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The Politics of Female Sadness and Self-Destruction: The 'Sad Girl' Trope in The Virgin Suicides (1993) and My Year of Rest and Relaxation (2018)

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List of Abbreviations

<i>TVS</i>	<i>The Virgin Suicides</i>
<i>MYORAR</i>	<i>My Year of Rest and Relaxation</i>

1. Introduction

The figure of the ‘sad girl’ has been a recurring presence appearing in literature, film and online spaces in recent years, symbolizing both defiance and despair. Emerging as a reaction to an overly optimistic popular culture highlighting happiness and success, the ‘sad girl’ phenomenon is rooted in online aesthetic trends focusing on sadness and self-destructive actions. In U.S. American culture and media, happiness and constant self-optimization are the ultimate neoliberal imperatives. Especially women are expected to optimize their minds and bodies and be successful in both career and private life, despite structural discriminations. As Lauren Berlant (1) points out in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), these dreams and ideals are not actually achievable and hinder people in their flourishing. In her Sad Girl Theory, Audrey Wollen situates female sadness as an act of resistance and sees the ‘sad girl’ as a figure who protests systems of power, such as neoliberalism and its impossible demands. Wollen illustrates how female sadness does not need to be a source of shame but can rather be reappropriated into a form of empowerment, allowing young women to make their suffering visible. Importantly, this thesis seeks to investigate the representation of sadness as a motif in contemporary U.S. American literature rather than pathologizing real people suffering from serious mental illnesses. A clear differentiation between depression as a mental disorder and sadness as a cultural trope is provided at a later point in this introduction.

Social media platforms have most prominently provided a space for discussions of gendered sadness and allowed for the ‘sad girl’ phenomenon to spread widely, especially during the 2010s. Online content on platforms such as Tumblr or Instagram tagged #sadgirl usually features images of crying faces, of lonely young women but also of self-harm references. The ‘sad girl’ aesthetic combines gothic elements, soft grunge, horror aesthetics as well as pastel colors (Alderton 95-96). Zoe Alderton (95) describes this kind of content as genuine yet often ironic or overblown in its performance of sadness. She identifies the online ‘sad girl’ as part of a new branch of feminism that asks why young women are so sad and simultaneously illustrates how sadness can be a strategy for releasing negative affect and for visibly protesting wrongdoing (Alderton 95). Such a public display of sadness and distress forces others to witness the despair of the ‘sad girl’ and confronts viewers with regimes of inequality (Alderton 101). At the same time, with social media being a space of highly curated self-presentation, the sadness expressed online tends to be carefully staged and presented as a visual performance. Private sadness is publicized, which blurs the line between authentic emotional expression and

strategic visibility. The social media ‘sad girl’ occupies an ambivalent space between genuine vulnerability and online self-fashioning.

The literary world has also recognized and taken up the ‘sad girl’ character, with numerous online lists ranking ‘sad girl’ novels. These books typically focus on introspection and feature complex female characters who are suffering or experiencing some form of inner turmoil. There is a long history of literary works that include female characters under mental distress, one early example being Shakespeare’s Ophelia in *Hamlet* (1603). In the 19th century, female writers also frequently used the trope of ‘madness’ in women as a literary motif. Famous examples include Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) or the short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) is often listed as a prominent example of ‘sad girl’ literature from the 20th century. The 1990s saw several major publications of ‘sad girl’ novels, such as Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* (1993). However, the high time of ‘sad girl’ books began in the late 2010s and continues to this day, as this time has seen a boom in ‘sad girl’ publications. Prominent examples of more contemporary ‘sad girl’ books include Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), Sally Rooney’s *Normal People* (2018), or Kate Elizabeth Russell’s *My Dark Vanessa* (2020).

As discussed above, online articles providing lists of ‘sad girl’ literature are readily available and illustrate the popularity of the genre. Two incredibly popular novels featured in nearly every listicle are Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) (abbrev. *TVS*) and Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) (abbrev. *MYORAR*), which can be considered as seminal works of the genre. This thesis explores the portrayal of female sadness and self-destruction in these two novels and examines how the characters can be classified as ‘sad girls’ according to Wollen’s theory and how they employ sadness and self-destructive acts to resist their oppressive circumstances. The two primary texts were chosen due to their enormous popularity and influence on the genre of ‘sad girl’ books. Although the exact sales figures of the two novels are not publicly available, both are highly critically acclaimed and have achieved significant recognition. *TVS* has been adapted as a movie directed by Sophia Coppola, furthering its reach and cultural impact. *MYORAR* was a *New York Times* bestseller and has become immensely popular on social media in the years following the publication. To this day, both novels are often featured in viral content on ‘bookstagram’ or ‘booktok’ focused on ‘sad girl’ literature¹. Having

¹ For instance, searching for the term ‘sad girl books’ on TikTok yields countless posts where users showcase their favorite “books for the sad girls” (@booksbooksandthoughts). A post from @booksbooksandthoughts featuring *TVS* has almost 500.000 views. Another video by the creator @mitskisbooks includes both *TVS* and *MYORAR* among other novels and has over 430.000 views.

been published exactly twenty-five years apart, the texts also lend themselves well to a comparison regarding representations of the ‘sad girl’ in U.S. American literature in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The two different narrative perspectives further allow for an interesting comparison of the portrayals of female sadness, as *TVS* is narrated by a collective male voice, whereas the narrator in *MYORAR* tells her own story in first person. I argue that while both the Lisbon sisters in *TVS* and the unnamed protagonist in *MYORAR* are on the one hand portrayed as girls in a crisis, both narratives also highlight their complexity and subvert the ‘damsel in distress’-trope.

The Virgin Suicides by Jeffrey Eugenides, published in 1993, is a coming-of-age novel set in 1970s suburban Michigan and follows five sisters – Cecilia, Lux, Bonnie, Mary, and Therese – aged thirteen to seventeen. As mentioned above, the book was received with immense critical acclaim, despite being Eugenides’ debut novel. The book explores themes of isolation, repression, nostalgia and adolescence. The sisters’ parents impose severe restrictions on their lives in order to preserve their innocence and uphold the family’s conservative moral standards. As a result, the girls live rather secluded lives and become the objects of interest for a group of neighborhood boys, whose collective narrative voice tells the story in retrospect. The novel begins with the suicide of Cecilia, the youngest sister, which leads the overprotective parents to isolate the sisters further from the outside world. Although the remaining sisters, especially Lux, try to occasionally disobey their parents’ rules and are eventually even allowed to attend the school dance, the death of Cecilia and their confinement to the family home have tragic effects on the girls. As a final desperate act, the sisters communicate with the boys in secret and seemingly arrange a rescue plan. However, as the boys arrive at the Lisbon house, they find that the sisters have all simultaneously taken their own lives.

The existing secondary literature on *TVS* primarily deals with the novel’s gothic and nostalgic themes as well as its ‘impossible’ narrative voice and the representation of female suicide. Debra Shostak (2009), Keith Wilhite (2015), Martin Dines (2012), Michelle Devereaux (2019) and Clare Hayes-Brady and Elizabeth Barrett (2020), for instance, discuss Eugenides’ use of Suburban Gothic² elements and the connected feelings of uncanniness and isolation in the U.S. American suburbs. In particular, Dines (959-60) highlights how the decaying home of the Lisbon family functions as a gothic motif that criticizes white, middle-class, suburban ideals and oppressive domestic roles of women. The notion of the idyllic suburban home and the nostalgia at its roots are closely related to the romanticization of the girls’ suicides, which has

² According to Bernice M. Murphy, Suburban Gothic is “a sub-genre of the wide American Gothic tradition which dramatizes anxieties arising from the mass urbanization of the United States and usually features suburban settings, preoccupations and protagonists” (2).

for instance been a focal point in the analysis by Hayes-Brady and Barret (191). Girlhood and its representation are another central element of the novel. While the Lisbon sisters can be read as girls in a crisis, they also exhibit a complexity that subverts the image of the helpless and passive damsels, as will be illustrated in this thesis.

My Year of Rest Relaxation by Ottessa Moshfegh was published in 2018 to praising reviews and became a *New York Times* bestseller. The novel is set in New York City, beginning in the year 2000 and ending on September 11, 2001. The story follows an unnamed young woman, who, despite her financial privilege, suffers from feelings of emptiness, disillusionment, and disconnection. She devises a plan to sleep in isolation for a whole year with the objective of emerging as a new and happy person afterwards. She achieves her “hibernation project” (Moshfegh 53) with the help of an irresponsible therapist, who prescribes her a mix of medications. Aside from occasional interactions with her friend Reva and her ex-boyfriend Trevor, the narrator is almost completely isolated in her apartment, increasingly experiences drug-induced blackouts and spends days at a time asleep. In the final phase of her hibernation, she tasks an artist named Ping Xi with ensuring she remains safely in her apartment during her prolonged blackouts. In return, Ping Xi is allowed to use her sleeping body as a model for his art projects. When she ultimately emerges from her year of sleep, she believes she has undergone a transformation and feels ready to restart her life. However, this feeling of renewal does not last long as the book ends on September 11, 2001, with the narrator watching live footage of the terrorist attack after her friend Reva has just started to work at the World Trade Center.

The growing body of current literature on *MYORAR* is primarily concerned with the novel’s portrayal of apathy and sleep as a critique of neoliberalism and its satirizing of wellness and relaxation techniques. One of the first research papers on Moshfegh’s novel was published by Sofie Behluli in 2018 and focusses on the representation of apathy caused by capitalism and labor fatigue. The portrayals of numbness and the avoidance of emotional confrontation have also been analyzed by Erica D. Galioto (2020) and Marlene Dirschauer (2022), for instance. The novel’s most prominent theme, namely sleep, has often been read as the narrator’s attempt to escape oppressive structures and has been interpreted as a subversive act (Galioto 2021; Strätz 2021; Dirschauer 2022; Li 2023; Wagner 2024). The renunciation of beauty labor and self-optimization practices is also often discussed in the existing literature and further illustrates Diana Wagner (2024) highlights how the protagonist refuses to adhere to neoliberal ideas of femininity and work culture, which emphasizes the damaging effects of societal pressures on women.

The existing literature on both novels has analyzed various themes in connection with the portrayal of girlhood, sadness, and self-destruction. Wollen's Sad Girl Theory in relation to critiques of capitalism and neoliberal feminism lends itself well to further the analysis and emphasize the empowering and political capacity of female sadness and self-destruction. In this thesis, I argue that the female characters in the novels are active agents in their stories and defy patriarchal and capitalist oppression through their enactment of sadness.

