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Shakespeare's Successful Sisters: The Reincarnated Judith in the Works of Munro, Egan, and Gilbert

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Shakespeare's Successful Sisters:
The Reincarnated Judith in the Works of Munro, Egan, and Gilbert

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The Invention of Mary Carmichael:

Virginia Woolf's Fictional History of Female Writers

A Room of One's Own, Virginia Woolf's 1929 treatise on women and fiction, presents a partially-invented history of female writing. The history begins with Judith Shakespeare, sister to William, who had all the talent and ambition of her brother, but was never able to write due to societal expectations of her gender. Woolf then considers the earliest women she knew to have written successfully, including Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot, who form the roots of a literary lineage that she believes women must have in order to write. Then she returns to an invented figure: Mary Carmichael, a contemporary of Woolf herself, who has successfully written and published a novel. Woolf examines the merits of this novel, and while she finds parts of it interesting and promising, she ultimately decides that it will be forgotten, and ought to be. Woolf's verdict on Carmichael asserts that in another hundred years, Carmichael may rise again and truly write the poetry Judith Shakespeare was meant to write. In Woolf's mind, another century might rid society of all that limited Carmichael and allow women writers to produce their work with no thought to their sex or societal status.

Woolf's prescription of a hundred years suggests that women need only the passage of time in order to prosper as artists. However, generations after Woolf, women continue to struggle with some of the issues that beset Mary and Judith. Though women have achieved a greater degree of equality since the early nineteenth century, gender continues to factor into contested issues of career, way of life, family, and creation. Today, when writers inhabit an often-gendered set of societal structures and expectations, Woolf's approach of understanding the effect of personal context upon the female writer proves particularly useful. Judith Shakespeare's time has most definitely passed; as in Woolf's time, women do successfully write and publish a great deal

of fiction. But how far past Mary Carmichael has the realm of literature progressed? Today, women writers are regularly recognized for their achievements, but they still must navigate the potentially gendered marketing, audience, and reception of their work. Now it seems that even though women are writing and, in some cases, recording the female experience, the possibility for the marginalization of fiction written by women still remains. Woolf's hundred-year prescription prompts me to wonder what Mary Carmichael and her work would look like if Woolf were around today to evaluate the current state of women in fiction. How much progress has a century really brought?

Woolf ends *A Room of One's Own* with the suggestion that someday "the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down" (114). With a theoretical and inventive approach such as Woolf's, I seek to understand how contemporary female writers represent and/or rise above the limitations that Judith Shakespeare and Mary Carmichael embodied. Alice Munro, Jennifer Egan, and Elizabeth Gilbert each provide a unique entry point to the understanding of the current literary environment and contemporary fiction written by women. All three women have received many awards and honors for their published writing. All three also have a complex relationship to "women's literature."

The greatest complication of women's literature lies in the struggle to define exactly what it is; a book can be considered women's literature for being about the lives of women, being written by a woman, targeting a female audience, or combining any of the three. Such definitions affect every aspect of production and reception, including how books are marketed—everything from the design of their covers to their categorization on Amazon. And marketing can influence who reads the book, who likes the book, and even what awards the book is eligible for. These

women specifically, and many other women writers, must struggle to be taken seriously in a sea of women writers of so-called “chick lit.” As a subset of women’s literature, chick lit also defies firm definitions, but it is generally regarded as fiction written by women, for women, and meant primarily for entertainment. The genre garners various levels of respect from the public, but generally, the chick lit label prevents a novel from contributing to the literary conversation, for chick lit stands in opposition to supposedly serious fiction, which is concerned with the human experience far and above the frivolous lives of women. These three writers exist within this tension—a tension I think Woolf would find very interesting if she were to witness the status quo of women and fiction.

In examining the work of Gilbert, Munro, and Egan alongside what they say about their work, I found a surprising reflection of Virginia Woolf’s ideas. Specifically, each selection of fiction I focused on centers on a character that creates—and the most important work of that character remains unpublished. These characters serve as an unexpectedly reincarnated form of Judith Shakespeare. They represent not the Judith that will finally write her poetry uninhibited, but instead the Judith via-Mary Carmichael that embodies the struggles and limits of the contemporary female writer. In many ways, this version of Judith plays just as important a role as the Judith that will someday write her poetry—for she reveals what work remains to be done, what obstacles still remain.

By beginning her exploration of the limits of a woman writer’s environment with Judith Shakespeare, Woolf argues that because Judith’s circumstances both keep her from writing and lead her to end her own life, Judith represents the most extreme of female writers constrained by their social situations and serves as a cautionary example of the consequences of the oppression of these women. Woolf emphasizes that Judith had the same capability as her brother, but her

gender made her situation vastly different—so different, in fact, that her brother’s life would reach a kind of immortality while hers would end by suicide. Woolf’s experiment leads her to determine that “it would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare” (46). Though Judith was just as “extraordinarily gifted” as her brother, she did not attend the same schools or read the same literature that he did, and so their paths were separate even from childhood (47). Woolf depicts Judith as picking up a book “now and then, one of her brother’s perhaps,” but having her parents call her to do housework instead and telling her not to “moon about with books and papers” (47). And as her brother went to London to make his own way, she ran off to London in order to avoid an arranged marriage. There, where her brother acted and learned the stage, “men laughed in her face” when she said that she wanted to do the same (48). The stage manager even “bellowed something about poodles dancing” (48), referring to the idea that a woman doing something like acting, preaching, composing, or writing is like a seeing a dog walking on his hind legs—“it is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all” (Tailleferre, qtd. in Woolf 54). These men retain the thought that women might occasionally slip into the men’s world, but only out of unexpectedness and never out of talent. This kind of environment so discourages Judith Shakespeare that she kills herself before she ever has the chance to write. As for William, Woolf determines that his state of mind, when writing, must have been “the state of mind most favourable to poetry that there has ever existed” (51). In this way, Woolf sets up a contrast of an excellent environment for creation versus a terrible one, and in this particular case the difference, first and foremost, is gender.

After chronicling the real-life female writers who managed to write without a strong tradition of female predecessors, Woolf writes another imagined character, Mary Carmichael, to

point out what skills female writers have gained and what weaknesses remain. Because Woolf also created Carmichael, the details surrounding her life represent a series of choices on Woolf's part. Woolf makes Carmichael one of her contemporaries and allows her book, *Life's Adventure*, to serve as a cross-section of the current state of women writers. Woolf describes herself choosing *Life's Adventure* at random, once she has decided to examine new novels to determine if women of her time were using "writing as art, not as a method of self-expression" (79-80). "It stood at the very end of the shelf," Woolf says, "and was published in this very month of October" (80). These details assert the novel's validity as an accurate representation of the current state of affairs. They also set up Carmichael "as the descendent of all those other women," the female writers whose history Woolf has just considered. Mary's book sits at the end of the shelf, and Woolf considers it "as if it were the last volume in a fairly long series, continuing all those other books that I have been glancing at" (80). With Mary Carmichael established as a figurative descendant of both Judith Shakespeare and all female writers who have come since, Woolf can shape her to reflect the reality of the contemporary literary landscape. Woolf's priority in creating such a reflection is to understand "what she inherits" of her literary ancestors' "characteristics and restrictions" (80). With full awareness of Woolf's intentional creation of Mary Carmichael, Mary's struggles and triumphs indicate the strengths and weaknesses Woolf sensed in female writers of her time.

First, Woolf considers her sentences without regard to their content. She scans them and tries a few of them out loud, aiming to discover whether Carmichael "has a pen in her hand or a pickaxe" (80). Woolf quickly determines that something about the work is a little different: "Something tore, something scratched; a single word here and there flashed its torch in my eyes" (80). Woolf struggles to pin down exactly what strikes her about Carmichael's sentences, but she

describes the experience of reading them as “like being out at sea in an open boat” (81). Woolf theorizes that Carmichael is conscious of the public impression that women’s writing is “flowery” and thus she “provides a superfluity of thorns” (81). Woolf’s assessment of Carmichael suggests that Mary has been so aware of the perceptions of women’s writing that she has written to disprove them, and in so doing has weakened her prose. In this way Carmichael represents Woolf’s concern that critical expectations have the potential to shape the work itself negatively. If Woolf’s inferences about Carmichael’s writing process were actually the case, Mary Carmichael would be racked with constant anxiety over her work’s comparison to expectations of women’s writing. Woolf concludes that she “cannot be sure” whether Carmichael is “being herself or someone else” (81). Woolf can’t decide whether Carmichael writes this way on purpose—with intention of departing from the normal way of doing things—or in giving in to outside pressures of expectation.

Woolf hopes that Carmichael is writing with intention when she breaks away from the expected sentence. Woolf qualifies this kind boldness in composition as “not for the sake of breaking, but for the sake of creating” (81). When Woolf discusses the lack of female literary models, she points out that the “male” sentence employed by the male writers did not serve the purposes of female writers and the stories they wanted to tell. She says “it is useless to go to great men writers for help” (76). Then she lists several male writers, and says that they “never helped a woman yet,” though some female writers might have been able to “adapt” some of their “tricks” for their own use (76). After describing the “man’s sentence,” Woolf deems it “unsuited for a woman’s use” and says that even Charlotte Brontë “stumbled and fell with that clumsy weapon in her hands” (76-77). George Eliot too, she says, “committed atrocities,” using with this kind of sentence, but according to Woolf, Jane Austen “looked at it and laughed at it and devised

a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it” (77). Austen, then, broke the male sentence for the sake of creating, as Woolf deems that she got more said than Charlotte Brontë even though Brontë had more “genius for writing” (77). In this way, Woolf elevates an author’s ability to defy conventions above that same author’s talent for writing. Accordingly, Woolf is more concerned with Mary Carmichael’s negotiation of expectations of her work than with Carmichael’s apparent skill.

In further examining Carmichael’s work, Woolf states that she cannot be sure of Carmichael’s intentionality in deviating from the male sentence “until she has faced herself with a situation” (81). Woolf defines this “situation” as something that will test Carmichael’s boldness; she gives Carmichael the freedom to create the “situation” in whatever way she pleases (77). But Woolf emphasizes that “when she has made it she must face it. She must jump” (77). In order to prove to Woolf that she is writing with a distinct purpose, Carmichael must truly step outside the bounds of earlier writing. Woolf’s prioritizing of innovation makes total sense, considering her own literary venture into stream of consciousness, which had only thin precedence by the time she was writing it.

Woolf soon identifies the “situation” that Carmichael has created for herself. As Woolf narrates herself reading Carmichael’s novel, she dramatically describes herself turning a page and finding on the other side a sentence beginning with the words “Chloe liked Olivia” (82). Woolf continues: “. . . then it struck me how immense a change was there. Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature” (82). Compared to the portrayal of female relationships throughout previous literature—Woolf alludes to Cleopatra’s jealousy of Octavia—this friendship between Chloe and Olivia represents a remarkable departure from the norm. Woolf initially responds to the novelty of the female relationship in literature by mourning the female

lives left unrecorded. She says “literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women” (83). However, the fact that Carmichael has broken into this realm means that a great opportunity lies before women writers, for the inner lives of women are uncharted waters. Describing Mary Carmichael’s exploration of this untapped potential, Woolf predicts that Carmichael will “light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been” (84). To Woolf, Carmichael is a kind of literary pioneer, an explorer on the frontier of new kinds of fiction. Woolf allows Carmichael to exhibit the kind of boldness that Woolf wants to see in a writer; in Woolf’s hand, Carmichael does indeed present herself with the “situation” of women, and by writing about female friendships, she fulfills Woolf’s expectations.

