hope so,” she said, but I could tell she believed him.

We bought our tickets and sat down at the scrappy McDonald’s inside of the station as we waited for our train to arrive.

“Should we just stay in Florence?” Caitlin asked as she nervously scarfed down a large order of french fries.

“We’ll be fine” I said. “Asy said she loved Naples.”

This was true. A friend from our abroad program told us that if we were going to Italy we must go to Naples.

I stayed in this cute little cottage with an old Italian woman who made me pizza and served me wine all day long. She had this adorable backyard where I would sit in the sun, drink, and play with her poodle all day. Occasionally I would walk around town by myself. Every time I would walk up and down the streets someone would invite me into their home for a drink. I did not feel scared to go into these strangers houses. I felt welcomed. They were mainly old couples who wanted to tell me stories of the area. Everyone in Naples was so nice and giving. I would love to go back.

After Asy had described her experience in Naples, I knew I had to go there.

Once Caitlin and I got on the train I completely forgot about what the cab driver had said earlier. I pictured myself in the same image that Asy had described — sitting out on a sun porch, drinking wine, and playing with a poodle.

The second we stepped off the train we were bombarded by groups of people pushing us left and right as we walked through the station. Everyone started screaming at us in Italian. We could not understand a word, but could understand that we needed to get out of their way or we would be in serious trouble. At one point as we were walking to find a taxi Caitlin got pushed down to the ground by an older man who was late for his train. He didn't seem to care that she fell and just ran right along. No one stopped to help. No one seemed concerned. As soon as I picked her up Caitlin looked as if she were about to cry.

“I don't know how long I can last here” she said.

I still remained optimistic about the whole matter and assured her that everything would be okay. We were only in the train station. We had not even seen the city. The cab ride to our airbnb, however, was anything but okay. The tiny cab which looked like it had not been cleaned for some time had no seatbelts, but the driver insisted that we hold on tight. As he drove us around the city I tried not to scream as he was going in and out of lanes at about 80 mile/hr while more shouting and honking occurred every couple of seconds.

“Why are you driving so fast?” I suddenly blurted.

“You're in Naples” he replied. “Get used to it.”

My parents had warned me of the reckless driving I would experience in Italy, but I had never felt as if my life was about to end until this moment. Luckily we arrived to our

airbnb in one full piece and without any whiplash. As we got out the driver charged us double of what we assumed we had to pay. Though he was most likely taking advantage of us being foreigners, we payed him anyways without hesitation as we wanted to get out of his car as fast as possible.

We were welcomed to our airbnb by a cute old Italian women. Seeing her face made me feel a little better. She looked exactly as I had pictured, somewhat of a modern day Italian version of Betty Crocker. Almost everything about her was perfect, except that she did not speak a word of English. She put us and our luggage in an elevator where we were lifted to the third floor of the building. The doors opened to a beautiful sun porch, similar to the one Asy had described. We took our bags and went into the apartment as the woman was talking our heads off in Italian. We smiled and nodded as if we knew exactly what she was saying.

The apartment was a 1950's Italian dream. Maybe everything would be okay, I thought. Once she showed us our room I attempted to ask her what we should do while we were here, as Caitlin and I had not really planned that out. Of course she too did not understand what I was saying and just looked at us with a blank stare. After a moment of awkward silent smiles she handed us the key and left the apartment.

“So what do you want to do?” I said to Caitlin. It was around dinner time so she suggested that we go look for some food. We headed out of the apartment and stopped right outside of the door realizing that we had no clue where we were going. We stood there for a moment looking in both directions to see if we could figure out which route had the most promise.

“Which way?” Caitlin asked.

“Left” I replied.