This thesis is informed by feminist readings of female sadness and self-destruction and critiques of neoliberal feminine ideals. Elisabeth Bronfen's and Margaret Higonnet's approaches to female suicide build one foundation of this project. Bronfen argues in her seminal work on femininity and death, *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), that portrayals of self-inflicted deaths of women are often romanticized and aestheticized yet at the same time reflect anxieties about women's agency and power. Higonnet (2000) interrogates how gendered stereotypes influence representations of female suicide. Another central aspect of my reading are feminist critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism. In particular, Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) are relevant for this analysis. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant focusses on situations where "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Their approach explains how women remain attached to neoliberal ideals of femininity despite their unattainability and harmfulness, and how refusing to strive for the 'good life' can be empowering. Similarly, in *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed argues that happiness is culturally framed as a reward for following prescribed life paths, and she exposes how happiness is used to enforce conformity, for instance to traditional gender roles. In this thesis, I use these approaches in connection with Wollen's Sad Girl Theory, which also positions itself as a critique of neoliberal feminism, to conduct a close reading regarding the themes of female sadness and self-destruction in the novels under analysis.

At this point, it is important to differentiate between depression as a real mental disorder and serious illness and the sadness discussed in Wollen's Sad Girl Theory. The American Psychological Association (2025) defines depression as follows:

Depression is extreme sadness or despair that lasts more than days. It interferes with the activities of daily life and can cause physical symptoms such as pain, weight loss or gain, sleeping pattern disruptions, or lack of energy. People with depression may also experience an inability to concentrate, feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt, and recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. (American Psychological Association 2025)

The World Health Organization (2023) also offers a definition of depression: "[Depression] involves a depressed mood or loss of pleasure or interest in activities for long periods of time. Depression is different from regular mood changes and feelings about everyday life." Both definitions highlight that a depressive disorder is clearly distinct from occasional feelings of

unhappiness or sadness. While the female characters in the novels under analysis certainly display many of the above-mentioned symptoms of depression, the aim of this thesis is not to apply psychopathology or to pathologize real people who suffer from a serious depressive disorder or any other mental illness. Instead, the objective is to investigate the literary representation of sadness in young women and illustrate how the primary texts under analysis envision the female character's despair and self-destruction. In contrast to the definitions of depression cited above, Wollen's theory and concept of sadness focus on the cultural trope of female despair. She proposes that the sadness and suffering of women, especially girls, should be reframed as a political act of protest (Wollen qtd. in Barron). Wollen further emphasizes the importance of acknowledging sadness and draws attention to the problems young girls often face when their suffering is dismissed or treated as an individual failure (Wollen qtd. in Tunnicliffe).

This differentiation between depression as a real disorder and sadness as a cultural trope further raises the question of where the limits lie when concepts from psychology are employed within the humanities, especially when analyzing literature that heavily focusses on the representation of mental illnesses. Since literary characters are not real humans, they cannot be subject to clinical psychological analysis. Any reading of a character and their inner conflict is an interpretation and not an empirical statement. It is also not the intention to draw conclusions about an author's psychological state by investigating the characters written on the page. Nevertheless, 'sad girl' books, or literary works dealing with mental health in general, invite readers to reflect on the representation and construction of psychological experiences and human behavior. From a cultural studies perspective, the analysis of these texts focuses on how literature engages with mental illness tropes, with the awareness that fiction is often dramatized. Concepts borrowed from other disciplines can be useful interpretive tools in order to understand how texts represent psychological phenomena but cannot function as diagnostic instruments.

For instance, the psychopharmaceuticals used by the main character in *MYORAR* illustrate how psychology and literature intertwine in the blending of fact and fiction. The protagonist uses a plethora of medications that are supposed to help with her sleep and numb her emotions, such as Xanax, Ambien, Trazodone, or Ativan. All of these are real medications that are prescribed to patients suffering from insomnia, anxiety or depression. The effects of these sedatives and antidepressants depicted in the novel are partially accurate in some cases and distorted or dramatized in others. The author also invents a medication called "Infermiterol" (Moshfegh 92), which causes prolonged blackouts and disassociation and is entirely fictional. The portrayal of medications in the novel has an element of clinical realism by including real

pharmaceuticals and their effects. At the same time, the depiction is intentionally exaggerated and satirical as the drugs function as a means of escape and self-destruction for the main character.

In this thesis, I read *The Virgin Suicides* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* through the lens of Sad Girl Theory and work with Wollen's interpretation of female sadness as an act of resistance. While Wollen's arguments about female sadness are concerned with the performance of suffering in online spaces by real people, my own approach is concerned with literary imaginaries of sadness. Despite Wollen's focus on actual individuals, her approach lends itself well to examine the primary texts' female characters. The aestheticization of sadness on social media is very similar to literary or other cultural representations of female melancholy. Wollen herself is inspired by fictional 'sad girls,' such as the Greek goddess Persephone, and draws on tropes found in literature. Both real and fictional expressions of female sadness are shaped by shared motifs, indicating that they can reinforce and reflect each other. Furthermore, I use Alderton's notion of the 'sad girl' as "a young woman who is unashamed of her emotional life and who fearlessly acts out her pain for others to see" (xx) to aide in the analysis of 'sad girl' characters in the primary texts.

According to the definitions cited above, both the Lisbon sisters and Moshfegh's unnamed narrator can be classified as 'sad girls.' The Lisbon sisters, aged thirteen to seventeen, clearly fall into the category of 'girl' as most people would describe it. The protagonist of *MYORAR*, however, being in her twenties, living by herself and earning her own money, would not immediately be classified as a 'girl.' In girlhood studies, girlhood is not seen as a fixed concept but rather as a set of different identities (Franz et al. 146). Andrea Lemahieu Glaws et al. (30) understand girlhood as a transitional period or liminal space between childhood and adulthood and a time of intense identity construction. Current scholarship on girlhood also increasingly works with a more expanded definition of 'girl' as a cultural construct rather than as a fixed category defined by age or biology (Allen and Green-Barteet 616). As such, girlhood can be seen as a process of maturation that is not limited to chronological age. I argue that, like girlhood, the self-prescribed 'rest cure' of the protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* can also be seen as a period of transition and maturation, since it is her aim to emerge as a happy and fully formed person at the end of her project. Accordingly, while the main character is undergoing her year of sleep, she can be classified as a girl in transition to becoming a woman. She also refers to herself and other people her age as 'girl' or is described as one at several points in the novel. Therefore, the protagonist can be understood as a 'girl' despite her age.

This MA thesis is structured as follows: After this introductory chapter, in which I have provided context on the primary and secondary material, chapter two focusses on the historical and cultural discourse of gendered mental illness and femininity under neoliberalism. Chapter three examines the portrayal of femininity and madness in literature. Chapter four outlines approaches for the analysis of female sadness, in particular Sad Girl Theory, as well as the connection between death, self-destruction and femininity. In chapter five, the analysis of the primary texts focusses on the representation of female sadness concerning the aspects of beauty, self-destruction and physical as well as psychological transformations. Chapter six provides a discussion of the character's oppressive circumstances and illustrates how they enact sadness, self-destruction and apathy as strategies of resistance. Finally, chapter seven offers a conclusion by recapitulating the most important findings and suggesting further research avenues.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

Women's emotions and affective states have been pathologized for millennia. As early as in ancient Greek mythology, we can read about figures such as Cassandra and Medea, who have been classified as 'mad' in many receptions of their stories due to their extreme emotions or violent actions. In early modern times, 'mad' women were prosecuted for witchcraft for transgressing societal norms and were believed to be possessed by Satan. In the Victorian Era, women were deemed 'hysterical' and subjected to rest cures or institutionalized in asylums. In the 20th and 21st centuries, pharmaceuticals were prescribed to women who were thought to destabilize traditional gender roles and to keep them high-performing in the workplace. The contemporary cultural moment is defined by neoliberal ideals and expectations, which affect women in particular and enabled the 'sad girl' figure to emerge as a response to an overly positive popular culture. In this chapter, I briefly trace the historical and cultural context of female madness and sadness in Western societies before focusing on approaches concerning femininity and girlhood under neoliberalism. The chapter emphasizes how historical perceptions of 'mad' and 'sad' women are subject to change and show how discourses are used to control women's actions and behaviors.

2.1 Discourses of Female Madness and Sadness

Women's emotional and mental states have long been pathologized and sorted into different categories, such as hysteria or schizophrenia. As mentioned above, the history of women's mental illness has produced multiple popular figures that embody female madness and sadness: From the mythological sorceress to the Victorian 'madwoman' and the Prozac-consuming woman of the 1990s, to name only a few examples (Thelandersson 33). Wagner (141) points out that even in the ancient world, many of women's ailments were attributed to the female reproductive system, which was seen as mysterious and biologically inferior to men. Common treatments for this condition named 'suffocation of the womb,' which was believed to be the cause of most illnesses, were marriage and pregnancy. These treatments indicate how medical theories and practices were both influenced by women's societal roles as child bearers and used to justify women's marginalization (Wagner 141). While women themselves did not have a lot of agency in the ancient world, the womb was believed to have "a life of its own" (Wagner 142). According to medical theories at the time, the uterus was an animalistic creature that could wander freely throughout the body, which caused women distress and suffering. The female

body was pathologized at every reproductive stage, and these pseudo-medical theories about the inferiority and animalistic nature of female anatomy were used to uphold oppressive patriarchal structures (Wagner 143-44).

In her influential book *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (1985), Elaine Showalter (8) marks the end of the 18th century as an important point of changing attitudes towards madness, also referred to as the first psychiatric revolution. While ‘lunatics’ were previously perceived as animalistic brutes who needed to be restrained and disciplined, the Enlightenment brought an ideological shift that led to a perception of the mentally ill as pitiful human beings in need of care and treatment. At the same time, this epistemic shift led to a perception of mental illness in a distinctly gendered way, as the symbolic notion of the insane person was no longer male but female. Showalter (*Female Malady* 8) illustrates this by referencing two sculptures depicting manacled male nudes, which were positioned at the entrance of Bethlem Hospital. These two statues were the most famous representations of madness in the middle of the 18th century. Throughout the century, however, the cultural image of the abhorrent ‘madman’ was replaced with the victimized ‘madwoman’ as the prototypical ‘insane’ person. Even the male statues at the gates of Bethlem Hospital were replaced with “poetic, artistic, and theatrical images of a youthful, beautiful female insanity” (Showalter, *Female Malady* 10), which reflected late-18th-century ideas of the ‘madwoman’ as a victim of male tyranny and oppression. Showalter (*Female Malady* 10) traces this tragic yet romantic notion of female madness back to Shakespeare’s suicidal Ophelia, whose representation typically emphasizes the feminine nature of her madness. The figure of Ophelia and her legacy in popular imaginings of female madness and sadness will be discussed further in the following subchapter and in chapter four. For now, it is important to highlight that the changing gender of the prototypical insane person also meant that irrationality and unreason became associated with femininity, while rationality and reason became synonymous with masculinity (Showalter, *Female Malady* 8).