However, Woolf does not allow her created character to be the ideal writer destined to beget a generation of female writers. In the process of creating Mary Carmichael and her work, Woolf embeds a series of shortcomings in Carmichael’s work that she uses to elucidate the remaining issues in the condition of contemporary female writers. Woolf reluctantly describes Carmichael’s work as “somehow baffling” in that it evades her literary expectations—Woolf cannot anticipate the movements of the novel because Carmichael has “broken the sequence—the expected order” (91). Woolf ascribes this confounding effect to the novelty of a feminine style of writing, but still concludes that the prose prevents her from fully experiencing the text. The style seems to throw Woolf off just when she thinks she has the sense of it: “whenever I was about to feel the usual things in the usual places, about love, about death, the annoying creature twitched me away . . . and thus she made it impossible for me” (91). This effect even makes Woolf question Carmichael’s seriousness as a writer. Carmichael seems to prevent Woolf from experiencing her work as literature, and so Woolf questions the work’s status as serious literature. Because Woolf cannot feel her to be “serious and profound and humane,” Woolf

wonders if she is “merely lazy minded and conventional” (92). Woolf’s ultimate opinion of Carmichael doesn’t seem to drop quite this low, but she does conclude that Carmichael is certainly not a genius, and that her books will be “pulped by the publishers in ten years’ time” (92). In this way, Woolf’s ultimate judgment of Carmichael’s talent allows her to represent any aspiring female writer who did not completely fulfill her potential and was thus forgotten by history.

Of course, Carmichael’s work still serves an important purpose in understanding the literary heritage of female writers. Woolf sees her as a stepping stone between the past and the future: she has her limitations, areas for improvement, but she also exhibits “certain advantages which women of far greater gift lacked even half a century ago” (92). To this extent, Carmichael’s talent has little bearing on how valuable she is as a literary figure; the most important aspects of her character are the opportunities afforded to her and the extent to which she seized them. Woolf describes Carmichael’s work as feasting “like a plant newly stood in the air on every sight and sound that came its way,” implying that Carmichael’s interaction with the world and her recording what she sees is the newest and most pressing aspect of her being (92). Her deftness in actually writing and writing well is of a lesser priority. And even in her lumbering through this new realm, Carmichael clearly experiences the world in a different way from a man’s, and so her work is innovative by nature. Woolf also places emphasis on this difference, as she appreciates Carmichael’s ability to “break the sentence,” even if she cannot craft a story that fully satisfies Woolf as a reader. Carmichael’s nuances—that her work succeeds in some ways and fails in others—indicate Woolf’s personal understanding of the progression of women’s status as writers, as well as their continued limitations within the arena of literature. Furthermore, Woolf’s specific choices about how Carmichael would write well and how her

writing would need more development serve to identify Woolf's perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of her sister writers. Mary Carmichael becomes a kind of symbol of both how far the female writer has come and how far she still has to go.

Woolf's final musing on Mary Carmichael worries that the young writer will pay too much attention to her critics. Woolf describes Carmichael as if she is running a race, with "the bishops and the deans, the doctors and the professors, the patriarchs and the pedagogues" all standing on the sidelines "shouting warning and advice" (93). They tell her, "You can't do this and you shan't do that!" among other things, but Woolf hopes that Carmichael can run the race without hearing or seeing them, without "looking to right or left" (93). Woolf advises Carmichael—and all female writers, since Carmichael is meant to represent their struggles more generally—neither to "stop to curse" those on the sidelines, nor to "stop to laugh" at them (93-94). In the context of Woolf's analysis of Carmichael's interaction with critics of her work, stopping to curse would represent an overreaction to gendered expectations—i.e. Carmichael replacing the flowery prose with thorny writing—and stopping to laugh would indicate a complete disregard for other people's opinions of one's work. Perhaps these two reactions are Woolf's "right" and "left" that the writer must avoid, since they exist on a kind of spectrum and the writer needs to find a balance between the two—in terms of the metaphor, to run straight ahead, toward the real goal. Woolf's final urging is to "think only of the jump" (94). Here Woolf revisits boldness and innovation. In order to accomplish her goals, Carmichael must prove herself by writing boldly where she ought to—not in reaction to expectations, and not out of ignorance of convention, but with purpose and skill arising from the craft itself.

Woolf concludes her consideration of the writer Mary Carmichael by prescribing "another hundred years" for Carmichael and all those she represents (94). Woolf ends *A Room of*

One's Own by dreaming that maybe someday, in better circumstances, Judith Shakespeare and Mary Carmichael may live again and write what has been previously suppressed. This hopeful prediction begs for an assessment of the current state of women in literature. A detailed understanding of contemporary writers and their work can explore what benefits women have gained over their literary mothers and how they are still limited. Though Woolf's utopian dream of seeing the female genius fully expressed may never completely become reality, determining what obstacles remain between the current state of women in literature and that ideal is the first step in coming closer to the ideal itself. So just as Woolf used Carmichael as a means to represent what women had gained as well as what remained to be changed, current writers have the potential to shed light on the status of female writers in the literary world nearly a century after Woolf. Remarkably, the foremost way these writers depict the state of the literary world relies on the creation of a character that reflects Judith Shakespeare and Mary Carmichael.

Chick Lit and the Female Creator

Because Elizabeth Gilbert, Alice Munro, and Jennifer Egan are women as well as writers, they have inevitably dealt with the term “women’s writing” and its implications. Because each of them has published a significant amount of work and has received various awards for that work, they have certainly found themselves in an environment friendlier than Judith Shakespeare’s. And while it may seem that their success should automatically exclude them from an exploration of how women writers continue to be limited, I regard the extent of their work and their presence in the public sphere as a well of sources for better understanding their relationship to the current world of literature. For even though these writers are respected, they still must grapple with the perception of women in literature, and their work reflects the complications of that struggle.

Historically, women have often struggled to gain recognition for their writing. In particular, women’s writing has been subject to culturally dominant definitions of genre, often resulting in unfair or limited categorization of the work. Traditionally, writing by women has been limited most by the idea that it exists only for women to read, and that the women who read it should expect not enlightenment but merely entertainment. In the Victorian period, women were already writing novels that pressed on the boundaries of social norms of the time, but the period’s most popular novels “focused . . . on the ‘womanly woman,’ the figure of domesticity” (Benstock 69). Surely such novels were intended for the common woman herself, as a kind of guidebook for proper behavior, not for enlightenment or a spark for conversation. The form of condemnation shifted by the early twentieth century, when the literary world valued experimentation and the highest critics condemned those who wrote in the traditional storytelling mode—many of whom took women’s experience as their primary material (Benstock 95-96). In

this sense women writers and the content and form of their work has been under various kinds of scrutiny for generations.

Currently, women's work commonly finds rejection in the "chick lit" label. Some writers proudly write within the chick lit genre, but others find their work cast off from serious circles because some of its features line up with aspects of the genre. The definition of chick lit is not firmly agreed upon, and so the term is up for the interpretation of anyone who uses it or witnesses its use. *The Online Oxford English Dictionary* includes a definition of chick lit as a draft addition that reads: "literature by, for, or about women; *esp.* a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of young professional women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences" (*OED*). This definition makes clear that the work can include women as author, audience, or subject, but not necessarily all three. However, it does focus on content as the deciding factor, since it implies that a work must first concern women's lives before it will attract a readership of women whose lives reflect the experiences of the characters. Even this definition, written by an objective and trusted dictionary, establishes chick lit as an island of a genre that is consumed by the same kind of people it concerns. I cannot imagine that Virginia Woolf would be satisfied with this kind of literature, even if it is written by women, and even if it does concern the lives of women, if it is only read by women and so fails to illuminate any new part of life to the reader.

The risk of an amorphous definition of chick lit is not just its perceived self-isolation—for definitions of the work betray more about the culture defining the work than the work itself. To gauge the public opinion of the meaning of the term, I looked up chick lit on *Urban Dictionary*, a website that allows users to give their own definitions of slang and colloquial terms. Other users can then vote upon individual definitions, which should allow the most

agreed-upon definition to rise to the top. The first *Urban Dictionary* definition for chick lit reads: “slang for a genre of literature geared towards female readers, which deal [sic] with modern issues in womens [sic] lives.” This first definition establishes several of the same points that the *OED* definition does, though it removes the idea of female authorship. The second definition on *Urban Dictionary*, however, reads: “books written by bad female writers, aimed towards stupid female readers. Usually marketed in pink jackets adorned with semi-retro pictures of high heeled [sic] shoes and martini glasses. Always about trendy twentysomething [sic] bitches whining about their jobs or relationships.” This definition reveals several assumptions that at least a portion of the general public makes about chick lit. It may not be that these people think that all women writers are bad writers, but it may indicate that they think if a woman is a bad writer, only women will read her, and that those women may not understand that she is a bad writer. The definition’s emphasis on young women indicates that any work about women can be denigrated with the chick lit label. The definition finally implies that the writing is necessarily bad and that any woman who reads it is stupid.

Bad fiction written by women does exist—it is not that every book written by a woman has been wrongly labeled as lesser and unimportant. In my preliminary research I read a few samples of self-proclaimed chick lit, and the books were truly bad—they relied on overused plot structures, denied realism only when convenient, and employed trite language. However, it appears that a great deal of literature gets lumped together with this chick lit simply for having some similarities with this unfortunate kind of fiction. So what would Virginia Woolf think of chick lit? I think she would find it frustrating that it draws attention away from good fiction written by women about the lives of women. And I think she would want women to aim higher

with their work, to endeavor to reveal the inner lives of women not only to other women but to all readers of literature who want to understand the world more fully.

Jennifer Egan's work provides an important update on the ways female writers might aim to subvert expectations of their work. Her novels have progressively defied definition and often question ideas of genre and form. The construction of her fiction, especially in the case of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, challenges established forms of fiction, and as Woolf hoped for Mary Carmichael, breaks convention for the sake of creation. *Goon Squad*, which won Egan the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, features a different fictional form for each chapter and a non-linear progression, resulting in a dizzyingly complex fictional world. To some extent, Egan's work represents a woman breaking some of the rules of fiction in order to represent accurately her perception of the world—this is the “jump” that Woolf discussed. Egan has also been outspoken about her desire for female writers to do more of this boundary-testing work and to give up what she considers repetitive work. Here, once again, the kind of women's fiction that is largely ignored by the literary world appears as a counterpoint to the artistic pursuit of the intentional and serious female writer, this time in terms of form and construction.

The work of Alice Munro, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013, gives insight into women and their writing. Since the time of Woolf's creation of Mary Carmichael, when the relationships of women were new to the page, women's fiction has provided an overabundance of stories about women's lives and relationships with each other. The difference is that these books about women are not always taken very seriously. Munro's work, on the other hand, is regarded as serious fiction most of the time. My exploration of her work focuses on how female characters appear in her stories—an Alice Munro woman serves as a distinct contrast to the

woman of chick lit. This aspect of her work might explain why she has mostly escaped critical misunderstanding and dismissal.

Elizabeth Gilbert has a particularly interesting relationship with women's fiction and critical reception. Her first memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love*, has been her most successful work and was read by millions of women. Perhaps because the work focused on Gilbert's midlife crisis and quest to find herself, it has been classified as "chick lit" and was read by many women who otherwise read popular fiction marketed purely to women. Since writing the memoir, Gilbert has had to struggle with literary preconceptions of her work. Those who have little interest in works like *Eat, Pray, Love* have completely rejected Gilbert and anything else she may write. Gilbert feels that in the wake of the memoir's publication, she was relegated to the "chick lit dungeon." However, her most recent novel, *The Signature of All Things*, rejects that classification on all fronts. It is a sweeping historical novel of broad scope and great ambition. It is as if Gilbert wants to prove all misconceptions of her work wrong at once. *The Signature of All Things* seeks to be deeply serious instead of light—and ambitious instead of trite—while still focusing on a woman and her life. Her work speaks to Mary Carmichael's own struggle with critical expectations of her work, since Gilbert may be either naturally breaking free of expectations or proving herself to be a slave to them by directly trying to prove them wrong—providing a superfluity of thorns, as Woolf calls it (81).