This decision was entirely unsystematic. We walked left until we ran into a street that looked as if it had a few shops and restaurants. As we got closer we realized that they were all pretty bare. Each store seemed to carry similar items: a couple boxes of cereal, expired fruit, some wine, cleaning products, and of course, pasta. We walked down this street for about two miles and could not find one restaurant, grocery store, or any other type of practical business. We only passed these strange convenient stores. Though the stores were empty, the street was packed. I felt as if we were back at the train station we had been in earlier. Every couple of seconds a man would whistle or yell at us. We were the only two American girls on the street. In fact we were the only two girls in sight. Throughout all of my time abroad, this was the first time I was uncomfortable. The first time I felt unsafe. As we continued walking Caitlin and I held closely to each other to make sure that other was always in sight. We ignored the stares, catcalls, and whistles of the creepy men and quickly ran into one of the stores to buy pasta and wine so that we could go back to our apartment. Once we bought our food we walked as fast as we could not looking back at anything that was going on around us. The second we arrived to the apartment Caitlin stated, “We need to leave.”

That night we booked train tickets back to Rome. We were in Naples for less than 24 hours and it was far from the fairytale like image Asy had described. The only time we were ever on the sun porch was when we were trying to get our bags into the elevator as a group of Australians laughed and asked us why we were leaving so soon. We only drank wine in our bedroom as we watched countless episodes of Gossip Girl on my Ipad. And

there was no dog, just a picture of one right above our bed. The cab driver in Florence was right. Naples was no place for two girls like us.

## II.

*My Brilliant Friend* takes place in a small working class neighborhood on the outskirts of Naples that Elena Ferrante refers to as *rione*;<sup>16</sup> a neighborhood that is controlled by the camorra also known as the Neapolitan mafia. The area is filled with violence, poverty, and social unrest that is attempting to pick up the pieces from the destruction of World War II.<sup>17</sup> While the upper class citizens are able to move to nicer parts of the city, the lower class Neapolitans have to remain in this unraveling neighborhood while struggling to survive. In *My Brilliant Friend* the central character Elena tells the story of her own struggle growing up in Naples. Part of her struggle stems from her being a female. Until the 1970's women had very few rights in Italy, which made it more difficult for them to live as unconsciously as the men did within the city.<sup>18</sup> While everyone in Elena's town, regardless of gender, is impoverished and working towards creating a better life for themselves, life in Rione is significantly more difficult for the women. The idea of class and the expectations of females within this city and time period play a huge role throughout the story.

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<sup>16</sup> The full neighborhood is called Rione Luzzatti which is identifiable by the geographical references in the book. It is one of the oldest neighborhoods in Naples, but also one of the most impoverished areas.

<sup>17</sup> Italy was the second most affected country during the aftermath of World War II due to the frequent attacks on the city during the war.

<sup>18</sup> Rosselli, Annalisa. *The Policy on Gender Equality in Italy: In-depth Analysis*. Luxembourg: Publications Office, 2014. [www.europarl.europa.eu](http://www.europarl.europa.eu). European Parliament, Mar. 2014.



While Elena is not only struggling to survive within her violent town, she also struggles to live up to her best friend Lila who at first seems to have a better grasp on the city than she does. The story of their friendship resembles the functionality of the neighborhood, as the readers witness Elena and Lila compete, defend one another, and struggle with the patriarchal values that are forced upon them. At first, Lila is depicted as the tough girl that Elena strives to be. Elena admires Lila for her intelligence, strength, and fearlessness in facing the dangers of Rione. However, the strong patriarchal force that is so heavily ingrained within city life gets in the way of Lila's ambitions and Elena quickly sees her fall apart. Throughout the novel Elena realizes how destructive Naples is to women, but tries to make the city a better place for herself regardless.

Unlike *Mrs. Dalloway*, *My Brilliant Friend* is not a modernist urban novel as it was written during a different time and from the perspective of an impoverished young woman rather than an upper class housewife. The main protagonist Elena does not have the same type of privilege as Clarissa Dalloway or even Maria Wyeth, making it physically more difficult for her to enjoy her life in the city. The narrator Elena realistically frames Naples, the neighborhood, and the people within it. She does not only discuss how the city makes her feel mentally, but displays the burdens of her location and those around her. Elena struggles to live in Naples with no money and little access to education, safety, and general rights as a female citizen. Ferrante composes Elena's narrative by switching from Elena's present self to her past. Elena recalls her childhood

to point out how her perspective on Naples shifts as she becomes more aware of how to overcome the barriers that the city forces upon her.