The most common mental illness diagnosed in women towards the end of the 19th century in Western society was hysteria. Deriving from the Greek and Latin words for uterus or womb, the name reflects the idea that the illness was caused by female anatomy, linking back to ancient notions about the female reproductive system. Hysteria encompassed a wide range of symptoms including seizures, hallucinations, lethargy and blackouts (Thelandersson 40-41). The most common treatment of this condition was the rest cure, which was developed by the U.S. American physician Silas Weir Mitchel and first prescribed in the 1870s. His method mainly involved the removal of the woman from her home and family and her confinement to bed,

forbidden to engage in any intellectual stimulation (Showalter, "Hysteria" 297). Both Showalter ("Hysteria" 300) and Wagner (146) highlight how the rest cure was used as a tool to assert male authority and subject women to submissive femininity. The rest cure, by removing women from their homes and isolating them, left them in a helpless and infantilized state (Wagner 147). Showalter ("Hysteria" 299) points out how this confinement can be read as women's "regression to infancy" with paternalistic male doctors in the position of power.³

Hysteria also became the focus of the second psychiatric revolution and led to the development of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud developed his theories of the unconscious mind and sexual repression while working with women diagnosed with hysteria (Showalter, *Female Malady* 18). He also theorized that the cause of hysteria was not a biological predisposition but rather derived from oppressive social circumstances. According to Freud, hysteria was caused by a culture that confined women to passivity and domestic life. This interpretation of hysteria also entailed a new cultural image of the 'madwoman.' Wealthy women of the upper middle-class were now seen as ideal candidates for Freud's treatments. Female madness within this framework was no longer considered repulsive or uncontrollable; instead, these wealthy women suffering from hysteria were seen as sympathetic and admirable (Thelandersson 45-46).

At the beginning of the 20th century, and especially after the First World War, more and more male patients suffering from shellshock after the war were diagnosed with hysteria. As such, hysteria was no longer seen as an exclusively female malady, and schizophrenia arose as the new feminine illness (Showalter, *Female Malady* 19). According to Fredrika Thelandersson (46), men and women were diagnosed with schizophrenia at an equal rate; yet, the female schizophrenic became the symbol of mental illness in mid-20th-century culture. During the 1950s and 1960s, schizophrenia became the most diagnosed mental illness in the United States of America. Similarly to Freud's analysis of hysteria a few decades earlier, schizophrenia was also believed to be caused by society's patriarchal structures. According to this view, schizophrenic symptoms, such as depersonalization, passivity, and fragmentation reflected women's oppressed roles in society (Thelandersson 46-47).

In the second half of the 20th century and after the overdiagnosis of schizophrenia of the 50s and 60s, the cultural fascination with the illness decreased and the consumption of psychopharmaceuticals became a new outlet for the expression of female mental illness. In

³ Hannah Bury (162), in her study on Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* (1853), also emphasizes how the isolation enforced on the main character due to her supposed madness is used by the men in her life as a tool to reinstate gender norms and subject her to surveillance through the male gaze.

1955, the drug Chlorpromazine⁴ was introduced in the United States and began a movement in psychiatry that focused on the prescription of pills as the primary form of treatment. Throughout the 20th century and with the introduction of pharmaceutical treatments into the mainstream, the connection between women and mental illness remained. Drugs were framed as the ‘saviors’ of women who dared to transgress traditional gender roles and, consequently, destabilize traditional family values. The family and the household were the key sites of gender struggles up until the 1970s. Betty Friedan termed the dissatisfaction felt by many women who were confined to housework and family life as “the problem that has no name” (5) in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Increasingly, the anxiety relief medication Diazepam, nicknamed ‘mother’s little helper’⁵ was prescribed to housewives who suffered from the pressures of marriage and motherhood (Woods 555). In the 1990s and 2000s, as women became more prominent in the workplace, antidepressant medications such as Prozac promised to keep women high-performing and upbeat in their lines of work (Thelandersson 50-51). Thelandersson (54) also points out that as Prozac entered the mainstream medical and cultural discourse, women on antidepressants became the new symbol of female madness at the turn of the millennium.

Another important set of mental or psychosomatic illnesses frequently associated with femininity that became particularly prominent in the late-20th and early-21st centuries are eating disorders, especially anorexia. While eating disorders are mainly visible on the physical body, they are classified as mental illnesses and have a strong connection to social and cultural contexts (Thelandersson 52). According to Susan Bordo’s book *Unbearable Weight* (1993) on eating disorders in Western cultures, these illnesses stem from the intersection of a patriarchal and post-industrial capitalist culture. Thelandersson (53) points out how this shows that contemporary sociocultural developments can influence mental illness diagnoses and that psychopathology reflects social structures. Women’s experiences of madness and sadness have a long history of stigmatization and pathology. While the focus of this section lay on historical discourses of female mental illness, the following subsection deals with neoliberal ideology in connection with femininity and girlhood.

⁴ Often known as Thorazine

⁵ The phrase originates from the Rolling Stones song “Mother’s Little Helper,” which was released on the band’s album *Aftermath* in 1966. The song addresses and critiques the wide-spread prescription of Diazepam to suburban women at the time (Woods 555).

2.2 Femininity and Girlhood under Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism emerged in the late 20th century as a political-economic ideology promoting free-market capitalism, privatization and individualism. Julie Wilson, in her book *Neoliberalism* (2018), defines the concept as follows:

[N]eoliberalism is a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the center of social life. [...] [P]ublic social infrastructures (such as social security, unemployment benefits, public education) are believed to squash entrepreneurialism and individualism [...] [I]ndividuals, organizations, companies, and even the government itself, will seek to optimize and innovate, creating a truly free social world where the best people and ideas come out on top. (J. Wilson 2)

This definition emphasizes the focus of neoliberal ideology on individualism and optimization. Catherine A. Rottenberg (2018), who has written extensively on neoliberal feminism, offers an even more focused definition. For her, neoliberalism is not only a system of economics focused on privatization and market deregulation, but

a dominant political rationality or normative form of reason that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents. [...] [Neoliberalism] produces subjects who are individualized, entrepreneurial, and self-investing; they are also cast as entirely responsible for their own self-care and well-being. (Rottenberg 7)

She focusses on the effect of neoliberal ideology on individual subjects and highlights how normalized neoliberalism has become.

Rottenberg (5) also outlines the entrenchment of neoliberalism and feminism, noting how the introduction of popular feminism into the mainstream led to a disappearance of key feminist demands for equal rights and social justice. After the newfound freedoms for women that the second feminist wave of the 1970s and 1980s brought, the 1990s and the turn of the millennium were often referred to in popular media as the era of post-feminism. The common narrative was that the objectives of feminism had been achieved, and women in the public eye were wary of labelling themselves as feminist (Rottenberg 8-10). Angela McRobbie (255), who has also extensively explored the issue of post-feminism, similarly explains how feminist demands were cast into the shadows, and feminism was seemingly made redundant. At the same time, the 1990s saw a shift in the focus of feminist interests away from centralized blocks of power to individualized sites, such as the body and the subject (McRobbie 256). What both Rottenberg (10) and McRobbie (256) point out is the introduction of popular feminism into the mainstream in recent years with a wider spread of seemingly feminist issues and the feminist label becoming trendy again. However, Rottenberg (11) argues that as mainstream feminism has become more

popularized, its tenets have also become more and more congruent with neoliberal beliefs and agendas.

According to Rottenberg (13), the ideal feminine identity of neoliberal feminism is that of the woman who can achieve a happy work-family balance. Using Sheryl Sandberg's bestselling self-help book *Lean In* (2013), which argues that women need to overcome internal barriers and actively assert themselves to achieve success in the workplace, as a prime example, Rottenberg illustrates this ideal feminine identity: "[T]he feminist ideal being presented here is emphatically not the one-dimensional or one-track professional woman who sacrifices family for career, but rather a high-powered woman who manages to balance a spectacularly successful career with a satisfying homelife" (72-73). In neoliberal feminism, women are encouraged to pursue both success in the workplace and fulfilment in their personal lives, namely through motherhood. Moreover, women are expected to engage in constant self-improvement strategies and monitor themselves in order to achieve what is constructed as happiness (Rottenberg 73).

A more recent study published in 2025 by Tinca Lukan and Marni Appleton analyses another ideal feminine subject in the neoliberal workplace, namely the 'girl boss.' The authors argue that the 'girl boss figure' is not only built on the tenets of post-feminism that encouraged women to enter the workforce and participate in consumer culture but also expands these cultural codes by performing confidence, positivity, and self-reliance in the corporate world. As such, the 'girl boss' has become an aspirational figure telling women they can achieve the same success as their male counterparts if they work hard enough (Lukan and Appleton 722). According to the authors, "the girl boss is best understood as a new sexual contract offered to women in a cultural climate in which the features of neoliberalism have become normalized and pervasive" (Lukan and Appleton 722). The central elements of the 'girl boss' are positivity, confidence, and productivity. Contemporary culture demands a hyper-positive affect, often concealing ongoing instances of inequality. High productivity levels signal that affluence and success are purely earned through hard work, ignoring systemic injustices (Lukan and Appleton 727-28). Due to these aspects, the 'girl boss' figure has been heavily criticized in recent years for its unrealistic demands of women, focus on self-interest and hyper-conformity to patriarchal capitalism.

Ana Elias et al. (24) highlight the demand of self-transformation as another aspect of neoliberal femininity. Under neoliberal feminism, women are expected to transform themselves, in particular regarding the management of their bodies and appearances. This "beauty imperative" (Elias et al. 25) indicates the importance attributed to the body in neoliberal feminism. The authors further identify new beauty pressures put on women under

neoliberalism. The requirement to look ‘beautiful’ is extending into nearly all stages of a woman’s life, with media and cosmetic brands targeting both younger and older age groups. Furthermore, the beauty requirement continually moves inside the body, as illustrated by ingestible products such as vitamins or collagen promoting drinks (Elias et al. 28-30). Most interestingly, neoliberal beauty culture also shows an increased focus on women’s psychic life. Women are blamed for their own unhappiness if their bodies do not adhere to the current beauty standard, which ignores the constraints of living under patriarchal capitalism and in a culture that emphasizes women’s appearances so much (Elias et al. 32-33). Regarding the neoliberal incitement to maintain both body and mind, Gill and Elias (1985) argue that is not

enough to work on and discipline the body, but in today’s society the beautiful body must also be accompanied by a beautiful mind, with suitably upgraded and modernized postfeminist attitudes to the self. Women must makeover not simply their bodies but now [...] their subjectivities as well, embracing an affirmative confident position, no matter how they actually feel. (Gill and Elias 1985)

Beauty labor has thus been extended to include both body work and psychic work. The neoliberal demands of happiness and a positive disposition are explored in more detail through Sara Ahmed’s approach at a later point in the chapter.