So while Egan, Munro, and Gilbert have all found success, each one of them continues to handle gendered issues of her work. In considering the current literary climate, even the idea of "women's literature" or "chick lit" indicates a continued discomfort and unfamiliarity with works of fiction written by women and about women. Since this is the literary climate that these three contemporary writers exist in, it is important to understand the public perception of fiction

written by women. However, I seek to understand them as writers beyond this limiting perception of women's work as a singular and defining unit. In exploring both what they have in common and how they differ from one another, I might come to understand how each of them has surpassed the expectations set out for her, and how her work continues to speak to the struggle of the female writer.

Within the work of these three, a surprising commonality intrigued me: the main characters of the works of fiction I chose for my focus shared remarkably similar names. Munro's short story "Meneseteung" concerns a "poetess" named Almeda; a chapter in Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is composed from the perspective of a girl named Alison; Gilbert's *The Signature of All Things* chronicles the entire life of a botanist named Alma. As I read, I knew that I could not connect these three characters based on their names alone, so I looked for other similarities in order to understand why their names might be so similar. Ultimately, it may be coincidence for these characters to have been named with the same first two letters, but the connections between the three represent a deeply important trope within fiction written by women.

In a word, these characters create. Almeda has written a book of poetry and aspires to write a poem that encompasses the essence of all existence. Within the short story, her poetic effort parallels her process of making grape jelly, as well as the start of her menstrual period, which the story connects to the free flow of her grand ideas. Alma the botanist spends much of her life in devotion to the understanding of natural life and ultimately conceives a universal theory of life comparable to Charles Darwin's. She also writes, but in the rougher poetry of scientific principle. Alison, a preteen of Egan's invented next generation, creates the PowerPoint that makes up an entire *Goon Squad* chapter, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses." She regards the

PowerPoint as her journal, which narrates the life of her family in bits of dialogue and observed idiosyncrasies.

Alison in particular serves to unlock the significance of these three characters as creators because Jennifer Egan considers Alison a reflection of herself as a writer (Patrick). The PowerPoint chapter, which Egan has called a “microcosm” of the novel, consists completely of Alison’s observations of and insights into the world around her, just as the novel itself sprang out of Egan’s observations of the world (Patrick). Essentially, Egan likens Alison’s observational instinct to her own authorial impulse and sets up Alison’s character as a mirror to herself. In the same way, Almeda represents the way Alice Munro understands creation, as Alma does for Elizabeth Gilbert.

These three characters share a creative instinct, but each remains unpublished or unnoticed in her own way. The unnamed narrator of “Meneseteung” comes to know the details of Almeda’s life only partially through the dusty volume of her poetry, and mostly through the gossipy musings of the local paper, *The Vidette*; the rest she invents. *The Vidette* regards Almeda as “our poetess” and generally diminishes her work, preferring to surmise her romantic prospects rather than honor her accomplishment (Munro 50). The tone of the narrator’s review implies that not many have read the poems. It seems that for all her creation, for all her ambition, Almeda’s work is largely ignored within her lifetime and forgotten after it. The story itself, on the other hand, attempts to resurrect this forgotten female creator.

Though she is a woman, Alma’s high position in society and connections enable her to publish her scientific articles and gain respect in botany circles. However, the last section of *Signature* concerns Alma’s writing and revision of her treatise on a universal theory of struggle in life. To her great disappointment, Charles Darwin publishes *The Origin of Species* in the

meantime, leaving her work old news—and to her mind, less well-written at that. In this way, much of her work is published, but her most important idea goes unpublished and is ultimately usurped by a man.

Alison's PowerPoint, a personal journal of sorts, naturally remains unpublished. However, the novel presents the chapter as her direct creation, so in a way she *is* published—in *Goon Squad*. Alison does stand out from the other two women as a source of hope for the future, since her youth invites the possibility that she may someday observe and create for a larger audience. Alison's character also pulls away from Alma and Almeda by existing in the future, while the latter two are set in the nineteenth century. Alison, then, might be interpreted as a representation of Egan's hopes for future creation, while Alma and Almeda represent Gilbert's and Munro's concerns for the past work of women left unrecognized and unremembered. On all accounts, these writers' works suggest that they continue to concern themselves with the state of women in writing.

The female character who creates but is not published or taken seriously echoes Virginia Woolf's incarnations of Judith Shakespeare and Mary Carmichael—who had the same creative impulses as Alma, Almeda, and Alison, but did not see their work come to be widely read and respected. In this sense, the works of fiction that surround these characters reimagine *A Room of One's Own* by considering the woman who creates fruitlessly from the perspective of a woman who has created with significant success. For Woolf, Mary Carmichael was a representation of the difficulties women writers of Woolf's time continued to face. The triplet characters from this modern fiction serve as an update on those difficulties. Woolf hoped that someday Judith Shakespeare would arise and write the poetry she was born to write, but what if the fate of Judith and Mary is not so much to write—they are invented, after all, and cannot literally produce—but

instead to reappear continually in order to represent the ways women writers are limited in each generation? Perhaps the Mary Carmichael character—a female creator created by a female creator—will always exist as long as women write.

Travel, Write, Hesitate:

Elizabeth Gilbert's Journeys

When writer Elissa Schappell was in graduate school, she hesitated to call herself a writer. She would identify her profession as a writer on her tax forms, but if someone asked her directly what she did for a living, she would reply, "I work at a magazine" (Filgate). Her reluctance continued until Toni Morrison visited her class and said: "I don't know why but men have an easier time calling themselves writers than women do. . . . If you need permission to call yourself a writer I give you permission" (Filgate). Schappell "started to sob": it was a "huge moment" for her (Filgate). Schappell's experience of intense self-doubt—relieved only by the encouragement of an older, respected literary figure—reveals just how difficult the young writer's life can be, especially for young women, and how important female mentors can be to the younger generation. At some point, writing requires a person really to claim his or her identity as a writer, and for some that assertion may be very difficult. If societal expectations put limits on who can claim such an identity, the writer must struggle through not only her self-doubt but also the doubt of others.

For a woman, the identity crisis may not end even after she has declared herself a writer. As Joyce Carol Oates has said, "the woman who writes is a writer by her own definition, but a woman writer by others' definitions" (Showalter). The act of adding "woman" to "writer" in and of itself is not a problem, but doing so without exception, for every female writer, can lead to gender-based generalizations. If any female writer is a woman writer (while any male writer is just a writer), women who write exist within a genre ghetto with a firm set of expectations and limits. Such a social construct will ultimately limit the work produced by women and limit the critical reception of that work. And as Elaine Showalter argues in "The Female Frontier," "no

understanding of American literature that excludes women's voices can hope to do justice to its splendor." Certainly, any critical system that ignores writing by women loses half of the great literature out there, but as a further risk a critical system that labels all writing by women as "women's writing" potentially discourages and/or fundamentally changes the work itself.

Elizabeth Gilbert has no problem calling herself a writer. She begins her TED Talk on creativity by firmly asserting, "I am a writer." She says, "Writing books is my profession but it's more than that, of course. It is also my great lifelong love and fascination." Gilbert, unlike Schappell, identifies herself as a writer without hesitation, even before a large crowd and a limitless online audience. However, Gilbert has struggled a great deal with the public perception of her work. In 2006, after writing a book of short stories, a novel, and a non-fiction book, Gilbert published the memoir *Eat, Pray, Love*, which became a phenomenal bestseller. It sold millions of copies, was featured by Oprah Winfrey, and was made into a movie starring Julia Roberts. As Gilbert explains in her TED Talk, in the aftermath of the book, people treated her as if she were "doomed." For the most part, others' fear for her centered on whether she would ever be able to produce something as successful as *Eat, Pray, Love*. But as Gilbert admits in the introduction to her next memoir, *Committed*, she also feared the world's reaction to whatever she wrote next: she felt that she had to figure out how she "would ever write unself-consciously again" (xiii).

The question of audience loomed over Gilbert primarily because the audience for *Eat, Pray, Love* was enormous—and not all members of that audience were friendly to the work. The book followed Gilbert through her mid-life crisis through three foreign countries on a journey of self-centering, and was loved by countless people—mostly women—who said that the book changed their lives. But it was also shunned in certain circles as indulgent and irresponsible. It

also changed Gilbert's identification in literary circles. Before *Eat, Pray, Love*, Gilbert was known "as a woman who wrote predominantly for, and about, men" (xi). Often told that she wrote "like a man," she believed that such a statement was "intended as a compliment" (xi). But once *Eat, Pray, Love* became successful, Gilbert found herself "being referred to as a chick-lit author"—perhaps because the memoir was about a woman, or perhaps because primarily women loved it (xii). Such a label, as Gilbert points out, is "never intended as a compliment" (xi).

Most remarkably, those calling Gilbert a chick lit author seemed to forget that she had written different kinds of work before she wrote *Eat, Pray, Love*. In an interview with *Slate*, Gilbert implied that the difference might have been a matter of content. She said: "It has not escaped my attention that when I wrote about a man's emotional journey they gave me the National Book Award Nomination, but when I wrote about a woman's emotional journey, they shunted me into the 'chick lit' dungeon." Jennifer Weiner, a writer who proudly identifies with the chick lit label and regularly argues for better treatment of popular female writers in the literary world, has echoed such sentiments. She asserted that "it's a very old and deep-seated double standard that holds that when a man writes about family and feelings, it's literature with a capital L, but when a woman considers the same topics, it's romance, or a beach book—in short, it's something unworthy of a serious critic's attention" (Franklin). According to these writers, literary criticism has rejected the emotional lives of women as a topic for serious literature.

Interestingly enough, Gilbert's most recent novel, *The Signature of All Things*, concerns the emotional life of a woman and has nevertheless been taken seriously by the literary establishment. The differences between *Signature* and *Eat, Pray, Love* are obvious: *Signature* is a sweeping, well-researched historical novel written in the third person—everything *Eat, Pray, Love*, is not. One might say that *Signature* is written as a man would write it. But in the *Slate*

interview, Gilbert felt it necessary to “make it clear” that she didn’t write *Signature* to “salvage” her “damaged literary reputation,” as if a book written in that way might prove her worthiness to hang with the “serious” crowd. On the contrary, Gilbert says that she is not ashamed of her literary reputation, and still considers *Eat, Pray, Love* to be the most important book she has ever written. She says that *Signature* is a better book, but in her mind *Eat, Pray, Love* is more important because she has “seen eye to eye, face to face, and heart to heart women whose lives were changed by that book” (Rabb). Here Gilbert allows herself to value two of her works for different reasons: she values *Signature* for its quality and *Eat, Pray, Love* for its effect on its audience. For an author whose work has appealed to both popular and literary crowds, this appreciation of different kinds of success proves vital, since every audience holds a specific set of expectations of what literature should accomplish. Writers cannot please everyone, at least not all at the same time.

Gilbert’s goals in writing *Signature* were not so different from those of *Eat, Pray, Love*. Gilbert says that with *Signature* she “set out to try to write a 19th-century novel with a more complete female experience”; she also intended the book to be “about a woman whose life is saved by her work” (Rabb). This story is important to her because she feels that her life has been saved by her own work. In this sense, the novel still focuses on a woman’s journey through life—the woman in question just happens to be a fictional one instead of the author herself. Gilbert connects herself to Alma, the protagonist of *The Signature of All Things*, in yet another way: Alma is a botanist in a time when female botanists were often called “polite botanists” and thus minimized in their pursuits. Gilbert thinks of the chick lit label in this way, calling it “‘the polite botany’ of our time” (Rabb). Here Alma serves as a direct reflection of Gilbert’s concern about a woman’s place in the world when it comes to her work. A fictional 19th-century woman

certainly lives a very different life from a contemporary female writer, but as Barbara Kingsolver points out in her review of *The Signature of All Things*, Alma's travels to Tahiti and then to Holland act as "her own 'Eat, Pray, Love' adventure." In this sense, *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Signature* hang on the same structure of journey and self-discovery—what makes them so different after all?