I feel no nostalgia for our childhood: it was full of violence. Every sort of thing happened, at home and outside, everyday, but I don't recall having ever thought that the life we had there was particularly bad. Life was like that, that's all, we grew up with the duty to make it difficult for others before they made it difficult for us. Of course I would have liked the nice manners that the teacher and the priest preached, but I felt that those ways were not suited to our neighborhood, even if you were a girl. The women fought among themselves more than the men, they pulled each other's hair, they hurt each other. To cause a pain was a disease. As a child I imagined tiny, almost invisible animals that arrived in the neighborhood at night, they came from the ponds, from the abandoned train cars beyond the embarkment, from the stinking grasses called fetienti, from the frogs, the salamanders, the flies, the rocks, the dust, and entered the water and the food and the air, making our mothers, our grandmothers as angry as starving dogs. They were more severely infected than the men, because while

men were always getting furious, they calmed down in the end; women who appeared to be silent, acquiescent, when they were angry flew into a rage that had no end (*My Brilliant Friend*, 38).

Elena starts the passage by stating that “I feel no nostalgia for our childhood: it was full of violence,” which is ironic considering the rest of the novel is about her childhood self and looking back on the past. While she may not feel nostalgic for her childhood in Naples there is a reason as to why she feels it is important for her to look back on it. This reason may be to show how she is able to overcome the difficulties she faces while growing up within her neighborhood as a child and as a female. The violence that surrounds her childhood plays a lot into her character and who she later becomes. She goes on to say “every sort of thing happened, at home and outside,” which implies that her living situation was not much different from the life outside of her home. She does not have the advantage of separating her private and public spheres within the city as characters like Clarissa and Maria do. Elena sees the violence that occurs on the streets in the same way she views the violence that occurs within her home.<sup>19</sup> Her home is not a haven for escape, it is just as dangerous as the world outside surrounding her.

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<sup>19</sup> According to the article titled "The Realism of Elena Ferrante's Naples" written by Irene Caselli, domestic violence was extremely common in Naples at this time. In the novel, domestic is explicitly displayed when Lila's father throws her through her apartment window.

The violence that surrounds Elena attributes to her tough nature, which she builds throughout the novel. She learns how to fight for herself through her best friend Lila, who starts out as fearless. The first chapter opens with Lila encouraging Elena to climb up to Don Achilles' apartment in order to retrieve Elena's doll that Lila had thrown up there. Don Achille is rumored to be one of the most violent men in the city, but Lila does not seem to care. In this scene Elena admits that she "hoped that Lila would turn back," but she never does, proving Lila's resilience to fear (*My Brilliant Friend*, 28).

During their first few years of elementary school, Elena watches Lila fight back when classmates throw rocks at her and sees her strive to physically and academically compete with her male peers. In the beginning, Lila proves that she is a female who can stand her own ground. Through watching Lila fight for her survival, Elena realizes that she must act this way as well. She claims that she cannot have "the nice manners that the teacher and the priest preached", because it is not "suited to her neighborhood," meaning that she would not be able to survive as a sweet and well behaved female, as this would not accord to the nature of her environment. She says "the women fought amongst themselves more than the men," which implies that it is normal for women in Rione to fight with one another as it was the only they could survive.

Elena distinguishes herself from other female protagonists, such as Clarissa Dalloway and Maria Wyeth, by the alternate way in which she describes Naples. While Clarissa Dalloway points out the physical beauty of London and Maria mainly discusses

her state of mind within the city, Elena describes Naples exactly as it is. She does not exaggerate how the city appears nor centers on herself within it. She describes the structure and mentality of the city as well. She uses words such as *invisible*, *abandoned*, *disgusting*, and *fetient*<sup>20</sup> when she initially talks about Naples — all words with fairly negative connotations. Unlike other female protagonists, Elena’s vision of the city is a bit skewed. She does not see the beauty of the people and environment like characters such as Mrs. Dalloway do, infact she actually sees the complete opposite. She sees the city for what it truly is — an impoverished landscape filled with crime, violence, and fear. Elena never heightens or exaggerates her environment to make it sound better than it actually is. She gives her readers a fairly realistic description in order to show how difficult her living conditions actually are. Her descriptions give the readers insight as to the type of character she is. Unlike Mrs. Dalloway she is not a modernist or intellectual, she is a realist. She comes from a less educated family and a more impoverished background. Though the city may not sound idealistic, Elena goes through the novel trying to make the most of her environment and persevering through the daily dangers she faces. She says that “I don’t recall having ever thought that the life we had there was particularly bad,” because she does not know of anything different. She is aware of the difficulties

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<sup>20</sup> An Italian word for which there is no English equivalent, but vaguely means stinking of disgust.

within the city, but she does not let that hinder her from making the most out of her life there.