Concerning neoliberal girlhood, another ideal image of femininity under neoliberalism is that of the ‘Girl Power’ phenomenon. Marina Gonick (2006) examines ‘Girl Power’ in contrast to the ‘Reviving Ophelia’ discourse, two competing definitions of femininity that shape the meaning of girlhood. The term ‘Girl Power’ can be traced back to the 1990s, when it was used primarily by young, white, middle-class women to reclaim the word ‘girl’ and reshape girl culture as a positive force. The feminist punk movement Riot Grrrls used the ‘Girl Power’ motto to highlight the fierceness of girlhood and to encourage young women to become active producers of culture. As the ‘Girl Power’ movement became more widespread and mainstream throughout the 1990s, however, the anti-consumer and anti-establishment elements were lost and ‘Girl Power’ turned into a non-threatening, apolitical alternative to feminism. The focus of the motto was now on self-improvement and mass-consumerism. The lack of political demands also reflects neoliberal individualism. As such, ‘Girl Power’ has become marketable and provides an image of the ideal apolitical, non-threatening feminine subject under neoliberalism (Gonick 6-11).

The neoliberal feminine ideals described by Rottenberg, Lukan and Appleton, Elias et al. and Gonick fall into what Justin Charlebois terms as “dominant femininity” (27), the current socially constructed form of femininity that is the most celebrated and powerful. Signifiers of dominant femininity, such as thinness, athleticism, and heterosexual desirability, link back to the constant self-improvement that is expected from women under neoliberalism. Charlebois

(38) also highlights whiteness and belonging to the middle-class as markers necessary for dominant femininity. On the whole, an attractive and youthful physical appearance through beauty labor as well as a passive sexuality and a nonassertive personality are the central elements of dominant femininity within contemporary U.S. American society and, thus, within a neoliberal context (Charlebois 40). Importantly, Charlebois (33) also discusses an alternative to the dominant femininity described above, namely oppositional femininity. In contrast to dominant forms of femininity, “oppositional forms of femininities encompass women who challenge patriarchal gender relations through outright noncompliance and more subtle forms of resistance” (Charlebois 33). Oppositional femininities have a transformative potential and can empower women to resist neoliberal and patriarchal demands.

Linking back to Gonick’s article about differing and competing discourses of girlhood, ‘Reviving Ophelia’ can be interpreted as a form of oppositional femininity. Referencing Shakespeare’s character Ophelia from the play *Hamlet* (1603) and using her as the symbol of girls in a crisis, this discourse focusses on young women who do not want to fit into neoliberalism’s models for femininity. Gonick refers to the Ophelia archetype as the “shadow twin to the idealized empowered girl. [...] [S]he is at risk of failing to produce the required attributes of the neoliberal feminine subject” (15). ‘Reviving Ophelia’ as a form of oppositional femininity presents a threat to neoliberal and patriarchal norms as it represents a refusal to adhere to society’s expectations and, thus, holds transgressive and political potential.

As mentioned above, an important approach that critiques neoliberalism and its ideals, particularly ideals of femininity, is proposed by Sarah Ahmed in her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). The book offers an analysis of the cultural narratives that link happiness to specific social norms and ideals, especially those rooted in neoliberalism and heteronormativity. Ahmed’s (*Promise 2*) central argument is that happiness is a regulatory discursive norm that disciplines individuals into conforming to dominant ideals. Neoliberal femininity, which expects women to succeed in both their professional and private lives, is one of the primary sites through which this disciplining occurs. Under neoliberalism, women are on the one hand expected to seek happiness by climbing the career ladder under a ‘work hard, play hard’ motto. On the other hand, they should strive for happiness through marriage, motherhood, and emotional labor. Happiness is used to justify these unequal expectations and labor distributions. The ideal neoliberal woman is expected to joyfully accept her role, which reinforces the illusion that social roles are freely chosen rather than imposed (Ahmed, *Promise* 50-53). Moreover, neoliberal femininity demands of women to be resilient and upbeat, regardless of their circumstances, illustrating how women are expected to generate positive affect not only for

themselves but also for others (Ahmed, *Promise* 6). Importantly, Ahmed (*Promise* 1-2) shows how decisions that deviate from heteronormative and neoliberal ideas are framed as failures by attaching happiness to particular life paths. She emphasizes the importance of rethinking what happiness means and calls for alternative forms of life and joy.

Ahmed also coined the idea of the Feminist Killjoy, which she discusses in detail *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (2023). The Feminist Killjoy is a person who gets in the way of others' happiness and is unwilling to go along with injustice (Ahmed, *Feminist Killjoy* 1). She explains that "to be a killjoy is to be heard as a complainer, as saying something negative, as being negative" (Ahmed, *Feminist Killjoy* 17). The author calls for a reclamation of the negatively connoted idea of being a killjoy and advocates for the potential of the term. The negativity associated with the Feminist Killjoy needs to be channeled and redirected to raise awareness and draw attention to instances of oppression (Ahmed, *Feminist Killjoy* 16). Using negativity and 'killing' happiness as a productive strategy is closely linked to the research focus of this thesis. Crucially, Ahmed's notion of the Feminist Killjoy is relevant in connection with the 'sad girl' figure. I interpret the 'sad girl,' according to how the concept will be defined and explored in chapter four, as a form of the Feminist Killjoy.

Another influential critique of neoliberal ideals is introduced by Lauren Berlant's book *Cruel Optimism* (2010). The text explores the fantasy of the 'good life,' which is no longer sustainable under neoliberal capitalism. Berlant defines the central concept of cruel optimism as a situation "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. [...] [T]he object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1). This concept reveals how women are encouraged to desire forms of success, happiness, and fulfillment that, in practice, inhibit their well-being. Berlant (3) critiques the ideal feminine subject under neoliberalism as a fantasy that demands intense affective labor with little structural support. The neoliberal fantasies are directed at women through media, self-help culture, and consumerism, encouraging constant self-optimization in pursuit of a life that is rarely possible to attain. A key example of cruel optimism is the idea of a woman who can achieve it all despite circumstances that work against her. Women are expected to persevere under difficult conditions because this fantasy of the 'good life' is framed as the only meaningful one, even though it might be harmful. As Berlant writes: "Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object" (24). Ultimately, like Sarah Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*, Berlant critiques how neoliberalism attaches happiness to certain unattainable gender ideals.

Both of the approaches discussed above illustrate clearly the impossibility of neoliberal femininity. The unattainable expectations of women and girls make it not surprising that more and more people seek to resist and actively defy these circumstances by coining new identities. One approach that can be interpreted as a political tool against neoliberal ideas of femininity, namely the concept of the ‘sad girl,’ will be discussed in chapter four.

3. Madness and Femininity

The interpretation of ‘mad’ women in literature and culture varies greatly within feminist theories and cultural contexts. While writings on female ‘madness’ and ‘madwomen’ characters are often read as empowering and transgressive, a number of researchers also oppose the view of madness as subversive and emphasize the danger of romanticization. This section focusses on these differing readings of the representation of female mental illness.

One of the most influential interpretations of ‘madness’ and ‘madwomen’ as subversive was published in 1979 by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. The authors suggest a reading of female madness in literature as empowering and as a refusal of patriarchal norms. In particular, they focus on the limitations of the literary field for women writers in the 19th century and discuss how writing madwoman characters was an act of resistance and escape for female authors. According to Gilbert and Gubar (17), female characters written by male authors aligned with one of two extreme images of women – the angel in the house or the female monster. The “angel in the house”⁶ trope represented the feminine ideal in the 18th and 19th centuries and portrayed a passive, pure, and self-sacrificing woman (Gilbert and Gubar 20). On the other end of the scale, the female monster is the “antithetical mirror image of an angel” (Gilbert and Gubar 28) and often appears in literature in the form of the ‘evil’ wife or stepmother. Gilbert and Gubar (17) argue that women writers internalized these limiting literary representations conceived by a male-dominated tradition but also responded critically and radically revised patriarchal conventions by writing characters who expressed their own rage and frustrations. 19th-century female writers redefined the misogynistic association between female creativity and monsters by creating madwomen characters who acted as ‘dark doubles’ both for the writers themselves and for the stories’ main protagonists, thus escaping from their patriarchal confines (Gilbert and Gubar 79).

Imprisonment and escape of ‘mad’ female characters were prominent themes of 19th-century literature written by women. Two important and well-known examples cited by Gilbert and Gubar that illustrate their argument of the violent escape of the ‘dark double’ are Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre*⁷ (1847) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow

⁶ The trope of the “angel in the house” originates from a narrative poem of the same name by English poet and literary critic Coventry Patmore (1863). The poem describes the ideal Victorian woman as a devoted mother, submissive wife, and morally pure figure.

⁷In *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist Jane is confronted with her dark double and secret self in the form of Rochester’s previous wife, ‘mad’ Bertha Mason who is locked in the attic. Bertha represents Jane’s secret desires and acts on

Wallpaper” (1892). In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the narrator is confined to a room and subjected to a solitary rest cure. She begins to see a figure moving and creeping in and through the wallpaper. It becomes clear that the woman in the wallpaper and the narrator are each other’s doubles. At the end of the story, as the narrator descends into madness, she and the other woman become one and the woman in the wallpaper escapes from her confines (Gilbert and Gubar 91). On the whole, Gilbert and Gubar’s reading of female madness in literature suggests that characters such as the ‘madwoman’ figure represent women’s suppressed rage at their prescribed roles and their resistance to a patriarchal society.

While numerous voices in feminist studies have interpreted female ‘madness’ in literature as empowering and as protest, Gilbert and Gubar’s position has also inspired critiques. Most importantly, Marta Caminero-Santangelo critiques the feminist literary tradition that sees female madness as a form of rebellion in her book *The Madwoman Can’t Speak: Or Why Insanity Is Not Subversive* (1998). According to Caminero-Santangelo’s (3) argument, madwoman characters only provide an illusion of power but eventually end in powerless positions. She suggests that the reading of madness as empowering is misguided as “the symbolic resolution of the madwoman as an alternative to patriarchy ultimately traps the woman in silence” (Caminero-Santangelo 4). The author asserts that madness reinforces gendered stereotypes and “provides the illusion of power while locating the mad (non)subject outside any sphere where power can be exerted” (Caminero-Santangelo 4).