Kingsolver admits that Gilbert's literary reputation in the aftermath of *Eat, Pray, Love*, set *Signature* up for potential failure. She says: "If ever a book were doomed to birth in a suffocation cauldron of expectations, this is it." But Kingsolver ultimately praises the book for its style and its story, its manner as well as its subject. Kingsolver's approval begs the question—what about *Signature* makes it worthy of positive critical attention, especially when the content of the novel resonates so deeply with Gilbert's work in *Eat, Pray, Love*? Perhaps that question is unanswerable; above all the discrepancy serves as an example of how two works by the same author—even if they have similar ends—can be regarded so differently because of their different forms. Furthermore, since Alma reflects Elizabeth Gilbert's anxieties about women and their passions in the world, Alma can reveal a great deal about how Gilbert has experienced internal and external limitations on her work.

Though the *Slate* interview focuses on *Signature*'s Alma as a "polite botanist" and the gender limitations placed on her as a scientist, Kingsolver takes a more nuanced stance on Alma's character. Taking into account Alma's "proud father and unsentimental mother," Kingsolver recognizes Alma as a strong and especially confident woman. Ultimately, Alma's upbringing provides her with all the intelligence and social capital that she needs, and while her gender does come into play, Kingsolver says that the story "is not overly concerned with her femaleness." It's true: Alma's story centers on her career in botany and the way it helps her

understand her world but does not emphasize the moments when others disparage her work because of her gender—though those moments do appear in the novel. Kingsolver wonders whether or not this “rendition of possibilities is perfectly accurate,” but Gilbert’s goal was not necessarily absolute historical plausibility. Alma is a character, after all—her story is incredible in the best kind of way: it makes itself believable.

Alma’s origin story, the story of her parents, does much to set up her remarkable life. The first chapters of the novel follow Alma’s father, Henry Whittaker, through the adventures that led to the making of his fortune. He begins a poor thief of exotic seeds from Kew Gardens, lands on the third voyage of Captain Cook, and travels the world, learning of every variety of plant. He marries a stout Dutchwoman, builds a large estate in Philadelphia, and expands his fortune by turning his knowledge of plants into a booming pharmaceutical trade. The section of the novel that chronicles this history ends by declaring that at Alma’s birth in 1800, Henry Whittaker is “easily the richest man in Philadelphia, and one of the three richest men in the Western Hemisphere” (47). Henry is a man unlike all others, and so Alma is born and “to a new kind of creature entirely, . . . a mighty and newly minted American sultan” (47). In this sense, if Alma’s father completely defies the norm, it does not surprise the reader to see Alma defy the norm throughout the rest of the novel.

As a child, Alma lives free; she rides her pony through the forests of White Acre, her father’s estate, and sits at the table with distinguished houseguests. When she is eight years old, an astronomer named Luca Pontesilli visits White Acre for a ball Henry throws in his honor. The man intends to give a lecture on his work, but the night becomes so jovial that he opts for a more physical approach: on the lawn, Pontesilli arranges several guests in a model of the solar system, with Henry serving as the Sun. As the most prominent houseguests circle around Henry, the

“Sun King,” and Pontesilli conducts the spectacle from above, Alma asks to be included, and Henry insists that her desire be fulfilled: “He might have dismissed her entirely, but then Henry bellowed from the center of the solar system, ‘Give the girl a *place!*’” (68). Pontesilli makes young Alma a comet and instructs her to “‘fly about in all directions’” (68). The chapter ends by depicting Alma as blissfully transcendent: “Nobody stopped her. She was a comet. She did not know she was not flying” (69). In this moment, the text represents Alma as an absolutely free person with a high trajectory.

Alma’s childhood is not completely without worry—soon enough her parents adopt another daughter, Prudence, who complicates her life in many ways. Prudence is only the first of many obstacles Alma encounters within her lifetime. But witnessing Alma embody a comet makes watching her grow up to be a budding intellectual interested in botany just like her father completely believable. By her teens she begins publishing her ideas about observations she has made in the rich landscape of White Acre. She publishes under the name “A. Whittaker” with the help of a family friend, George Hawkes, who runs a publication called *Botanica Americana*. Alma and Hawkes decide, at least at first, that it is best not to “announce herself in print as female” in order to avoid being “shrugged off as a mere polite botanist” (106). Alma does experience some early resistance to her enthusiasm for botany when a visiting professor remarks that botany is perhaps the only scientific work that women can do “on account of its absence of cruelty, or mathematical rigor” (95). However, this remark hardly fazes Alma, since her work goes far beyond recreation and is really the devotion of her entire life. Remarkably, the event represents the only time Alma’s work is specifically disparaged because of her gender.

Not far into her career, Alma publishes under her full name and becomes a respected figure in the botanical community. Thanks to a mossy pile of boulders on the White Acre

property, she finds moss so fascinating a scientific subject that she focuses on it for the rest of her life. She publishes two books in her middle age: *The Complete Mosses of Pennsylvania* and *The Complete Mosses of the Northeastern United States*. However, in the same breath that the novel reports on Alma's respected position, it negates her success by saying that "moss was not a competitive domain, and that is the reason, perhaps, that she had been allowed to enter the field with so little resistance" (168). In this moment of free indirect discourse, when Alma's perspective floats to the surface of the third-person narrative, Alma tips her hand and shows that maybe she isn't so sure of the source of her success. However, the text goes on to cite Alma's "dogged perseverance" as another reason for her admission into botanical circles, so she does not completely discount her own autonomy in her career. In fact, Alma is most often portrayed as absolutely confident in her position.

Alma is less sure about the state of her womanhood. She does not marry until she is nearly fifty, and her marriage to a Mr. Ambrose Pike fails in nearly every way possible. In this trying time, she also loses a friend of her youth to mental illness. Alma also discovers that her sister's entire marriage was a sacrificial act meant to benefit Alma: George Hawkes and Prudence loved each other, but Alma loved George, and so Prudence married another man in the hopes that George would turn to Alma. Instead, he marries Retta Snow, Alma's friend who steadily goes insane after the marriage. By the time all these social complications come to light, Alma has also lost both her parents. In a moment of deep distress, she questions her identity:

With all that learning and all that privilege, what had Alma created of her life? She was the authoress of two obscure books on bryology—books that the world had not by any means cried out for—and she was now at work on a third. She had never given a moment of herself over to the betterment of anyone, with the exception of her selfish father. She

was a virgin and a widow and an orphan and an heiress and an old lady and an absolute fool. (320)

Interestingly enough, five of the seven labels Alma affixes to herself are tied to her gender: authoress, virgin, widow, heiress, and old lady. All seven self-definitions she means as an affront to herself. Her moment of self-criticism reveals her deep discomfort with herself, especially with her gender.

Alma's uneasiness in relationship to being a woman manifests itself most clearly when she realizes her most important idea. After her father's death, Alma travels to Tahiti to retrace the exile of Ambrose, her husband. Though she doesn't do a great deal of scientific work there, the experience prompts a revelation that encompasses every scientific thought she has had in the course of her life. On a Tahitian beach, Alma gets recruited to play a game called *haru raa puu*, which involves all the women of the village violently competing to run a bundle of plantain fronds down the beach. In this way, Alma finds herself held underwater by the matriarch and believes that she is about to die. For a moment, she accepts her imminent death as fact: "Shockingly, she relaxed. It was not so bad, she thought. . . . In order to die, one merely had to stop attempting to live" (433). But as she remembers her mother's death, she thinks that she was not born to die in this manner, that she would kill in order to survive. Here, in the waves underneath a large Tahitian woman, Alma realizes that "the world was plainly divided into those who fought an unrelenting battle to live, and those who surrendered and died" (434). Then Alma comes up out of the water as if she is reborn, as if the whole experience has been a baptism. She brings this idea, "the explanation Alma had been seeking forever," with her (434).

With this new idea in mind, Alma leaves Tahiti for Holland, where she plans to find her mother's family. She also plans to compose a thesis on her idea, which she calls "A Theory of

Competitive Alteration,” and to prove the theory with evidence she has gathered in her study of mosses. As she writes, the text provides snippets of her idea that an informed reader recognizes as very similar to Darwin’s. It also punctuates her writing with an anaphora of “She wrote, . . . She wrote, . . . She wrote, . . .” (447). By the time she arrives in Holland and finds her uncle, the director of a botanical garden himself, she has a nearly complete draft of her thesis to present to him. She is sure of the ideas, but unsure of how he will react to them. She feels that this “reaction to her work might be anything—from boredom (*the mosses of Philadelphia?*), to religious offense (*continuous creation?*), to scientific alarm (*a theory for the entire natural world?*)” (458). As Alma considers her own work, the imagined judgments of others—represented by the italicized parenthetical phrases—prove discouraging. Her anxiety at the thought of anyone’s reading her work echoes Gilbert’s personal struggle with writing “unself-consciously” after the success of *Eat, Pray, Love*—when Gilbert incapable of writing without imagining the entire world’s reaction (*Committed* xiii). Both Alma and Gilbert face the same challenge that Virginia Woolf said Mary Carmichael would: they must run the race without paying too much attention to the critics to either side of them.

Alma’s uncle accepts her work and in fact encourages her to publish. At this point, however, she limits herself in her perfectionism. In all her surety about the ideas themselves, she notices one gap in her logic that keeps her from presenting her work to a larger audience. She thinks the work should be airtight, absolutely impenetrable, before she publishes. Alma calls the gap the “Prudence Problem,” for it concerns Prudence’s way of living and Alma’s continual inability to explain it. Essentially, in the structure of the fight for survival, Alma cannot fathom a way to explain human selflessness and self-sacrifice. Why would Prudence lay down her very happiness in an attempt to improve Alma’s life? As Alma insists on finding an answer and

incorporating it into her thesis, Alma's uncle accuses her of "being overly timid, of holding back" (464). He thinks that her fear has more to do with the possible social and religious repercussions of her work, but she insists that her hesitation rests in a desire for the theory to be "scientifically incontrovertible" (464). Gilbert calls this yearning for perfection on Alma's part "a story of women's lives that's really familiar" (Rabb). Gilbert even connects Alma's actions to modern young women, saying that perfection is "the thing that's holding back many young women writers, and many young women in general now—this idea that we don't put out work out until we believe it's immaculate" (Rabb). In this sense, just as Alma's struggle with the perception of her work reflected Mary Carmichael's, it also stretches into the present and speaks to contemporary young women faced with the same task of creating without heeding negative voices—even those that come from within.

Alma waits too long; Darwin publishes first. On her sixtieth birthday, she receives a copy of *On the Origin of Species* and reads it in one sitting. For her, reading the book is like being in a "deep cavern that resounded from every side with her own ideas" (473). However, she does not believe that Darwin stole her idea—she believes it entirely possible for the idea to have developed simultaneously. Darwin had finches as she had moss. As she reads, she is almost more excited to think that she has been proven right by someone else who has developed the same idea as she has. Furthermore, she regards *Origin* as a masterpiece, something she could not have achieved: "Even if she'd said it first, she could never have said it better. It was even possible that nobody would have listened to her had she published this theory—not because she was a woman or because she was obscure (although these factors would not have helped), but merely because she would not have known how to persuade the world as eloquently as Darwin" (474). She calls her own prose a "hammer," while Darwin's is a "psalm" (474-75). Alma's inability to write as

well as her male peers pulls her into the ranks of Judith Shakespeare and Mary Carmichael. While Alma “wrote, . . . wrote, . . .wrote,” Darwin “asked, . . . wrote, . . . concluded” (475). The disparity between these two structures demonstrates the chasm between the writing processes of each scientist, and shows in just three words why Darwin is a historical figure and Alma is a character in a historical novel.