Due to impoverished conditions that the residents of Elena's neighborhood are faced with, schooling is not a priority, especially for females. During this time parents wanted their children to start working as soon as possible in order to provide a substantial income for their family. In Naples, it was fairly normal for females to stop their education right after elementary school, while boys would continue schooling through mid high school.<sup>21</sup> In the novel Lila is depicted as being one of the most intelligent girls in her elementary school class. Elena states that while she worked hard to do well in school, "In Lila's case it was different. Even by the first grade she was beyond any possible competition. In fact, the teachers said that with a little application she would be able to take the test for second grade, and not yet seven, go into third" (My Brilliant Friend, 48). Elena's jealousy of Lila's intelligence is overshadowed by the fact that Lila is unable to continue school. It is clear Lila values her education and would succeed if she continued to a higher level of education, but her parents feel differently.

But what could you do, it didn't enter into his [referring to Lila's father] view of the world that she could continue to go to school.

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<sup>21</sup> According to official statistics, now 93 percent of Italian children finish secondary school, and there are more female than male graduates at Italian universities. However, up until the 1980's, illiteracy and dropout rates in Naples remained extremely high.

Nor did it fall within his economic possibilities: the family was large, they all had to live off the shoe repair shop, including two unmarried sisters of Fernando and Nunzia's parents. So on the matter of school it was like talking to the wall, and her mother all in all had the same opinion (*My Brilliant Friend*, 70).

Lila's parents force her to drop out of school right after her elementary year to help at home so that her brothers can work. It is clear that this is not what Lila had planned for her future. At school Lila and Elena make a pact to become wealthy. They ignore the normal standards for female education within this society and decide that they will rise above it. Elena states that, "we thought that if we studied hard we would be able to write books and that the books would make us rich" (70). Lila and Elena both prove that they see a brighter future for themselves than is actually expected of them. Unfortunately, due to the realities of their environment and Lila's family situation, Lila cannot live up to this dream. This pushes Elena even more to do it for herself. While Elena sees Lila's dreams fall apart by being forced to drop out of school, getting married at the age of sixteen, and working a job that she does not enjoy, she becomes aware that she cannot live the same life as Lila and now has to figure out how to survive school on her own.

While Elena may have to make it on her own through schooling, she still relies on Lila to help her navigate the city. Both Elena and Lila rarely step out of the confines of

their neighborhood. They are unaware of what most of Naples looks like. One can assume that both of their families keep them pretty isolated from the rest of Naples. The confidence that they eventually build together as friends give them the strength to finally venture outside of Rione.

We decided to skip school, and cross the boundaries of the neighborhood. It had never happened before. As far back as I could remember, I had never left the four-story white apartment buildings, the courtyard, the parish church, the public gardens. I had never felt the urge to. Trains passed continuously on the other side of the scrubland, trucks and cars passed up and down along the stradone, and yet I can't remember a single occasion when I asked myself, my father, my teacher: where are the cars going, the trucks, the trains, to what city, to what world? (*My Brilliant Friend*, 73).

When Elena states that she never “felt the urge to” leave her town it seems as if she was never encouraged to do so. It is likely that Elena and Lila would have never actually decided to venture off if they did not have each other. They feel safe with one another, which is why they eventually feel safe to explore other areas of Naples. While they go on



this journey the readers can clearly spot the class and gender discrepancies that are placed upon them within the outside areas that are presumably much nicer than Rione. Elena says that, “We saw a lot of small snotty children who stopped playing and looked at us threateningly. We also saw a fat man in an undershirt who emerged from a tumbledown house, opened his pants, and showed us penis. But we weren’t scared of anything...” (*My Brilliant Friend*, 76). While it is clear Rione is unaccommodating for females, it seems as if the outside world is no different. However, both Elena and Lila are completely unafraid of the threatening images they pass by while exploring these new territories. This scene shows how aware they are of their surroundings and each other, which keeps them safe from being harmed. Elena and Lila allow each other to enjoy certain little communities within the city knowing that they will be able to defend one another if something was to happen. Their confidence in protecting each other helps make Naples a more positive environment for them as females.