However, although it has been criticized, Gilbert and Gubar’s interpretation of madness as empowering has been incredibly influential in feminist scholarship. Their approach lends itself particularly well to other analyses of 19th-century literature and has inspired numerous investigations into female ‘madness’ in writings from this era. One more recent study on the subject was conducted in 2010 by Hannah Bury, who investigated the female madness trope in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Villette* (1853). Bury (160) understands madness as a “deviation from normative middle-class femininity” and as “an identity that challenges prescriptive gender norms and expectations.” She argues that madness is used in the novel to highlight how the protagonist challenges normative feminine ideals. The novel further emphasizes the consequences of isolation and limited female agency in the Victorian era, thus critiquing patriarchal gender norms (Bury 160). The author builds on Gilbert and Gubar’s concept of the ‘madwoman in the attic’ to show how “madness diametrically opposed culturally constructed

them, for instance by burning the estate to the ground as a symbol of destroying Rochester’s authority (Gilbert and Gubar 359-360). Despite being written by a British author and published in the U.K., *Jane Eyre* remains one of the most famous texts regarding the representation of ‘madwomen’ in the 19th century and influenced U.S. American writers as well.

expectations of femininity” (Bury 167). In *Villette*, the protagonist’s transgressive feminine identity is constructed as ‘madness’ and policed by the male gaze, which is reinforced by her isolation. Her madness can be read as empowering because she resists gendered constraints and strives for autonomy (Bury 169). For the focus of this thesis, the subversive potential of the ‘madness’ label and the connected transgression from societal ideals is especially relevant; however, I do not view madness as a distinct identity, as suggested by Bury. Instead, the perspective that madness can be empowering is a useful basis for interpretation.

Feminist literary theorists have also proposed an empowering interpretation of female madness in 20th-century literature, in particular with reference to Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963). In her analysis of Plath’s novel, Stephanie de Villiers (2) argues that new metaphors and vocabularies created in the text present madness as a rejection of patriarchal oppression. She also highlights how madness has been associated with femininity and how behavior that deviates from masculine norms is deemed as ‘mad.’ Like Victorian writers before her, Plath provides a commentary on the society she is writing in, critiquing the patriarchal and capitalist ideals of U.S. America in the 1950s. According to these ideals, women should strive to be housewives and mothers and provide emotional support for their families. If they do not show interest in marriage and childrearing, they would be seen as defective (de Villiers 2-4). De Villiers (4) draws on Gilbert and Gubar’s seminal work to show how engaging in creative pursuits, such as writing, was also viewed as a transgression from the feminine ideal. The author further argues that *The Bell Jar* demonstrates this silencing of women through patriarchal language and presents the protagonist’s mental distress as a result of this oppression (de Villiers 7). At the same time, Plath portrays madness as complex and creates a new vocabulary for the expression of mental illness. She uses metaphors that oppose damaging, stereotypical and romanticized depictions of female mental illness (de Villiers 7-8). As such, de Villiers sees the portrayal of madness in *The Bell Jar* as empowering as it “achieve[s] some progress in the revolt against the oppression of patriarchal society” (10).

In her study on madness in women’s 20th-century fiction Saba Marwan Suleiman (2020) builds on the idea of language use in connection to madness as empowering. She focusses on *The Bell Jar* (1963), Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and Margaret Atwood’s *Surfacing* (1972). Marwan Suleiman (165) emphasizes that the madwoman is a transgressive figure as she resists patriarchal power structures. Madness becomes a strategy of resistance that allows the female characters in the novel to protest their submissive positions. By creating their own language and expressing themselves, the women become empowered and defy societal norms.

(Marwan Suleiman 166-67). For her, thus, madness is “a tool for resistance and redemption” (Marwan Suleiman 169).

Madness as a form of resistance against oppressive circumstances has also been a common interpretation in literary works from the 21st century, albeit often focusing on neoliberal ideals. Petra Volkhausen (2017), for instance, has analyzed the representation of female madness in literature in the age of neoliberalism. Volkhausen suggests that female madness “represents a failed attempt [...] of conforming to the 21st-century image of a successful woman who allegedly can have everything she wants if only she tries hard enough – a goal that is indeed unattainable” (68). Neoliberal ideals of femininity, a never-ending cycle of self-improvement as well as an increased focus on the individual oppress these women and have them label themselves as ‘mad’ if they do not achieve what is expected of them (Volkhausen 81). While the author highlights that the female characters in the novels under analysis do not manage to escape their circumstances, their madness draws attention to their struggles and the impossibility of the neoliberal imperative of constant self-optimization (Volkhausen 69).

At this point it is important to highlight the danger of romanticization of mental illnesses. Showalter states that reading hysteria as a form of feminist resistance is “dangerously close to romanticizing and endorsing madness as a desirable form of rebellion rather than seeing it as the desperate communication of the powerless” (*Female Malady* 5). Instead, she calls for an investigation of the influences of gender relations on the cultural perception of mental illnesses (Showalter, *Female Malady* 5). Luma Balaa (2023) draws on Caminero-Santangelo’s work and argues that madness in literature articulates female victimization and is often falsely romanticized. Balaa understands the term subversive as “being able to voice oneself, take action and be able to change [one’s] status quo” (6). ‘Madwomen’ characters typically lack this agency and are often confined, silenced and unable to truly change their social and political circumstances. Furthermore, madness is construed as ‘other’ and inhuman by patriarchal and colonial ideologies. Colonial subjects, such as Bertha in *Jane Eyre*, are seen as inferior due to their otherness and are accused of being uncontrollably mad. Being diagnosed with madness is used as a form of social control, including silencing, discipline, and imprisonment (Balaa 6-8). Moreover, Balaa (11) points out that representing women as insane in literature reinforces gendered stereotypes of emotional and irrational femininity. Linking back to Showalter’s argument in *The Female Malady*, Balaa (11) discusses the association between madness and femininity. Most importantly, author emphasizes that the power of madness is only illusional. Using Bertha Mason as an example, Balaa (15) admits that the character can be interpreted as

powerful, since she does not adhere to prescribed societal roles. Yet ultimately, her power is simply an illusion because her “rebellion cannot be sustained and is controlled” (Balaa 15). The ‘othering’ of Bertha and her representation as ‘mad’ illustrates how she is doubly oppressed by colonialism and patriarchy and shows how ‘madness’ is used as a label to silence her attempts at rebellion. Thus, Balaa (17) advocates against a reading of madness as resistance and concludes that analyses of madness need to be careful to avoid romanticization and interpretations that see madness as a desirable subject position rather than as a label forced upon women by patriarchal and colonial oppression.

This thesis examines literary representations of female mental illness, focusing on the political potential of expressing sadness and performing self-destructive acts. The project is aligned with feminist readings that interpret female madness and sadness as empowering, while remaining attentive to the risk of romanticization and false sense of subversiveness discussed above. The analysis centers on female despair as a means that allows the characters in the two novels to draw attention to their suffering and, thus, push back against patriarchal and neoliberal expectations. The political and emancipatory potential of the ‘madwoman’ figure, as explored in this chapter, is central to this argument.

4. Sadness and Femininity

While there is a vast amount of literature on the connection between madness and femininity, sadness has not nearly received as much attention and can be difficult to define. This chapter traces how femininity and sadness are connected and discusses how literary and cultural studies can deal with emotions before focusing on Audrey Wollen's Sad Girl Theory and approaches concerning femininity and death.

According to Anna Gotlib (1), despite sadness being an emotion that powerfully shapes our identities and the way others perceive us, the emotion has been relatively undertheorized within the humanities. Sadness can be vague and uncertain as it may refer to experiences similar to depression or grief but does not constitute a clinical condition. Sadness does not seem to require definite emotional objects – one can feel sad without a clear reason or justification. Yet despite the vagueness of sadness, how we choose to express it and how others perceive it, has moral implications and helps construct our identities (Gotlib 5). Gotlib (5) names the current cultural obsession with happiness, especially in U.S. American culture, as a reason for the neglect of sadness as a research field. This happiness master narrative, which Gotlib terms “happiness-mining” (5), dictates that happiness should always be the desired affective stance and sadness should be avoided. In the United States in particular, a “happiness-at-all-costs” (Gotlib 6) mentality is prevalent, which also results in an abundance of self-help literature, focused on achieving happiness. In contrast to happiness, sadness is not only pathologized and medicalized but also devalued as a morally significant emotion, as it is commonly associated with personal failure (Gotlib 6).

The medicalization of sadness can be seen in early approaches focusing on mental illnesses, for instance in Sigmund Freud's conceptualization of melancholy and melancholia. I understand sadness as closely related to both concepts. Although both terms are often used interchangeably in contemporary everyday language, there is a difference between melancholy as a temporary mood and melancholia as a mental disorder. In his influential essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), Freud works towards a definition of melancholia and distinguishes between mourning and melancholia as two different responses to suffering loss:

Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on. As an effect of the same influences, melancholia instead of a state of grief develops in some people, whom we consequently suspect of a morbid pathological disposition. [...] [A]lthough grief involves grave departures from the normal attitude of life [...] we rest assured that after a lapse of time it will be overcome. The distinguishing features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of love, inhibition of all

activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings. (Freud 153)

Freud draws a clear distinction between mourning as a ‘normal’ reaction to loss and melancholia as a pathological one. While both mourning and melancholia initially show similar symptoms, melancholia is characterized by self-hatred and a “fall in self-esteem” (Freud 155). Melancholic patients exhibit a self-destructive quality due to their loyalty to and internalization of the lost object (Ferber 1). Freud’s theory of melancholia focusses on the connection between depression and self-loathing. According to Jennifer Radden (39), the term melancholia initially encompassed a range of conditions, of which depression was only one symptom. Depression was only used as a distinct disorder in the 19th century and surpassed the use of melancholia in the 20th century.

In contemporary understandings of depression, the illness is usually linked to femininity, both in medical diagnoses⁸ and in our cultural imagination. However, Radden (47) points out that historically women were considered less likely to suffer from melancholia than men. Up until the 18th century, medical and nonmedical writings show an “alignment between men and melancholic states” (Radden 47). With the emergence of melancholia as an illness resembling today’s depression in the 19th century, the disorder became more associated with women. Emotions and irrationality were linked to the feminine and mental illnesses experienced a “feminization” (Radden 49). This gendered notion of depression as a “women’s disorder” (Radden 50) is still prevalent today.

Writing about emotions and affective states in the context of literary studies raises the question of how the humanities can analyze these feelings and potentially draw on concepts from other fields. One approach that asks how cultural texts create feelings and how this can shape identities and social life is Affect Studies. Affect Studies defines ‘affect’ as something that goes beyond feelings and emotions, “exceeds human boundaries and has an independent ontology that challenges how we conceptualize cognition, sociality, and familiar binaries” (Miller 115). Two important scholars who work with affect within cultural studies are Brian Massumi and Sara Ahmed. In *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), Massumi (29) writes that the humanities recognize more and more that affect is central to understanding our contemporary late capitalist culture and its master narratives and calls for an integration of affect and its autonomic nature into cultural theory. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Ahmed explores how texts use emotions “to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies” (*Emotion* 1), in particular by assigning ‘otherness’ and creating a ‘we’

⁸ According to the World Health Organization (2023), women are diagnosed with depression around 1.5 times more often than men.

group. She also points out that emotions are often thought of in a hierarchical manner, where some emotions are seen as elevated and others are considered 'lower' and 'weak' (Ahmed, *Emotion* 3). This hierarchy is reflected in the construction of femininity as emotional and masculinity as rational (Ahmed, *Emotion* 170). Considering affect in cultural texts and analyzing which emotions are assigned to which groups and how the emotions are expressed reveals how media makes us feel and understand social life.