When Alma meets Alfred Wallace, the man who really did simultaneously develop a theory parallel to Darwin’s, she declares that she has contributed to science after all, and she regards it as “no small feat. . . . Anyone who can say such a thing has lived a fortunate life” (497). The novel leaves Alma soon after this meeting, in a scene where Alma ventures out into the garden and considers her impending death. When she grows short of breath, she leans against a tree, which is said to “hold her up just a little while longer” (499). This final image emanates a feeling of balance, as if Alma has finally come to understand her place in the world. Ending in balance is not unusual for a novel, but it does seem very familiar to a reader who knows Gilbert’s work. Balance is the ultimate goal of Gilbert’s global trek that spawned *Eat, Pray, Love*: in Italy she sought pleasure; in India she sought devotion; and in Indonesia she sought balance of the two.

Alma has her own locations that represent pleasure, devotion, and balance. Early in the novel, the narrative even connects two of them for the reader. One is the binding closet where Alma discovers her sexual self and masturbates on a regular basis. The other is the carriage house, where Alma does all of her scientific work and writes her books and articles.

. . . these two locations—the binding closet and the carriage house study—became for Alma twin points of privacy and revelation. One room was for the body; one was for the mind. One room was small and windowless; the other airy and cheerfully lit. One room

smelled of old glue; the other of fresh hay. One room brought forth secret thoughts; the other brought forth ideas that could be published and shared. (114)

The parallel structures of these sentences emphasize the connection between the binding closet and the carriage house. Each sentence gives a detail of one place and then a contrasting detail in the other place. These dichotomies suggest a disconnect between Alma's body and mind, but the passage ends by demonstrating the relationship between the two rooms, and thus Alma's body and mind, once more: "But both rooms belonged to Alma Whittaker alone, and in both rooms, she came into being" (114).

This selection refers to these two places as twins, but a third location stands out as a third "point of privacy and revelation." In Tahiti, Alma meets a man named Tomorrow Morning who helps Alma better understand her husband's life and death. Their unique relationship forms quickly and culminates in a cave filled with "the most luxuriant mantle of mosses" Alma has ever seen (425). In this place, Alma finds the object of her life's devotion to the point of pleasure. In an act that gathers together her past relationships and all her work, Alma performs oral sex for Tomorrow Morning. Thus, in a third place where she comes "into being" (114)—in a bed of moss—Alma finds balance between pleasure and devotion.

Alma's experience in the cave of moss parallels Gilbert's time in Bali, which constitutes the "Love" section of *Eat, Pray, Love*. As Gilbert's memoir pulls together, she finds a balance between the pleasure she absorbed in Italy and the devotion she sought in India. Most significantly, she meets the man who will later become her second husband. While Tomorrow Morning represents more of a spiritual partner than a romantic one, Alma's experience with him resolves many of her own conflicts, just as Gilbert's future husband, Felipe, does for her. The stories, at their core, share a great deal, but one is regarded as chick lit and the other qualifies as

literary. A cynic would cite *Signature*'s historical bent as evidence of its being written "like a man" and thus deserving literary attention, but I argue that the real difference lies in their individual attitudes to the purpose of literature. *Eat, Pray, Love* reads like a chatty best friend over coffee—and in effect it serves as a pleasant, though weighty, self-help book on identity and self-discovery. *Signature* also concerns itself with identity and self-discovery, but through the medium of a serious and detailed history. *Eat, Pray, Love* exists for entertainment; *Signature* exists for enlightenment. I will try not to think too much of the irony that plenty of women were enlightened by *Eat, Pray, Love*, and that I was certainly entertained by *Signature*.

Beyond the parallels that Alma's life draws between *Eat, Pray, Love* and *Signature*, Alma gives important insight into Elizabeth Gilbert's life as a creator. Gilbert herself has given two insights into Alma as she wished to create her: she is a woman saved by her work, and she is a woman limited by perfectionism, both traits that Gilbert recognizes in both herself and other contemporary women. Furthermore, Alma represents a woman who had the potential to be silenced by her time, but instead silenced her own most important idea. In this sense, Alma reflects Gilbert's great fear when she sat down to write again after the phenomenal success of *Eat, Pray, Love*: could she write without thinking of all the critics? Gilbert's characterization of Alma asserts that women are limited not so much by their societies as by their own perceptions of their own shortcomings. And while Alma's internalized limitations keep her from publishing her most important work, real-life Elizabeth Gilbert has published both her most important work—*Eat, Pray, Love*—and her best work so far, *Signature*, despite her literary anxieties. Ultimately Gilbert embodies the writer Virginia Woolf summoned who would run the race of writing without "looking to right or left" to the critics (*Room 93*). The critics shouting, "You

can't do this and you shan't do that!" remain, but Gilbert has found a way to run through them and write just the way she likes anyway (93).

A “Trickle in Time”:

Alice Munro’s Connections between Writer, Narrator, and Character

According to a New York Times article, “For Better Social Skills, Scientists Recommend a Little Chekhov,” a study published in the journal *Science* found that subjects who read literary fiction tested better in empathy and perception than subjects who read popular fiction. The article claims “something by Chekhov or Alice Munro will help you navigate new social territory better than a potboiler by Danielle Steel” (Belluck). Writer Lousie Erdrich responded with gratitude that science would find “a way to prove true the intangible benefits of literary fiction” (Belluck). However, the article examines the effects of literary fiction and identifies examples of that fiction, but does not draw connections to explain the way in which the work increases social knowledge.

Chekhov and Munro are fitting examples for the results of the study because their work routinely invites readers to explore the psyches of its characters, thus requiring the reader to exercise empathy. Joyce Carol Oates connected the two writers when she called Munro a “master of the realistic, ‘Chekhovian’ short story” (“Writers on Munro”). According to Oates, Munro reflects in her own work what succeeds in Chekhov’s: characters portrayed fully and honestly in real human relationship. Writer Sheila Heti responded to the strengths in Munro’s work: “You look at her and think, Of course, just put all your intelligence and sensitivity and vitality into your work in a consistent way. There is nothing else” (“Writers on Munro”). Heti’s assessment may make Munro’s work seem simple, but it actually shows the complexity of Munro’s work. For the study’s organizers, Munro represents literary fiction not because she is agreed upon as a literary writer, but because her work induces the literary reading experience that results in empathetic exercise.

Munro's unquestioned status as a literary writer serves as an interesting case study in literary reputation, particularly because Munro generally focuses on the lives of minor people in remote places. In particular, a great deal of her fiction considers the inner lives of girls and women. In essence, her work proves that chick lit is not denigrated just because it is about women's lives—something else must be at work there, something else must separate Munro from chick lit writers. When Munro won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2013, Roxana Robinson responded by writing about her first impression of Munro's work. She says that she was "suspicious" of the first Munro book she read, *The Lives of Girls and Women* (Robinson). She questioned why Munro would restrict herself to that narrow realm of experience: "It seemed that, if you were going to write, you should write like a man, because that was the model. The great writers were men, so it was they whom we should emulate. Write like a man! The women I knew were trying to out-men the men" (Robinson). Robinson considered Munro's subject matter inherently flawed if she really meant to accomplish anything. But Munro surprised Robinson by convincing her that her subjects were important and contributed to the literary conversation. In fact, Robinson credits Munro with telling the world that "the lives of girls and women are worth thinking about, writing about, reading about." And why are these lives worth thinking about? "Women's lives, too, are driven by the great forces that drive all important experience. . . . rage, love, jealousy, spite, grief, passion" (Robinson). Responses to Munro's work suggest that her status as literary arises from the way in which she writes, not necessarily what she writes about. Her work is an argument for the value of fiction that digs into the deep lives of its characters regardless of who those characters are.

In comparing Munro to other female writers, Robinson explains that Munro "doesn't have a political point to make. . . . she has no axe to grind" (Robinson). Munro does not write

about girls and women to assert their importance, but instead takes their importance as her base assumption and works from there. Munro's own description of her childhood and the beginning of her writing career provides valuable insight into this feature of her writing. In her Nobel Prize Lecture, which took the form of an interview, she remembers that she did not feel inferior as a woman growing up in Ontario. She explains that where she lived, "women did most of the reading, telling most of the stories, the men were outside doing important things" (Åsberg). In retrospect, Munro thinks that this pattern of life and gender made it easier for women to write than the men, simply because storytelling was considered a female pursuit. Her upbringing serves as a perfect antithesis to Judith Shakespeare's and shows just how much life situation can influence a writer's success.

Munro's confidence in her art held strong until she "grew up and met a few other people who were writing" (Åsberg). When she was younger, the narrow scope of her rural life protected her from the discouragement of the literary world, but once she became more aware of the field, she was "naturally rather daunted" (Åsberg). Writers "who were in a way more academic" intimidated Munro the most, because she believed that she "couldn't write that way, didn't have that gift" (Åsberg). During this time, Munro relates, she threw out what she wrote more often than she kept it. In fact, she wonders if she would have flourished as a young writer if she had grown up in a place more in tune with the literary elite. Vitaly, in the course of her life and development as a writer, she only received discouragement at times when she could respond with hard work, not resignation. For this reason, Munro's special circumstances deserve consideration: if Munro's environment naturally led her to write stories, elements of that environment might be worth imitation. Her experience also illuminates her natural concern for young female writers, particularly the way their environments do or do not enable them to create.

In the tradition of Virginia Woolf's creation of Mary Carmichael, many of Munro's short stories feature characters who engage in the act of creation. In particular, the first-person narrators of "Friend of My Youth" and "Meneseung" fade into the background as they tell the story that constitutes the main narrative. In both cases, the narrators expand, edit, and alter the stories as they know them. The result is a narrative that gives both a story and a portrait of the narrator. Furthermore, each story concerns the narrator's ancestors in some way: "Friend of My Youth" features a daughter grappling with a season in her mother's life; the unnamed narrator of "Meneseung" tracks down the history of a forgotten woman who serves as a figurative progenitor. Here each of Munro's characters engages in what Woolf would call thinking "back through her mothers" (97). In this sense, Munro herself thinks back through her mothers, too—whether they are women, writers, or storytellers.

In this way, Munro's work can be particularly resonant for women, especially female writers. But Munro insists that she just wants her stories "to move people," and that she doesn't "care if they are men or women or children" (Åsberg). In the same interview, she counters that she wants readers to enjoy her work: "I want people to find not so much inspiration as great enjoyment" (Åsberg). These two intentions seemingly conflict—are readers supposed to be moved by her work or just enjoy reading it? Munro's work certainly doesn't offer the easy, tied-up endings of much popular fiction that exists purely for enjoyment. So we might take her comments to mean that she wants her readers to enjoy her stories the way she enjoys stories—for the very joy of storytelling and its magic. Her meta-fictional exploration of stories and their tellers exhibits the extent of her commitment to the very idea of a short story, and her belief in the short story's ability to move all kinds of people.

Critic Gayle Elliot's article "'A Different Tack': Feminist Meta-Narrative in Alice Munro's 'Friend of My Youth'" attempts to understand the mechanisms of Munro's fiction. Elliot recognizes Munro's tactics as innovative and transformational, but hesitates to identify the ways she innovates and transforms as specifically feminine. Elliot harbors a "distrust of the notion of feminine writing" but admits that "women writers continue to articulate a theory of 'women's writing,'" not to distinguish it from men's writing, but "in order to empower themselves with a more extensive knowledge of their craft and a deeper sense of the contributions made by women to the evolution of modern fiction" (75). In this sense, Elliot's quest to define the function of Munro's writing takes the shape of a search for understanding as opposed to a categorization of her form as either male or female. Specifically, Elliot wants to know what has enabled Munro to "take a different tack" and write so far outside of the norm (76).