In a recent interview with *The Paris Review* conducted by Ferrante’s publishers, Sandro and Sandro Ferri, Ferrante explains that “if we have to cultivate our narrative tradition, as women, that doesn’t mean we should renounce the entire stock of techniques we have behind us. We have to show that we can construct worlds that are not only as wide and powerful and rich as those constructed by men but more so.” Ferrante suggests that her awareness is what makes her stories distinct and as powerful as stories about men. Elena’s observations of the city are specific to her, especially to her being a woman.

She sees Naples in a different way than the men do. She displays the different tactics each gender must use to navigate the city. While at times Elena feels hindered by her gender, she still remains calm whenever she ventures out of the confines of her home. Her confidence may come from her heightened awareness of the situations that take place around her and the way she is able to see people from an outside perspective. During a New Year's Eve party that Elena attends with Lila, Elena makes direct distinction between how the men and women were viewed within this setting. Ferrante writes, "We were outside, on the roof terrace of one of the apartment buildings in the neighborhood. Although it was very cold we were wearing light, low-cut dresses, so that we would appear attractive. We looked at the boys, who were cheerful, aggressive, dark figures carried away by the party, the food, the sparkling wine" (*My Brilliant Friend*, 89). She starts the passage off by describing what is plainly seen from the outside and then digs deeper into the psyche, especially those of the women, in order to construct a scene that is derived from her own personal feelings about the situation. The distinction is quite obvious in terms of gender. She describes the men as "cheerful," "aggressive," and "dark," but states that they were "carried away by the party, the food, the sparkling wine" which insinuates they were having a good time. She can tell that they are happy to be there and feel extremely comfortable on this terrace. By using the word cheerful it almost seems as if the men at this party are utterly carefree meaning that they are able to enjoy themselves in full capacity. The words "aggressive" and "dark" are used to relay how

Elena personally feels about the men within this moment, not how the men see themselves. Their energy and faces seem to stand out. The word “dark” implies that Elena is uncomfortable being around them.

While the men at this party seem to be comfortable and able to enjoy themselves, Elena depicts the women in an opposing way. Ferrante says that the women are wearing “light, low-cut dresses” so that they “appear attractive.” She contrasts this observation with how cold the night is. The women are wearing these minimal outfits regardless. While from a male's perspective they look good, it is clear that Elena and the women she is with are uncomfortable and do not feel as they appear. The use of the word *appear* provides a direct distinction between how the males are navigating the party versus how the females feel about being there. Ferrante never states that the males “appear” to be having fun, she says that they are. The men are enjoying themselves, most likely because they are dressed appropriately. They are not dressed for anyone but themselves, whereas the women are dressed for them. Ferrante’s description of how the women look attest to how they feel within this moment as well. Elena’s opinion of this scene comes out in her stark contrast of word choices, the women are light while the men are dark. Ferrante constructs an image of how Elena starts to view the two genders within this moment and how she continually views them throughout the rest of the novel.

This is also the same moment in which Lila starts to realize the discrepancies placed on her as a young woman as well. All of the sudden her future and past start to

blur. Elena describes it as her “first episode of dissolving margins,” meaning that she starts to lose her memory and strength (*My Brilliant Friend*, 89). This occurs due to the abuse she receives from the men in her life. Abuse that unfortunately many women within Naples at this time faced. In a scene before the New Year’s Party, Elena witnesses Lila’s father throwing Lila through the window of their apartment. Elena comments on this incident by stating that, “fathers could do that and other things to impudent girls,” showing how much the men actually had during this time especially over their daughters (*My Brilliant Friend*, 82). By referring to Lila as imprudent, Elena implies that Lila’s father is under the impression that Lila has no respect for him or his. As the novel goes on, Lila starts to lose memory of her early life in the city - the life when she was able to stand up for herself and overcome that were put upon her due to her gender and family situation.