As mentioned above, the emotion of sadness has often been overlooked by research projects on emotions and is usually connected to weakness, especially with regard to female sadness. However, sadness can also be interpreted as a form of resistance and as a critique of societal ills. For instance, in his analysis of *The Virgin Suicides*, Dines (1999:60) highlights how sadness, embodied through the decay of the Lisbon home, the multiple insect pests and the doubling illusions, criticizes white, middle-class ideals of prosperity in the suburbs and indicates oppressive domestic roles of women. Scholars have also analyzed how this nostalgic representation romanticizes the girls' suicides, leading to a mythologizing of their deaths. Hayes-Brady and Barret (1991) draw attention to how the girls and the reasons for their suicides are mystified throughout the novel contributing to a perception of them as 'other.' Furthermore, their imprisonment in their suburban home has been analyzed by existing research projects (Shostak 2009; Wang 2020). Previous research has also focused on the threat the Lisbon sisters' suicides pose to the imagined idyllic suburban space and how the Lisbon household comes to portray the nation and its social ills (Wilhite 2015; Hayes-Brady and Barret 2020).

Regarding the representation of girlhood and sadness in *TVS*, several previous projects have pointed out how the novel portrays girls in a crisis and how the Lisbon sisters can be read as damsels in distress. For instance, both Laurence Roussillon-Constanty (2019) and Michelle Devereaux (2019) draw a comparison between the depiction of Cecelia Lisbon's lifeless body in the bathtub at the beginning of the novel and pictorial representations of the drowning Ophelia. Masafumi Monden (2013) also focusses on the portrayal of girlhood but argues that rather than being helpless damsels, the sisters in the novel are characterized as complex and that they exhibit a girlhood that is both fragile and assertive.

Another analysis strand of sadness is its connection to the critique of neoliberal ideals, which is a central element in many analyses of *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. The growing body of current literature on *MYORAR* primarily focusses on apathy and sleep as a critique of capitalism and the novel's satirizing of neoliberal wellness and relaxation techniques. Behluli (2018) published one of the first secondary research papers on the book and discusses the main character's complex apathy caused by capitalism and labor fatigue, which creates multifaceted

affective structures. More recent publications also deal with the portrayals of numbness and the avoidance of emotional confrontation, for instance Galioto (2021) and Dirschauer (2022). Arguably the most prominent theme in the novel is sleep, which has been analyzed in the existing literature as the protagonist's attempt to escape oppressive structures and has been read as a subversive act (Galioto 2021; Strätz 2021; Dirschauer 2022; Li 2023; Wagner 2024). In particular, Wagner (2024) highlights the detrimental effects of societal pressures on women and how the protagonist refuses to adhere to neoliberal ideals of femininity and work culture.

As shown above, despite the relative gap in the literature on the connection between femininity and sadness, an analysis of feminine emotional states and their representations can encompass many aspects. The concept of sadness as a form of resistance is central to the analysis in this project; one approach that views sadness as political and transgressive is Audrey Wollen's Sad Girl Theory, which will be discussed in detail below.

4.1 Sad Girl Theory

This section focusses on the 'sad girl' as an online trend and as a political figure. What started as a popular internet aesthetic on websites such as Tumblr and Instagram was later defined under the banner of Sad Girl Theory by internet personality and artist Audrey Wollen. In this chapter, I trace the beginning of the 'sad girl' trend and discuss Wollen's approach to sadness as a political tool.

The 'sad girl' emerged as an internet phenomenon in the early 2010s on the social media platforms Tumblr and later Instagram as a way for girls and young women to express their sadness and establish communities. Alderton defines the 'sad girl' as "core to a new brand of feminism and philosophy that defines the performance of mood online, revealing both why young women are so sad and how sadness can actually be a way of releasing negative affect and protesting wrongdoing rather than wallowing in non-action" (95). In her analysis of online content tagged with #sadgirl, Alderton (95) describes images of crying faces, lonely young women as well as self-harm references as typical features of the aesthetic. While the performance of sadness in this kind of content is often ironic or overblown, the emotions expressed are genuine. The 'sad girl' aesthetic, thus, offers young women an outlet to express their feelings while forcing others to witness the struggles faced by girls in a society that pressures them to be constantly positive and happy (Alderton 95-96).

The 'sad girl' aesthetic has long since expanded from its beginnings as social media posts and can now be found in various other media forms. Online listicles ranking 'sad girl' books or

movies are readily available, as are specifically curated playlists that feature ‘sad girl’ music. Celebrities have also taken up the ‘sad girl’ persona, the most notable being singer Lana Del Rey, who is often credited for popularizing the aesthetic. Del Rey is famous for her evocative and melancholy songs that focus on themes of loneliness and lost love. Her aesthetic persona as a melancholy popstar is well-crafted and is evident not only in her music but also her performances and visual content, such as music videos or album covers (Alderton 98). Alderton (100) suggests that Lana Del Rey epitomizes female sadness yet simultaneously appeals to young women who can relate to her emotions and can feel empowered by seeing a more nuanced representation of femininity.

One of the most important voices within the ‘sad girl’ phenomenon is the artist, writer, and online personality Audrey Wollen. Wollen gained traction on Instagram in 2014 by posting images of herself following the typical ‘sad girl’ aesthetic but also by recreating famous paintings with a modern twist (Thelandersson 170). Importantly, Wollen coined the Sad Girl Theory, which directly politicized the ‘sad girl’ figure and situates female sadness as an act of resistance. With her Sad Girl Theory, Wollen proposes that “the sadness of girls should be recognized as an act of resistance. [...] Girls’ sadness is not passive, self-involved or shallow; it is a gesture of liberation, it is articulate and informed, it is a way of reclaiming agency over our bodies, identities, and lives” (Wollen qtd. in Watson). Furthermore, she sees female sadness as a form of protest:

Basically, girls being sad has been categorized as this act of passivity, and therefore, discounted from the history of activism. I’m trying to open up the idea that protest doesn’t have to be external to the body. [...] There’s a long history of girls who have used their own anguish, their own suffering, as tools for resistance and political agency. Girls’ sadness isn’t quiet, weak, shameful, or dumb; It is active, autonomous, and articulate. (Wollen qtd. in Tunnicliffe)

Wollen draws on a long history of girls and women who utilized their own anguish to disrupt the status quo and make their suffering visible. She criticizes patriarchal ideas that classified sadness and self-destruction as female ailments, for instance in the form of hysteria (Wollen qtd. in Watson). Women’s protests and liberatory gestures have historically been labelled as ‘mad’; Wollen calls for a reappropriation of these ideas. She also lists famous figures she would classify as ‘sad girls,’ such as Sylvia Plath, Marilyn Monroe, Frida Kahlo, Virginia Woolf, the Greek goddess Persephone, or St. Catherine of Siena (Wollen qtd. in Watson).

An important aspect of Wollen’s Sad Girl Theory is her criticism of neoliberalism and the neoliberal feminist mantra of ‘girl power’:

We still tell every girl that her sadness is individual, her own failure, her own symptom, and to keep quiet about it. Suffer alone. [...] Instead of trying to paint a gloss of positivity over girlhood, [...] I think feminism should acknowledge that being a girl in this world is

really hard, one of the hardest things there is, and that our sadness is actually a very appropriate and informed reaction. (Wollen qtd. in Tunnicliffe)

Wollen (qtd. in Watson) also explicitly criticizes popular mainstream feminism, as it is always represented as unthreatening and commands women to live a perfect life, which is an illusion. Girls and young women are being made to view themselves as failures if they do not achieve the kind of empowerment demanded by contemporary neoliberal feminism. This also relates to the demands of constant self-improvement and self-care, which Wollen views critically as well.

Sad Girl Theory proposes a reading of sadness as resistance because sadness and suffering are made visible and viewers are confronted with instances of injustice. The ‘sad girl’ can, thus, be seen as a form of oppositional femininity, since she embodies the binary opposition of the ideal neoliberal feminine identity. I apply Sad Girl Theory to *The Virgin Suicides* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, drawing on Wollen’s approach to female sadness as a form of resistance. Wollen’s arguments about female sadness focus on real individuals’ performance of sadness online, whereas the aim of this thesis is the analysis of literary representations of female sadness. Despite this difference in focus, Wollen’s approach proves useful in examining the primary texts’ female characters. The aestheticization of sadness on social media often reflects literary or other fictional representations of female melancholy. I argue that real and fictional expressions of female sadness are shaped by shared motifs, indicating that they can reinforce and echo each other. Therefore, Sad Girl Theory lends itself well to examine literary imaginaries of female sadness.

While the ‘sad girl’ can be seen as a transgressive figure, it is also important to highlight critical views. Several authors have pointed out the inherent whiteness of the ‘sad girl’ aesthetic. Alderton (106) describes the typical ‘sad girl’ as a white young woman from an affluent Western country, conventionally attractive and thin, youthful and beautiful despite her pain. The ‘sad girl’ is supposed to exhibit a “frail, sweet, and vulnerable body” (Alderton 107). This emphasis on whiteness is exclusionary to women of color and makes the identity primarily available to white women and girls. Heather Mooney also criticizes this aspect in her article “Sad Girls and Carefree Black Girls: Affect, Race, (Dis)Possession, and Protest” (2018). While the ‘sad girl’ does represent an oppositional position to the ‘girl power’ mantra, the aesthetic identity heavily relies on whiteness (Mooney 177-78). Mooney (181) traces the beginnings of the ‘sad girl’ to Latina/x and immigrant communities in 2014, who originally used the term to refer to a girl who, despite experiencing hardships, does not feel depressed. Thelandersson (174) mentions the group Sad Girls Y Qué, which also emerged in 2014, and sees the beginning of the figure

in Chola culture⁹. In contemporary understandings of the ‘sad girl,’ the Latina/x roots are usually overlooked in favor of whitewashing the concept. Wollen in her Sad Girl Theory, but also the stereotypical ‘sad girls,’ rely on whiteness within their aesthetic to present depressive aspects of girlhood. The privilege connected to white bodies also means that only certain people, in this case white women and girls, are allowed to fully adopt the ‘sad girl’ persona and display their suffering, while the identity remains inaccessible to women and girls of color. This tension clearly illustrates that not everyone can freely show their sadness. (Thelandersson 174-75).

Another aspect that requires critical analysis is the commercialization of the ‘sad girl’ trend. As Mooney points out, “[t]he rise of the (white) Sad Girl has been accompanied by a specific material culture” (180). Clothing items and accessories that feature ‘sad girl’ phrases or slogans, such as “Emotional Baggage” or “So Sad Today,” are sold by small retailers and large fast-fashion brands alike. While this ‘sad girl’ messaging displayed on items of clothing for female bodies protests the neoliberal ‘girl power’ ideology, it pertains the risk of trivializing or fetishizing actual mental illnesses and the real pain experienced by ‘sad girls’ (Mooney 180). Furthermore, Thelandersson (187-88) criticizes the monetization of mental illness discourse, as serious illnesses or disorders are turned into financial rewards for companies or influencers who run mental health blogs. The commercialization of the ‘sad girl’ phenomenon is also inherently ironic; the ‘sad girl’ is a figure that represents protest against neoliberal and capitalist ideals, yet selling and buying products that denote this aesthetic essentially nullifies the objective of anticapitalism.