Elliot determines that within Munro's story-within-a-story method, "meaning cannot be derived from any single story segment; it emerges, instead, from the shifting contexts in which the (multiple) stories are told" (77). Essentially, Munro's practice of not doling out information in a linear manner but instead revealing parts of the story gradually, over time, results in a story about storytelling and its effects. Instead of a narrative that communicates directly to the reader, the narrative becomes a "means of discovering truth" (77). In "Friend of My Youth," the daughter's story ultimately tells the reader more about the daughter than it does about the mother. Once the reader comes to understand that what the daughter says happened might not actually be what happened, the difference between the story as it is told and the truth of the story shows, in relief, the true character of the daughter.

Munro also often uses alternative narrative elements to tell her stories. “Friend of My Youth” and “Meneseteung” both build on many kinds of sources, including “hints, confessions, gossip, news accounts, primary and secondary narrative, letters, photographs, even the telephone party line” (Elliot 80). These sources layer on top of one another to allow infinite interpretations of the truth of the story and the characters who tell it. Elliot concludes: “In the end, it is not resolution that is sought but understanding, knowledge not an end but an ongoing process: one experience touches upon and doubles back on the next, looping and threading together” (80). This kind of narrative relies inevitably on the reader to fill in gaps and make inferences about the story—and thus Munro’s approach serves the double purpose of commenting on the act of storytelling and inviting readers to participate in those empathetic exercises that define literary fiction.

“Meneseteung” serves as perhaps the best example of the various functions of Munro’s work. The story takes as its guide an unnamed narrator who has searched out historical evidence of a certain Almeda Roth, an inhabitant of a small Canadian settlement in the mid 19th century. The narrator begins by relating only the facts that she¹ knows for sure, pulling from Almeda’s book of poetry, *Offerings*, its preface, and the picture of Almeda in the front matter. She also explores the archives of the local paper, the *Vidette*, for details of Almeda’s life. What she finds gives her a starting point, but she inevitably moves beyond the facts and begins to fictionalize Almeda’s life. The *Vidette* is not so much a newspaper as a local gossip rag, and so the publication gives plenty of insight into the manner of local life. It also becomes a jumping off point for the narrator, who takes the *Vidette*’s advice to the locals to be on their guard for “tramps, confidence men, hucksters, shysters, plain thieves . . .” as an opportunity to invent a few

¹ The narrator’s gender is not explicitly expressed, but if we take the narrator to be a reflection of Munro or her authorial self, we may assume that the narrator is female.

stories of such vagrants and their antics. In the same way, when the *Vidette* notices Almeda Roth walking home from church with Jarvis Poulter, the neighboring bachelor, the narrator centers much of the story on Almeda's potential relationship with Jarvis.

But the story is not so much about Jarvis as it is about Almeda as she rejects the idea of him—she is on her way to becoming an old maid—and returns to writing poetry. The *Vidette*, and much of the town, it seems, minimizes Almeda's poetry and considers it a trivial pursuit. The paper refers to Almeda as “our poetess” (50), simultaneously regarding her as a token, a possession of the town, and lessening her position by attaching her gender to her profession. Furthermore, when Jarvis comes into the picture, the narrative suggests that “all that reading and poetry” may appear as “more of a drawback, a barrier, an obsession” to the town, and that being published probably overinflated her ego and got her hopes up (59). The *Vidette*'s verbal connection to seeing—thanks to its Latin root in the word for *see*—emphasizes that Almeda exists under the often-judgmental gaze of the town and its inhabitants.

The narrator imagines that Almeda originally considers Jarvis to be a potential suitor, while he remains only somewhat interested. The dynamic of their relationship changes when Almeda calls on him for help after finding a woman passed out against her fence. Almeda believes the woman dead, but Jarvis rouses the woman like an animal and sends her home. Before this incident, Jarvis could not imagine Almeda as a wife, but “now that is possible” (67). Afterwards, he makes his first real move toward courting Almeda—he offers to walk her to church. However, this same incident causes Almeda to recoil from Jarvis out of the sense that he has only recognized her as wifely material for her weakness and need. Almeda rejects Jarvis by leaving a note for him on her door; she says that she is sick and won't go to church after all. She knows that these words will end their potential relationship.

Instead of going with Jarvis, Almeda takes nerve medicine and stays in her home to make grape jelly. She really has felt sick, and she soon realizes that her discomfort is due to “an accumulation of menstrual blood that has not yet started to flow” (68). In the confines of the house, the laudanum alters and widens Almeda’s perception of both her immediate surroundings and her life situation. She sits back and observes everything as it sits around her. Eventually,

Almeda in her observations cannot escape words. . . . Soon this glowing and swelling begins to suggest words—not specific words but a flow of words somewhere, just about ready to make themselves known to her. Poems, even. Yes, again, poems. Or one poem. Isn’t that the idea—one very great poem that will contain everything. (69)

Almeda then considers all the details, images, and scenes she must incorporate into this poem that is to contain everything. She wants it to encompass all experience, both to build upon and to fly beyond direct experience. She realizes that all her thoughts need to be “channelled” (70) into the one poem, and that this metaphor informs the entire process: for the poem is also about the river, the Meneseteung, and this burst of creativity is deeply connected to the start of her menstrual flow. This scene, which serves as the climax of the story, draws a firm connection between Almeda’s observation, her impulse to create, and her womanhood.

Critic Pam Houston, in “A Hopeful Sign: The Making of Metonymic Meaning in Munro’s ‘Meneseteung,’” further connects Almeda’s observational relationship to the world around her to the narrator and to Munro herself. She calls all three of them “observers” and “recorders” (89). Houston regards this identity as fundamentally related to metonymy, which she regards as a distinctly feminine manner of writing, one of “unlimited generative potential and creative possibility” (91). I am reluctant to connect any particular literary device to a single gender, but Houston underlines the fact that Almeda was unable to write her one great poem—as

Judith before her—but that the narrator and Munro essentially write the poem for her in the form of the short story:

These women give birth to one another, and their lives are inextricably meshed into some sort of life dance that feels “generational,” in all of its slipping meanings. A story, a poem, a history, a life, a river: “Meneseteung” becomes all things female, all things generative, all things that can never be absolute. (91)

Regardless of metonymy’s relationship to women, “Meneseteung” does speak deeply to the connections between women and creation—and in some ways it becomes reminiscent of Woolf’s idea of literary lineage.

The end of “Meneseteung” returns to the first-person narrator, who hints at her reasons for telling Almeda’s story. The last evidence of Almeda’s life is her grave marker, which the narrator has found covered in grass. The narrator then muses whether she will be the last one ever to consider Almeda’s life or care about her story. She has sought out Almeda’s story in “the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish” (73). In a sense, this narrator wants to find a way to resurrect Judith Shakespeare, or some form of her—the writer who did not write or was forgotten. And in the end, she must admit that much of Almeda’s story has indeed been forgotten—for much of the story consists of her own fabrications and projections. The story ends with the narrator’s admission: “I may have got it wrong. I don’t know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don’t know if she ever made grape jelly” (73). So in the same moment that the narrator ends Almeda’s story, she draws attention to the fact that really it is not Almeda’s story at all, though it might be. Almeda’s real story has been forgotten simply because she was a woman and not worth much recording during her lifetime.

But because Almeda is also a creation of Alice Munro, she has no “true story” because the story about her life is really about the life of the woman who creates her life around the few details she can find on microfilm. These layers show the extent of Munro’s concern with the act of storytelling itself and the forms it takes, especially for women. Almeda’s character also points to Munro’s anxieties about the woman writer, especially the one limited by her environment. For even though Munro’s story resurrects Almeda and gives her a place on the page, the entire basis of the story is that this woman has been completely forgotten by time. This aspect of Munro’s work indicates that she may worry more about the state of women in writing than she lets on.

Despite her insistence that her gender did not limit her as a young writer, Munro claims that, because she was a woman, she never expected to win the Nobel Prize (Åsberg). However, she does believe that it’s easier now for a woman “to be really serious about writing, as a man would write” (Åsberg). In this way, Munro simultaneously acknowledges the way her gender has limited her and asserts that current women might not encounter the same obstacles she did. Almeda’s characterization emphasizes Munro’s connection of woman and storyteller and reveals her anxiety that great work by women may have been ignored and forgotten. For in every moment that Almeda finds herself free and able to write, she is also suppressed by her society. A dose of laudanum, prescribed by a doctor who thinks marriage would calm her nerves, casts a drugged and fuzzy shadow over her poetic reverie. Her muse leads her out into the Pearl Street Swamp, where she catches the pneumonia that kills her. The swamp is an improper place for a lady like her to be, but more importantly, it represents poetic inspiration because of its association with Pegasus. Early in the short story, Almeda sees the Pegasus constellation hanging over the swamp. In classical mythology, Pegasus is regarded as a muse of poetry and was said to plant springs of creative inspiration wherever he treads. Since the Pegasus constellation

figuratively treads the earth at the Pearl Street Swamp, Almeda's traipse through the swamp becomes a symbol of immersion in a wellspring of creativity. The swamp epitomizes Almeda's experience with creation: she jumps in—though her peers think she ought not to—and the choice to do so ultimately kills her. Through Almeda, Munro depicts the distinction between being free to write and being free to be a writer. Munro herself both writes and is regarded as a writer, but Almeda's existence in fiction attests that not all women meet these criteria.

When asked if she thinks she has been influential in the lives of younger female writers, Munro responded, "I actually don't know . . . I would hope that I have been. I think I went to other female writers when I was young, and that was a great encouragement to me, but whether I have been important to others I don't know" (Åsberg). As evidenced by the wealth of contemporary female writers who cite Munro as inspiration in "Writers on Munro," Munro has certainly played a role in building a female literary heritage, even if Munro does not recognize her own role in establishing such a tradition. Ultimately, in the same way that the narrator of "Meneseteung," searches for the story of a poet who has come before her, Munro's work has descended from the female writers before her and will inspire the next generation. Thus Munro's expression of Almeda's story through the narrator's investigation deeply relates to Munro's place in the kind of literary lineage Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*. The narrator of "Meneseteung" seeks "a trickle in time," a connection between herself and those who have come before her (73); Munro provides the connection that binds writer, narrator, and reader to Almeda and the reincarnation of Mary Carmichael that she represents.

The Jump:

Jennifer Egan's Representation of Experience in Words and Images

When I shut the back cover of Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, I said to myself, "That's how I want to write." The depth and truth of the book welled up in me like a resounding note; I felt as if I were holding an entire world in my hands. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf describes a very similar reaction to great literature. Upon finishing something of "integrity," as Woolf calls it, "one exclaims in rapture, But this is what I have always felt and known and desired! And one boils over with excitement, and, shutting the book even with a kind of reverence as if it were something very precious . . . one puts it back on the shelf" (72). When I read Woolf's description of this experience, I was even more excited to know that there was a name for this kind of reaction and the work that prompted it. After describing the response, Woolf suggests what an author must have in order to have integrity and elicit this kind of response in his or her readers. She says "integrity, in the case of the novelist, is the conviction that he gives one that this is the truth" (72). She also believes that each of us has the ability to discern this integrity in a work of literature: "one holds every phrase, every scene, to the light as one reads—for Nature seems, very oddly, to have provided us with an inner light by which to judge of the novelist's integrity or disintegrity" (72). Through Woolf's description of artistic integrity, I came to understand that what I felt upon finishing *A Visit from the Goon Squad* was a kind of deep recognition of the kind of truth that literature attempts to trace.