It becomes clear that Lila is no longer the fearless young girl she used to be. She is now uncomfortable in social scenarios like this, but does not know how to vocalize it because she is not yet sure as to why she feels this way. When discussing how Lila felt within this moment, Elena states, that “in spite of the cold she began to sweat” (*My Brilliant Friend*, 89). While Elena notices the discrepancies within the party, it seems as if Lila truly felt it. The pressure to look attractive, be noticed, and cater to men seems to overwhelm Lila at this moment, she cannot handle the feeling that she is on display, but yet never does anything about it. It seems as if the expectations of a female is something

that Lila cannot handle as she no longer feels like herself. seems to get a grasp on. During the New Year's Eve Party Lila is recovering from the mental and physical abuse of her father. Her father has physically hurt her by throwing her out of the window and has mentally damaged her by forbidding her to go to middle school. At the party she realizes how much this abuse has affected to her. It is hard for Lila to enjoy herself at the party as she is coming to terms with what her role in the city will now be. Lila starts to forget her past, because she now has to become a new person. Elena states, "that New Year's Eve she had perceived for the first time unknown entities that broke down the outline of the world and demonstrated its terrifying nature. This had deeply shaken her" (*My Brilliant Friend*, 91). While Elena observes and is aware of the limitations she faces, Lila cannot seem to look past them and falls right into a trap of catering to exactly what is expected of her even though she clearly is not happy in doing so.

Ferrante continuously alludes to how the women are expected to feel, look, and act versus the men in the city. She combines this with the danger the women can encounter if they are not dressed appropriately and if they are not under the protection of men. She recalls,

One Sunday, in the middle of April, I remember, five of us went out: Lila, Carmela, Pasquale, Rino, and I. We girls were dressed up as well as we could and as soon as we were out of the house we

put on lipstick and a little eye make up. We took the metro, which was very crowded, and Rino and Pasquale stood next to us, on the lookout, the whole way. They were afraid that someone might touch us, but no one did. The faces of our escorts were too dangerous (*My Brilliant Friend*, 191).

Elena, herself, seems to not mind getting dressed up or looking good, but she is aware of the consequences she could face if she is not careful of her whereabouts. However, she does not seem as afraid for her safety as others do. The moment that Elena truly steps out of her neighborhood with a huge group of people is when she becomes aware of the precautions she must take within the rest of the city as well. Once again she contrasts the women with the men. Elena and her friends are dressed up with make-up, while the men are simply described as “dangerous.” She never once mentions what the men are wearing. It is unimportant to how the men are dressed, but for some reason it is important to explain that once again that females are in fact dressed up. Ferrante repeatedly suggests that a girls outside appearance is important within the city, while men are intimidating due to the fact that they are simply male. During this outing Elena and her friends are safe because of the men that they are with. If they had been alone this scenario would most likely play out much differently. In this moment Elena describes the females based off of their appearance, while she mainly uses adjectives to describe the

men. She shows how much of a woman's life in the city revolves around pleasing the patriarchy physically and emotionally.

Once Lila starts to work instead of attend school, she stops defending herself in the way that she used to. She now lives to please the men around her rather than living the life she actually wants for herself. She stifles her previous love of knowledge and devotes all of her time to her family's shoe repair store. She devotes as much time to the store as she most likely would have in school. Though, she starts to lose her memory, she does not lose her ability to work hard, nor does she lose her desire to succeed in any task that is given to her. She attempts to transform her family's shoe store into a full-fledged business in order to make more money to support herself and her family. In turn, Lila pushes herself away from Elena as she does not have the time to see her, nor do they have much in common as Elena is in school while Lila is working. While Elena is upset about their relationship she is more concerned about the new way in which Lila now conducts her life. Lila not only devotes her life to the shoe store, but goes on to marry Stefano Carracci, the son of Don Achille at sixteen, while Elena is still attempting to finish high school. Lila's devotion to the shoe business is not only for the purpose of impressing her father, but to please Stefano as well. Lila ends up making shoes for her husband that are later given to a local member of the Neapolitan mafia that Lila despises. In the end Elena can see that Lila's work and devotion to her husband has failed. Elena

becomes conscious of how the men in Lila's life have taken advantage of her. The last passage of the novel suggests how the patriarchal society of Naples has ruined Lila's life.