Finally, it is important to mention that Wollen’s Sad Girl Theory raises ethical questions about the visibility and consumption of depression and mental illnesses, particularly when real mental health struggles are aestheticized or romanticized. While the focus of this thesis is on fictional representations, this concern illustrates that cultural imaginaries do not exist in isolation from lived experience; rather, they can reinforce or challenge the ways people understand and express their own emotions. This is also significant given the unequal access to psychiatric care, which shapes whose mental suffering becomes visible and culturally meaningful in the first place. The ability to name, aestheticize, or narrativize mental illness is structured by factors such as class, race, and gender. Representations that romanticize suffering risk disregarding the unbalanced conditions under which many individuals do not receive adequate support or care.

⁹ Chola culture is a subculture within Mexican American communities, characterized by a specific aesthetic, strong communal ties and an identity shaped by experiences of socioeconomic hardship, especially relating to gender discrimination (“Cholo (subculture)”).

This thesis analyzes the representation of female sadness and self-destruction in literature and illustrate how the expression and performance of sadness can be empowering; however, I am also conscious of the risk of romanticizing mental illness. Therefore, it is important to clarify that this thesis refuses readings of mental illness through a romanticized, glorified lens but rather maintains a critical viewpoint to interrogate the subversive potential of enacting despair as well as its limitations. The objective is to investigate the literary representation of the ‘sad girl’ trope and analyze how the novels envision the female character’s despair. Within the differing interpretations of female madness and sadness discussed above, this thesis is aligned with readings of madness as capable of being empowering. The liberating and political capacity of the ‘madwoman’ figure due to her transgression of societal norms and resistance of oppression is central to the main argument of this project. I aim to expand on approaches that treat female madness as empowering by including how enacting sadness and self-destruction can defy patriarchal oppression and critique imperatives of neoliberal feminism.

4.2 Death, Self-Destruction, and Femininity

This section is concerned with artistic and literary representations of death, self-destruction, and femininity and discusses critical approaches dealing with these subjects. Death and its inevitability have been an ever-present subject in human mythology, art, and literature since the dawn of time. The inherent unfamiliarity of death is an important aspect that concerns academics focusing on death and its representations. In her famous work *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), Bronfen poses that death and the dead body occupy a role of otherness, “clearly delineated as not life” (x) and inherently unknowable. Bronfen (xi) aligns death’s otherness with the otherness of femininity, as both are seen as diametrically opposed to the norm, namely life and masculinity. This argument is substantiated by Higonnet who writes that both death and femininity “lie outside the frame of the ‘known’” (229). Due to this construction of otherness, according to Bronfen (xi), representations of death, particularly of female death, are symptoms of our culture. Our unconscious knowledge and fear of death is repressed over representations of the dead feminine body. Positioning death at the site of alterity, for instance at the body of a beautiful woman, also allows us to “experience death by proxy” (Bronfen x).

Bronfen (3) also examines pictorial representations of dead women as beautiful, serene or erotic, which were especially prevalent in the 18th and 19th centuries. In many paintings, the dead female body is encapsulated into an aesthetically pleasing object of art, thus making the horrors of death itself more bearable and tame (Bronfen 60). One of the most famous 19th-

century artworks illustrating the trope of the beautiful dead woman is the painting *Ophelia* (1851-52) by John Everett Millais. It displays Ophelia's corpse as pale and fragile, yet beautiful and pure. Magda Romanska (36) highlights that this representation embodies the quintessential innocence of idealized 19th-century femininity. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the beautiful young woman and her tragic death emphasizes the fragility of life and the power of death (Romanska 39).

The connection between femininity and death also encompasses the theme of suicide and self-destruction. In literary and cultural representations, dying often functions as women's one effective act of communication in a climate typically disinclined towards female self-expression (Bronfen 141). In *Over Her Dead Body*, Bronfen interprets suicide as follows:

[S]uicide implies an authorship with one's own life, a form of writing with the self and writing death that is ambivalently poised between self-construction and self-destruction. [...] The choice of death emerges as a feminine strategy within which writing with the body is a way of getting rid of the oppression connected with the feminine body. [...] Feminine suicide can serve as trope, self-defeating as this seems, for a feminine writing strategy within the constraints of patriarchal culture. (142)

Bronfen (143) further argues that in a culture that objectifies the female body and always connects femininity to the body, denying the body is the only way for a woman to gain a subject position. In response to traumatic events or unjust, oppressive circumstances, self-inflicted death as the most radical disruption to human existence can be used to reassert control (Bronfen 149). In her article on suicide ideation in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and *The Bell Jar* (1963), Rajasmita Singha (2024) substantiates Bronfen's point about suicide as an act of taking control over one's body. Singha (23) highlights that the female characters in both narratives are denied agency over their lives and experience feelings of helplessness. As a result, suicide seems to them as a resource to reclaim agency and might be considered almost a reasonable reaction to their circumstances (Singha 26).

Female suicide and its tropes have also been analyzed by Higonnet (231), who, like Bronfen, points out the disruptive and uncanny quality of self-destruction, as the otherness of death discussed above can also be applied to suicide. Furthermore, suicide is often interpreted as highly gendered and polarized. Suicides that are considered to have clear motives and are seen as heroic are usually encoded masculine, while self-inflicted deaths that seem involuntary or irrational are associated with femininity. This also links back to the concept that both death and women occupy an unknowable position (Higonnet 232). Holli G. Levitsky (31) discusses gendered suicide as well and emphasizes how the connection of illness and female suicide led to a feminization of suicide. Especially in 19th-century literature, female suicide was connected

to hysterical and irrational women who were left with no choice but to end their lives (Levitsky 34).

Furthering the argument that suicide and self-destruction can have transgressive potential, Evi Verbeke (2021) analyzes the self-destructive body as a form of resistance. Verbeke (56) argues that self-care practices such as watching one's weight, eating healthily or exercising are fundamental expectations in neoliberal Western societies, especially in an U.S. American context. We are encouraged to achieve the best versions of ourselves and have to take full individual responsibility for the success or failure of these efforts (Verbeke 56). In contrast to the ideal of the healthy and vital body stands the self-destructive body, which Verbeke describes as "a body that self-destructs rather than becoming a healthy temple" (56). She further argues that self-destruction becomes a form of resistance against the idea that it is an individual's responsibility to perfect and constantly monitor one's body (57). The neoliberal demand of making the best of oneself creates bodies that do not adhere to this expectation, which can be read as a form of resistance. Refusing to engage in certain self-care and self-improvement practices also creates new identities and movements, such as self-harmer¹⁰ or body positivity communities (Verbeke 59). I argue that another new identity that has emerged in opposition to neoliberal body ideals is the 'sad girl' as conceptualized by Audrey Wollen.

¹⁰ According to Alderton (4), social media platforms allow individuals who engage in self-harm practices, especially young people, to form communities and find people with similar struggles. These communities can have different aims: While some encourage self-harm behaviors, others focus on recovery and offering each other emotional support (Alderton 4).

5. Beauty vs. Self-Destruction in *The Virgin Suicides* and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*

This first chapter of analysis of the primary texts focusses on the juxtaposition of beauty and self-destruction and how this contrast is used to portray the female characters' sadness and mental struggles. The representation of the characters and their sadness in the two novels strongly draws on descriptions of their appearance, which change throughout the course of the narratives and always display a stark contrast between beauty and ugliness. Both novels highlight the physical effects of the characters' sadness and juxtapose imagery of beautiful young women with grotesque and even monstrous descriptions. Through beauty treatments and makeup, the characters attempt to conform to ideals of femininity. Their physical and psychological transformations throughout the narratives that align with the worsening of their despair, however, indicate an unsuccessful performance of femininity. The two primary texts also display girlhood as a period of transition and locate the main characters in ambivalent positions.

5.1 Beautiful Corpses and Beautiful Sad Girls?

The notion of the beautiful corpse and the idea of suffering as beautiful and mystifying is especially relevant to the aspect of beauty and self-destruction. As discussed in chapter four, there is a long historical tradition of visual depictions of dead women as beautiful, tranquil, or even erotic, particularly during the 18th and 19th centuries. The female corpse is transformed into an aesthetically pleasing object, which softens the grim reality of death; the most prominent example being John Everett Millais's painting *Ophelia* (1851–52), which also highlights the contrast between the beauty of the young woman and the tragedy of her death (Bronfen 60).

TVS includes a scene of attempted suicide already on the first two pages of the novel, which can be interpreted as a reference to the iconic image of Ophelia submerged in the water. When the youngest Lisbon sister, Cecilia, cuts her wrists in the bathtub, the scene is described as both beautiful and grotesque: “[W]hen they found her, afloat in her pink pool, with the yellow eyes of someone possessed and her small body giving off the odor of a mature woman, the paramedics had been so frightened by her tranquility that they had stood mesmerized” (Eugenides 1-2). The dying girl in the water suddenly seems more mature and fascinates the men who look at her. Later, when she is carried out of the house on a stretcher, Cecilia is

described as “a tiny Cleopatra on an imperial litter” (Eugenides 3) and as a “drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips” (Eugenides 4). After her second, and this time fatal, suicide attempt, where she jumps out of a window and impales herself on the garden fence, the description of her dead body is again heavily focused on the aesthetics of the scene: “The spike had gone through so fast there was no blood on it. It was perfectly clean and Cecilia merely seemed balanced on the pole like a gymnast. The fluttering wedding dress added to this circusy effect” (Eugenides 28). Cecilia’s dead body is described as elegant and graceful. The language used also directly evokes notions of the circus and performances and adds to the aesthetics of the beautiful corpse.

A strong aspect in *TVS* that relates to the narrators’ mythologizing of the girls’ deaths is Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze. In the essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), Mulvey (62) poses that pleasure in looking aligns with the dichotomy between male/active and female/passive. In narrative cinema, women function as erotic objects and spectacles to be looked at, while men gaze at the women and actively advance the narrative (Mulvey 63). A similar dynamic is evident in the way the male characters in *TVS* treat the Lisbon sisters. As mentioned above, the male paramedics who gaze at Cecilia in the bathtub are mesmerized by her. Even more prominently, the whole story is narrated by the boys in the neighborhood who seemingly spend all of their time observing the girls. As such, according to Mulvey’s essay, the male characters are in control of the narrative, while the female characters remain passive objects for the spectators.