Also after reading *Goon Squad*, I found myself particularly inspired by Egan's ability to make me feel what I did with the intensity that I did. I mean—I was downright evangelical about this book after I finished it. I thanked the professor who had assigned it as if he had saved my life. I didn't completely understand how Egan had accomplished such a feat within the pages of a

book, but I knew that she had done it with words and I wanted to make the same magic. With Woolf's understanding in mind, my reaction to *Goon Squad* implies that a work of integrity has the potential not only to reveal human truths but also to inspire readers to seek the same challenge of writing to that same level of clarity and insight. I read *Goon Squad* at a time when I was still deciding how I wanted to spend my time at DePauw; I thought I wanted to study English but I was on the fence between majoring in literature and majoring in writing. Writing had always been my dream to some extent, but I generally denied the thought that I might actually spend my college education studying it. I thought that writing was either a minor pursuit for small people or a grand pursuit for important and talented people. And being a small, young person, I figured that I shouldn't presume to learn how to write better. But Egan's work made me itch to know more about the function of literature—and I didn't just want to know how it worked, I wanted to do it for myself. *Goon Squad* did things I didn't know fiction could do, and somehow it made me feel that I could learn how to do them too. Now I see that the integrity of Egan's work resonated with me and inspired me to trace truths in the same way that it did. I didn't want just to imitate it: I wanted to understand what it did and then pour its lessons into written words of my own. In this way, my reaction to Egan's work connects Woolf's ideas of integrity and artistic lineage. For just as women need female writers to look back to if they are to write well, these artistic mothers can serve as the direct inspiration to young women to write—and the bolder the original work, the bolder the work of the next generation.

Jennifer Egan was scheduled to visit DePauw just weeks from the time I finished reading *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. And not long after I shut the back cover and started telling everyone I knew what a revelation the book had been for me, Jennifer Egan won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. My English professors couldn't believe DePauw's luck; Egan was coming as a

part of the Kelly Writers Series, but as a Pulitzer winner she easily could have come for an Ubben Lecture. Essentially, Egan became a much more important speaker between the time she was booked to come to DePauw and the time she actually came. I was equally excited to see this book I loved so much receive such an honor and followed the press coverage of the award. In the dark cubby of my freshman dorm room, I clicked through a link to a piece that criticized Egan for statements she made in an interview she gave after winning the Pulitzer. As often happens, I read the response article before I read the interview itself. However, the interview, which was with the Wall Street Journal's "Speakeasy" blog, proved to be far more interesting to me than the critique of the interview, though the critique does inform why I find the interview so interesting in the first place.

For the most part, the interview was standard after-a-win fare: how does it feel, is it real for you, what do you think of the direction of modern fiction? But in the final question, the interviewer asked Egan about the way male and female writers are handled in the press. The interviewer specifically asked if female writers should confidently proclaim the success of their work as men sometimes do. Egan replied:

"Anyone can say anything, that's easy. My focus is less on the need for women to trumpet their own achievements than to shoot high and achieve a lot. What I want to see is young, ambitious writers. And there are tons of them. Look at "The Tiger's Wife." There was that scandal with the Harvard student who was found to have plagiarized. But she had plagiarized very derivative, banal stuff. This is your big first move? These are your models? I'm not saying you should say you've never done anything good, but I don't go around saying I've written the book of the century. My advice for young female writers would be to shoot high and not cower."

When I read this statement, all I could see was Egan’s encouragement to “shoot high and not cower.” In my mind, that was her advice to me personally as a young female writer, and it made all the sense in the world to me, because her book had inspired me to do the same thing that she was encouraging me to do: her book did not just make me want to write but made me want to write boldly, in a way that moved people. And so I also sympathized with what she was saying about “derivative, banal” fiction—if we’re going to write, we might as well write new and adventurous works, right? Why do what has already been done?

But others were very upset with what Egan had said. The young writer she referred to, Kaavya Viswanathan, had plagiarized Megan McCafferty, Meg Cabot, and Sophie Kinsella, among others, all successful writers of popular fiction whose work, because it is generally read by women, could certainly fall under the umbrella of chick lit. By criticizing Viswanathan for plagiarizing these writers, and by grouping their work under a label of “derivative, banal stuff,” Egan dismissed all their work. But the work, readers protested, is greatly respected even if it is not literary. Jennifer Weiner, another chick lit writer, spoke out about her negative feelings about Egan’s interview, tweeting: “And there goes my chance to be happy that a lady won the big prize. Thanks, Jenny Egan. You’re a model of graciousness.” Weiner expressed disgust that Egan would not stand beside her sister writers and would even denigrate them by implying that they are not worthy of being plagiarized. Egan later apologized, saying that she didn’t really know whom she was criticizing. She also said she didn’t blame Weiner for being angry. Ultimately she returned to the idea that she wanted to encourage young female writers. “I’m eager to provide encouragement and support for young women. The irony is that’s what I was trying to do in that moment and the thing that was so agonizing was that I did the opposite” (Kachka).

Personally, I was convinced of Egan's good intentions for that interview. I gave her the benefit of the doubt because I had been directly inspired by the novel itself, and so Egan's words filtered down so clearly to that message of inspiration. I also understood Egan's words to be more about the nature of the chick lit genre as she believed it to be, however accurate or inaccurate that impression may have been. In her mind, at least at the time of the interview, the genre exists in opposition to the kind of fiction she writes and values. From her perspective at that time, chick lit was a genre so flooded with imitation that a publisher would not notice a work of plagiarism until after the book had hit the shelves. If that perception was accurate, Egan had every right to criticize it in the act of encouraging young women to push toward writing more ambitious fiction. In the end, I feel that the jury is still out on whether chick lit is based purely on imitation or simply focuses on a certain kind of life—but we still cannot reject the idea of an entire genre based on imitation.

So I chose to focus on the positive message of Egan's interview—"shoot high, and don't cower," as well as the inspiration that her novel planted in me. After her reading, I held out my copy to her and told her that I found it inspiring. And when she nodded and thanked me, I wished that there were another way to convey the extent to which she inspired me, because I realized that other people might have made the same claim when really they had just liked the book, whereas I was standing there feeling that the book had persuaded me to write, had taught me the breadth of possibilities of what fiction can do. So then I mentioned the recent interview, and told her: "I knew what you meant." She said something about having her foot in her mouth. Then she signed my copy: "To Caitie—with thanks for giving my words the benefit of the doubt!!" Now I wonder if she meant her spoken words or her written ones.

After this encounter with Jennifer Egan, I wished that I had been more eloquent and had managed to say what I really meant. I wanted so badly to communicate to her how connected I felt to her work, and how much I felt it had changed me and altered my path. I wanted her to know that she was a literary mother for me, that I would regard her work as a guide—not in specific form or content, but in manner. She taught me that boldness good, and she did so with her written words, not with her spoken ones. And I don't think I gave them the benefit of the doubt—I think I just heard them as she meant them. Maybe that's presumptuous, to say that I know what she meant, but combined with her work her words give a clear message: just do it, you really can. Break some rules.

A Visit from the Goon Squad as a whole demonstrates Egan's ability and willingness to break outside of literary norms, but "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," the chapter written entirely in PowerPoint, exhibits this feature of her work best. Egan calls this chapter the "lynchpin" of the novel, in part because it pulls together the stories of several disparate characters, but mostly because it accomplishes on a chapter scale what the novel does as a whole (Durham). The chapter takes the form of a "slide journal" compiled by Alison, the 12-year-old daughter of Sasha, the first chapter's main character who appears most often in the novel. The PowerPoint explicates Sasha's trajectory as it provides a portrait of her family in the future—the narrative covers two days sometime in the 2030s. In her slides, Alison focuses on her family's dynamics. In time, she paints moments that demonstrate various relationships between the members of her family. Many of the slides show a special connection between Alison and her brother, Lincoln, who appears to be at least somewhat autistic. He's obsessed with the pauses in songs and spends a great deal of his time listening to and charting the songs with his favorite pauses. His father doesn't understand this obsession. In these ways, and in various others, this chapter at once

contains some of the novel's most important characters, carries its most prominent theme of time, connection, and disconnection, and exhibits its most daring and unexpected format.

The PowerPoint makes for a form of storytelling that mixes words and images. One of the early slides establishes each character's presence by showing five circles: one large circle in the center surrounded by four smaller ones, each of which contains the name and age of one of the members of Sasha Blake's family (178). In the middle of the center circle, Alison has written the pronoun "US" (178). Toward the end of the chapter, after the family moves through various interpersonal conflicts and misunderstandings, the image reappears, this time without any text at all (246). Without using any words, Egan invokes an image—a diagram, really—to express the wholeness of this family even in its complication. In a similar manner, the chapter ends with a series of graphs depicting research Lincoln has done on "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" (247-50). The reader knows that Drew, Alison and Lincoln's father, has helped Lincoln put these graphs together. Though Drew initially cannot understand his son's obsession with the pauses, he promises to help Lincoln graph his conclusions after Alison tells him that Lincoln needs help. These moments provide a context in such a way that the graph slides do not need to explicitly state that they are the product of reconciliation between father and son. Instead, the chapter ends in a wash of understanding that the Blake family is not simple, but it will remain a family.

Because the chapter's narrative filters through Alison, it reveals the most about her character and the way she perceives the world. She calls the PowerPoint her "slide journal" and uses it to record snippets of conversation, make observations about possibilities and realities, and reflect on her own place within her family. Essentially, she searches for stories all around her and translates them into the clearest language she knows: this futuristic mix of verbal and visual representation. Her mother, who is of the previous generation, does not understand Alison's

compulsion to use PowerPoint slides as her medium, but Alison finds great value in it. Furthermore, Alison feels it is her destiny to experience life as an observer. In this chapter, she searches out further details of her mother's life—which the reader knows very well from the other chapters in which Sasha plays a part. Alison believes she can come to understand her mother if she understands the story of her mother's life. On a slide titled, "Mom Sits on the Edge of My Bed," Alison writes a small selection of dialogue in which she tells her mother, "'I want to know every bad thing you've done' (203). Before Sasha can answer, Alison adds, 'Including dangerous and embarrassing'" (203). Sasha replies that Alison "can't" know (203). On the next slide, "What I Suddenly Understand," Sasha writes, "My job is to make people uncomfortable. . . . I will do it all my life. . . . My mother, Sasha Blake, is my first victim" (204). Because of an impulse to observe and understand other people's stories, Alison wants to know the story of her mother's life. However, when she makes her mother uncomfortable, she starts to think that it is her fate to make other people uncomfortable. Alison's effort does perhaps make Sasha miserable, but Alison will likely spend the entirety of her life wanting to know other people's stories, not necessarily making other people unhappy.

Alison's slide journal initially appears as a point of departure between Alison and her mother, but it reflects the kind of processing Sasha also does. Alison includes a slide that duplicates what she calls "Mom's 'Art:.'" collages made up of scraps of paper and notes from around the house (207). Alison says "she uses 'found objects,'" a term which harkens back to the first chapter, "Found Objects," which chronicles Sasha's battle with kleptomania many years earlier. Alison also relates that her mother says the scraps are "precious because they're casual and meaningless" but that "they tell the whole story if you really look" (207). The fragments that make up Sasha's collages simultaneously resemble the items Sasha steals in the first chapter and

reflect the way Alison also “steals” bits and pieces of the lives around her to construct her slide journal. In both cases, the whole story—the bits of the past, the dynamics of relationships, the dreams and disappointments and truths—are there “if you really look” (207). Alison’s confession that she looks at the collages when her mother is not around reinforces the sense that Alison craves a deep understanding of the “whole story.”