The unpredictable revealed itself only at that point. I saw Lila lose her color, become as pale as she when she was a child, whiter than her wedding dress, and her eyes had that sudden contraction that turned them into cracks. She had in front of her a bottle of wine and I was afraid that her gaze would go through it with a violence that would shatter it, with the wine spraying everywhere. But she wasn't looking at the bottle. She was looking farther away, she was looking at the shoes of Marcello Solara.

They were the Cerullo shoes for men. Not the model for sale, not the ones with gilded pin. Marcello had on his feet the shoes bought earlier by Stefano, her husband. It was the pair she had made with Rino, making and unmaking them for months, ruining her hands. (*My Brilliant Friend*, 331).

Elena suggest that it took Lila so long to construct something that was of no benefit to her in the end. This passage says a lot about who Lila has become. Elena



reminds the readers that she loses her memory of the past as she gets older - which is to suggest she has lost her sense of self as well. The phrase “shoes for men” points to Elena’s disapproval in Lila’s work. She realizes that she cannot live as Lila does and will not work in order to make the patriarch satisfied. Ferrante’s repetition of “not” in this passage suggests that the store could have been something else, but it simply was a store for men as were many of the stores along the streets of the city. The use of the phrase “ruining her hands” suggests that she is ruining her life and ruining her potential as a person. Lila has washed away her life by committing to this marriage and to the shoe shop rather than exploring what she is actually capable of. This passage concludes Elena coming into her own and realizing the way in which she wants to construct her life within the city. Lila is held back by this patriarchal society, while Elena seems eager to push through it.

Ferrante’s vision of Naples is depicted through Elena, who cannot see the city as simply as a man can, because from a woman’s perspective living in Naples is more complicated. In the novel, Ferrante displays the violence that is seen throughout the neighborhood, but also what is felt by the women who live there because of it. Elena figures out how to brave through the cities unaccommodating nature and defy the standards of women in the city constructed by men. In *My Brilliant Friend*, Ferrante uses the violent city of Naples to create a character that becomes an intelligent and strong woman because of it. Elena is never saddened by her struggles, rather she finds a way to overcome them. While the story is also about friendship, it is mainly about survival.

Survival in a city that is extremely hard to live in, especially for a woman. In Sandro and Sandra's Ferri interview with Ferrante in the Paris Review, Ferrante's states that "she wouldn't recognize [herself] without women's struggles," which is to say the struggles that the struggles she faced in Naples helped her define who she now. She is able to construct the character of Elena based off of her past experiences. She constructs a woman who finds herself due to the discrepancies that the city forces upon her. Ferrante's Naples is far different from Woolf's London and Didion's Los Angeles as their struggles within the city are only internal. While Ferrante does not depict an idyllic world she uses the cities flaws to create stronger characters. The city of Naples helps Ferrante build complex female characters, while showing the readers her disapproval of the way that women are perceived and the damage that it prevails.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

What differs Virginia Woolf, Joan Didion, and Elena Ferrante from their male contemporaries is that each of these women portray the cities they write about in full — they discuss the pros and cons that city life entails and shape the city not only from an emotional perspective, but from a physical one as well. These women and their characters have experiences in the city that many male writers cannot relate to based on their gender. While these urban spheres may not exactly cater to the female consciousness and mind, each of these female writers share some sort of attachment to them. Virginia Woolf sees the beauty in walking around London alone. Joan Didion likes Los Angeles due to the complexity of its structure and residents. Whereas Naples has helped Elena Ferrante portray strong and intelligent women that are survivors of the city rather than simply flaneurs. Her characters have much more resilience to Naples than I did, which is why I so greatly admire Ferrante and her story. Each of these writers would have no story to tell without their experiences in these places, just as I would have no reason for this project if I did not feel such a strong connection to the cities I've been in.

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