Later in the chapter, during a walk with her father that takes the two of them out into the desert, all the way to a “city” of solar panels (233), Alison loses the sense of her own story and imagines herself as a part of a much bigger story. As the two of them approach their house, Alison thinks it looks abandoned and fears “that the solar panels were a time machine. . . . That I’m a grown-up woman coming back to this place after many years” (241). Alison describes this possibility with such conviction and nostalgia that entering the house and realizing that the story is not true makes her cry with relief (241-42). In the house, “familiar things fall back over” Alison “like the softest, oldest blanket” (242). In the walk in the desert, Alison briefly understands the nature of adulthood, and it frightens her. The blanket and tears present upon coming home indicate that she does not feel prepared for adulthood just yet—and so she returns to her childhood.

This sequence of events mirrors the nature of Lincoln’s pauses. In confusion and frustration, Drew tries to ask Lincoln “why the pauses matter so much” to him (220). Lincoln cannot explain why: he can only explain the pauses themselves, and so Drew gets very angry and Lincoln begins to cry. Sasha, who understands Lincoln much more intimately, explains the pauses to Drew as best she can: ““The pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn’t really over, so you’re relieved. But then the song *does* end, because every song ends, obviously, and THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL”” (223). Sasha’s explanation implies

that Lincoln's fascination centers on his basic understanding of the way the world works, particularly his knowledge of the reality of death. Sasha's statement that "every song ends" equates music with mortal life—since every life ends, as Lincoln inherently knows—further suggesting that Lincoln is obsessed with the idea of his own mortality.

In this sense, both Lincoln and Alison experience existential anxiety akin to Margaret's in Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Spring and Fall." Margaret cries over the leaves as they turn colors and fall to the ground; the realization that leaves die leads her to the implicit knowledge that she too will die someday. In the same way, Lincoln knows that the song will end no matter how long the pause lasts, and Alison knows that she will grow up regardless of her retreat to childhood. How a piece of fiction written in PowerPoint slides resonates with a Victorian poem, I'm not completely sure. But the fact that they engender similar effects speaks to the power and significance of literature, no matter its form. Ultimately, the connection between these two works elucidates the integrity that I sensed in the novel the first time I read it, since "Spring and Fall" has served as a touchstone for generations of people forced to grapple with their own mortality. This kind of literature resonates in the soul because it illuminates parts of us we knew but could never express. Many have achieved resonance, integrity, with words, and others have done it with images. Egan just so happens to have accomplished such resonance with both words and images at the same time.

Just as Mary Carmichael proves her writing ability to Virginia Woolf by writing of female friendship for the first time in sentences that break away from the male sentence, Jennifer Egan's success in the boldness of her form qualifies her departure from the compositional norm as "breaking . . . for the sake of creating" (Woolf 81). In this sense, Egan fulfills Woolf's charge to "think only of the jump" (94). Egan's work forsakes literary norms—some as basic as having

text formed into sentences and paragraphs—in order to test the limits of what fiction can accomplish. Whereas Mary Carmichael turns the page on fictional representations of female friendship, Egan breaks out of a mold of text-based fiction and finds a whole world of possibility waiting for her.

Alison, the medium of Egan’s success, furthers the sense of possibility that the innovation of “Great Rock and Roll Pauses” induces. Like Judith Shakespeare, Alma, and Almeda before her, her work remains unpublished—but it’s just a personal slide journal, and she is still a girl. Alison stands out from her counterparts in the sense that Alma and Almeda exist in the past, while Alison lives in the future. This difference suggests that Alison may go on to write and publish her work when she grows up. Similarly, both Alma and Almeda die during the course of their narratives, and so the reader witnesses a full life lived and completed. The narrative of “Great Rock and Roll Pauses,” on the other hand, leaves Alison’s life undetermined, endowing her with a sense of possibility. As the creator of the chapter that breaks so many literary rules, Alison embodies the “jump” that Woolf urges writers to take. Furthermore, the successful resonance of her chapter demonstrates the risks, rewards, and endless potential of creation.

Understanding All Things

The visual nature of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*'s PowerPoint chapter enables Alison to show the reader literally what her mother's collages of their family life look like: on one slide, she imitates the collages by covering the slide in shapes of various sizes and colors. Some of the shapes represent the kind of scrap Sasha would actually use—a grocery list, a reminder jotted down, a confirmation number. Others, however, follow the pattern of the rest of the chapter and include bits of dialogue or Alison's own commentary. On a hexagram, Alison quotes her mother, who says that the bits “tell the whole story if you really look” (207). Just as the PowerPoint chapter serves as a microcosm of the novel, this single page represents the nature of the chapter. For Alison and Sasha's desire to gather the bits of their lives into some kind of sense represents the same impulse: both of them want to know the “whole story.”

Each of the “A” characters I have examined carries this same need to understand her entire world. Alma seeks a scientific theory that can explain the direction of all life and believes that she can find it through patient observation. Almeda senses a poem within herself that can encompass all human experience and the flow of time. And Alison watches closely, listens in the silence of the pauses, in the hope that she might fathom the “whole story.” Furthermore, for these women who naturally create, satisfying the itch to know comes not just by coming to understanding, but also by distilling and sharing the understanding with others.

The title of Elizabeth Gilbert's *The Signature of All Things* and the idea to which it refers—Boehme's belief that every living thing's form reflects its function in a signature of God's creation—hints at what kind of understanding the creator characters seek. Alma first encounters the idea of “the signature of all things” through Ambrose Pike, who later becomes her husband. He tells her of a mystic and botanist named Jacob Boehme who believed that God had

hidden a “divine code” inside the design of every plant on earth (229). According to Boehme, proof of the Creator’s love could be found in the way that many plants “resembled the diseases they were meant to cure, or the organs they were able to treat” (229). Alma finds herself skeptical but oddly intrigued by Boehme’s ideas. His shoddy methods and blind spots prevent Alma from taking him seriously as a scientist, but the idea that “God had *pressed* Himself into the world, and had left marks there for us to discover” fascinates her (230).

Within the realm of botany, Alma spends much of her life studying mosses. When she finds a colony of moss on a group of boulders on the White Acre estate, she feels that “*this was the entire world*. This was bigger than a world. This was the firmament of the universe . . . This was planetary and vast. These were ancient, unexplored galaxies” (162). Alma views the moss with great potential because she feels that so much remains to be discovered about the microscopic worlds that it represents. When Ambrose arrives, Alma wonders aloud about the depth of her interest in mosses: “Why must I pick at their secrets, and beg them for answers about the nature of life itself?” Ambrose replies, “Because you are interested in creation” (203). Here Ambrose provides insight into Alma’s obsession: beyond cataloguing the progression of mosses across a set of boulders, Alma wants to hold an entire world of knowledge in her hands. Perhaps this impulse explains her three encyclopedic endeavors that result in her two books: *The Complete Mosses of Pennsylvania* and *The Complete Mosses of the Northeastern United States*. For Alma, if something is worth knowing, it is worth knowing in its completeness. And so she searches for the signature of all things.

Alma’s story peaks in her realization of her own encompassing idea, what she calls “A Theory of Competitive Alteration” (443). Based on her work with mosses, the theory centers on the struggle for life that every organism endures. Alma says that “this fact was the very

mechanism of nature—the driving force behind all existence, behind all transmutation, behind all variation—and it was the explanation for the entire world. It was the explanation Alma had been seeking forever” (434). In this way, the theory fulfills a deep desire Alma has harbored for her entire life. The idea also makes her feel as if she has a “story to tell—an immense story” (441). The theory energizes Alma but also inspires her to share the theory with the world. If it is worth understanding, it is worth sharing. Because of Darwin and her own doubts, Alma shares her work only with a select few, but her initial desire to broadcast her story about the world indicates that sharing constitutes a vital part of the discovery process.

In the same way that circumstance keeps Alma from sharing her great understanding with the rest of the world, Almeda Roth never creates the poem that would encompass everything she has ever known. In her reverie, she thinks about writing poems again and revels in the thought of writing “one very great poem that will contain everything” (70). She lists some of the “so many things” she must consider: “Champlain and the naked Indians and the salt deep in the earth,” three images that have appeared earlier in the story. “All this,” she thinks, “can be borne only if it is channelled into a poem, and the word ‘channelled’ is appropriate, because the name of the poem will be—it *is*—‘The Meneseteung.’” The name of the poem is the name of the river” (70). The Meneseteung, a fictional river said to have been discovered by Champlain, embodies Almeda’s creation in both its grand scale and its ultimate nonexistence. The Meneseteung represents so many ideas, but it is just a story; Alma’s poem has the potential to express all experience, but she dies before she can write it.

In this sense, Alison, Alma, and Almeda each seek an understanding of “all things.” Their quest finds resonance in the similarity between their names: for the names begin not just with “A,” but with “Al,” connecting them to the word “all.” Alison wants the “whole story” (Egan

207), Alma wants a theory for the “entire world” (Gilbert 434), and Alma wants a poem “that will contain everything” (Munro 70). If these three characters serve as reflections of the writers who created them, this common yearning indicates a desire to take part in the most serious of literary conversations. These creator characters—and by extension the writers—want, above all else, to help define what it means to be human. Gilbert, Munro, and Egan do not want to entertain or surprise nearly as much as they want to illuminate how this world works and how we function within it. However, the fact that the characters who represent this desire remain unable to share their observations and realizations points to the writers’ residual feelings of powerlessness in the literary world. All three has had great success, but their limited creator characters assert that Judith Shakespeare has not yet arisen to write her poetry.

At the end of all this exploration, I realized that Virginia Woolf herself wrote a creator character who seeks to understand all things and knows that she will not be remembered for her discoveries. The artist Lily Briscoe, in *To the Lighthouse*, spends the third section of the novel working on a painting even as she remembers Charles Tansley’s repeated refrain, “women can’t paint, women can’t write” (48, 86, 159, 197). As she paints, “the old question which traversed the sky of the soul perpetually” comes to her mind: “What is the meaning of life?” (161). Sitting in front of her easel, Lily thinks that “the great revelation had never come”—the question has not, and will never be, fully answered (161). Instead, she realizes, revelation comes in the form of “little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” (161). Lily recognizes that her painting has the potential to be one of these “daily miracles,” a partial answer to “the old question” (161). Even though Lily believes in the painting’s potential to express the truth of life, she senses that it will be ignored and forgotten: “it would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa” (179). However, the fact that the painting

will be forgotten and perhaps destroyed does not prevent it from epitomizing the novel's themes of connection and the passage of time. In fact, the final image centers on Lily's concept of the painting: "With sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision" (242). In this way, Lily's painting embodies the hesitation of female creators, their anxiety about being ignored, and the ultimate triumph of creation. Because Lily's exultant moment closes the novel, her completion of the painting parallels Woolf's completion of the novel itself. In this sense, Woolf too lays down her pen in fatigue; she has had her vision. The difference is that Woolf's work will continue to be regarded as a great work of fiction, whereas Lily Briscoe's painting remains encoded behind Woolf's words.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman identified literature as the "passionate interest in other people's lives" (93). I would add that, for many writers, literature indicates a passionate interest in one's self. While Woolf consciously created Judith Shakespeare and Mary Carmichael to reflect the nature of women in fiction, she also invented Lily Briscoe, the artist in *To the Lighthouse*, who more subtly represents Woolf's own relationship to her art. The same connection between writer and character exists for Gilbert, Munro, and Egan: in the moment that one of these writers creates a literary work that throws light on the human condition, she also creates a character who attempts the same mission and fails to be recognized for her success. Call her Judith, Mary, Lily, Alma, Almeda, or Alison: she yearns to understand and to share that understanding. In this sense, these characters demonstrate what drove their creators to write in the first place. Perhaps they will always be present—as long as women write, and as long as the shadowy category of "women's fiction" remains. We can only hope that the continually reincarnated Judith will have opportunities for greater exploration, fuller expression, and fairer reception of her work—that

William's forgotten sibling will someday live not as Shakespeare's sister, but with a name of her own.

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