Additionally, the book strongly plays with the concepts of scopophilia and voyeurism. Scopophilia as “pleasure in looking” (Mulvey 60) and voyeurism as pleasure “in looking at people and their activities without their knowledge” (Kuhn and Westwell) are important themes in the novel. The narrators not only recount the deaths of the Lisbon sisters, they also keep objects and memorabilia of the girls, which they call “exhibits” (Eugenides 3) and which become artifacts that keep being subjected to the boys’ gaze. They take nostalgic pleasure in reconstructing the sisters’ lives and remembering their youth spent observing the girls and turning them into objects of spectacle. Importantly, they mostly observe the girls from a distance and even admit in the end that they can never fully understand the sisters: “In the end, we had pieces of the puzzle, but no matter how we put them together, gaps remained” (Eugenides 241). The private lives observed by the boys without ever gaining consent or truly knowing the girls show how voyeuristic looking creates illusions of intimacy while ultimately maintaining distance. However, Eugenides also subverts the trope of the male observers by having the boys realize that the Lisbon sisters are active observers as well: “[T]hey had been looking out at us

as intensely as we had been looking in” (Eugenides 119). As they read Cecilia’s diary, another violation of privacy turning the girl into a spectacle, the narrators also come to understand that their own roles in the sisters’ lives can be passive as well: “[T]hey knew everything about us though we couldn’t fathom them at all [...] our job was merely to create the noise that seemed to fascinate them” (Eugenides 40). In this realization, the boys are put into the passive role, and the Lisbon sisters take on the role not only of the observers but also of being in the know. In contrast, despite their best efforts, the narrators never fully understand the sisters, and the boys’ obsession with looking mythologizes and romanticizes the sisters and their deaths.

References to death and suicide as mystifying and beautiful can also be found in Moshfegh’s *MYORAR*. For instance, the narrator thinks about how peaceful she would find floating in cold water and dying: “That sounded nice. That was the best way to die – awake and dreaming, feeling nothing. I could take the train to Coney Island, I thought, walk along the beach in the freezing wind, and swim out into the ocean. Then I’d just float on my back looking up at the stars, go numb, get sleepy, drift, drift” (Moshfegh 204). Like Cecilia’s death in the bathtub in *TVS*, the narrator’s ruminations about dying in the ocean can be interpreted as an allusion to the drowning Ophelia. Another instance of the narrator referring to death occurs when she is already deep into her sleep project and catches sight of herself in a mirror: “The mirror hanging on the wall above the mantel showed a frozen corpse, still pretty” (Moshfegh 224). Again, there is a clear emphasis on the character’s beautiful appearance despite her suffering. The narrator’s mother, who died of an overdose, is also described as beautiful despite being near death and attached to life sustaining machinery in the hospital: “Even with a tube down her throat, a machine taped to her face to keep her breathing, she was still pretty. She was still prim” (Moshfegh 151). The novel even includes an explicit mention of the idea of the beautiful corpse. When the narrator and her friend Reva discuss going out for drinks, Reva says: “Soon we’ll be old and ugly. Life is short, you know? Die young and leave a beautiful corpse” (Moshfegh 78). This passage illustrates the young women’s obsession with beauty and shows how, even in death, a female body is expected to look beautiful.

Importantly, both novels also juxtapose this imagery of the beautiful dead girl with rather grotesque, ugly, and perhaps more realistic descriptions of death and sadness. In *TVS*, when Cecilia is found in the bathtub, she is described as having wet hair hanging down her back and blue limbs. At the party that her parents organize to help with her recovery, she appears as fragile, thin, and worn out: “[The dress] had sequins on the bust she didn’t fill out [...] [I]t ended above Cecilia’s chafed knees. She sat on a barstool, staring into her punch glass, and the shapeless bag of a dress fell over her. She had colored her lips with red crayon, which gave her

face a deranged harlot look” (Eugenides 24). Her final death scene, which begins with the almost theatrical description of her impaled body on the fence, is also transformed by the description of her “open eyes and the way her mouth kept contracting like that of a fish on a stringer” (Eugenides 28). Cecilia’s portrayal at her funeral is similarly ambivalent and less focused on her beauty: “[P]ale skin and hair blending with white satin, Cecilia emerged from the background like a figure in an optical illusion. [...] The open section of the lid revealed not only her face and shoulders, but her hands with their bitten nails, her rough elbows, the twin prongs of her hips, and even her knees” (Eugenides 36). These descriptions illustrate the juxtaposition used by Eugenides in the portrayal of Cecilia’s death and suffering. On the one hand, she falls into the classic Ophelia trope of the beautiful dead girl; but on the other hand, more realistic and unattractive descriptions of her body are also clearly present.

When the remaining sisters take their lives towards the end of the novel, their dead bodies are also described in ambivalent ways. The boys find Bonnie hanging from a beam in the basement of the Lisbon house wearing a pink dress and looking “clean and festive, like a piñata” (Eugenides 209). While the boys first gaze at her mystified and find beauty in her death, soon afterwards the description turns more gruesome: “She spun slowly, and at one point her face broke out of the seaweed of balloons, showing us the reality of the death she’d chosen. It was a world of blackening eye sockets, blood pooling in lower extremities, stiffening joints” (Eugenides 210). The almost sterile and medical register used to refer to Bonnie’s dead body no longer has the romantic quality of the earlier description and instead focusses on the more realistic aspects of her death.

The medical descriptions continue in the chapter after the girls’ deaths in the coroner’s report; however, the focus is again on the beautiful and youthful qualities of sisters’ dead bodies:

A single coroner [...] opened up the girls’ brains and body cavities, peering inside at the mystery of their despair. [...] He spoke of the incredible cleanliness of the girls’ bodies, the youngest he had ever worked on, showing no signs of wastage or alcoholism. Their smooth blue hearts looked like water balloons, and the rest of their organs possessed a similar textbook clarity. [...] Nevertheless, it saddened the coroner to pierce and shred those unblemished bodies. (Eugenides 216)

Eugenides emphasizes how the girls, in their death, once again return to an untouched and innocent state, despite the horrors they have endured in life.

In *MYORAR*, Moshfegh also includes descriptions of the narrator’s sadness that are more grounded in reality and portray her as not so beautiful. A theme that is carried through the novel is the beauty labor and treatments that the protagonist periodically stops and starts again. Early on in the book and at the beginning of her sleep project, she disregards maintaining her beauty and taking care of her body: “I took a shower once a week at most. I stopped tweezing, stopped

bleaching, stopped waxing, stopped brushing my hair. No moisturizing or exfoliating. No shaving. [...] My muscles withered. The sheets on my bed yellowed” (Moshfegh 2-3). She also comments that her deteriorating and neglected appearance makes her less attractive to the men around her: “But once I’d begun shuffling in with eye boogers and scum at the corners of my mouth at odd hours, they quit trying to win my affection” (Moshfegh 5). While the narrator continues to have beauty treatments done during her hibernation, even unconsciously, there is always a discrepancy between her polished appearance and her more unappealing and deteriorating body. For instance, after an episode where she goes to the funeral of her friend Reva’s mother and then sleeps again for several days, she wakes up to find that she has had a waxing appointment and a manicure: “My pubic hair had been waxed off recently. A good waxing – my skin was neither red nor bumpy nor itchy. My fingernails, I saw, were French-manicured” (Moshfegh 180). However, Moshfegh immediately juxtaposes the protagonist’s well-groomed appearance with reference to her body odor: “I could smell my own sweat. It smelled like gin. It smelled like vinegar” (180). As such, her sleeping project and her depression are accompanied by physical effects. The protagonist’s beauty labor and its connection to neoliberal ideals of femininity will be discussed in more detail below.

As mentioned above, throughout the story, the protagonist in *MYORAR* continuously engages in beauty work to keep her body looking desirable according to contemporary Western beauty ideals. At the beginning of the novel, she reflects on the beauty labor expected of women and shows an awareness of the demands to maintain a beautiful appearance “I did what young women in New York like me were supposed to do, at first: I got colonics and facials and highlights, worked out at an overpriced gym, lay in the hammam there until I went blind, and went out at night in shoes that cut my feet and gave me sciatica” (Moshfegh 28). She also mentions that beauty treatments make her feel better not only physically but also mentally: “More often than I needed, I’d get face peels and pedicures, massages, waxings, haircuts. [...] I paid strangers to make me feel good” (Moshfegh 157). In line with neoliberal demands, the protagonist is not only focused on maintaining a beautiful outside appearance but also intends to transform her inner self. The primary goal of her hibernation project is to emerge as a new and happy person at the end, as someone who is beautiful from the inside. This reflects the added pressure on women under neoliberalism to not only manage their bodies but also their minds. While she initially makes the active decision to have beauty treatments done, during her sleep projects she also engages in beauty labor unconsciously and without even noticing it: “It seemed that while I was sleeping, some superficial part of me was taking aim at a life of beauty and sex appeal. I made appointments to get waxed. I booked time at a spa that offered infrared

treatments and colonics and facials” (Moshfegh 86). Her unconscious actions to stay beautiful raise the question how conditioned women are under capitalism and neoliberalism to stay physically attractive despite or even on top of all other struggles. The fact that she continues to manage her appearance without even thinking about it shows how normalized beauty labor is in this society. According to Melisa Trujillo (238), especially practices of body hair removal usually go unquestioned and illustrate the normative, idealized female body. What is more, even when the protagonist is dealing with depression and experiencing extreme circumstances, her mind and body are conditioned in a way that ensures that she remains beautiful even in suffering. This links back to the idea of the beautiful corpse and shows how even in their worst moments, women must appear aesthetically pleasing. As was shown above, however, the illusion of beauty in suffering does not always hold true and the protagonist’s beauty labor does not always succeed.

Another common theme throughout both novels that serves to highlight the characters’ faded beauty in life and death as well as their self-destruction is makeup. In her book *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985), Elizabeth Wilson (91) argues that makeup, as one aspect of fashion, is closely linked to sex due to its proximity to the body. Wilson (108) illustrates that while makeup nowadays is typically used to preserve a youthful and lively appearance, its original association was with death, as it was first used in mummification ceremonies in Ancient Egypt. This ambivalent history and cultural meaning of makeup can also be found in the novels under analysis. As mentioned earlier, in *TVS*, Cecilia is described with exaggerated lipstick at the party at the Lisbon home. When Lux leads the boys into the house before the sisters commit suicide, she is also depicted as wearing heavy makeup: “She took one more step and her face appeared. For a second it didn’t seem alive: it was too white, the cheeks too perfectly carved, the arched eyebrows painted on, the full lips made of wax” (Eugenides 205). When Mary’s dead body is found, she is similarly described as wearing a lot cosmetics: “She had on so much makeup that the paramedics had the odd feeling she had already been prepared to viewing by an undertaker, and this impression lasted until they saw that her lipstick and eyeshadow were smudged” (Eugenides 232). In *MYORAR*, the protagonist, once she is deep into her sleep project, is described with smudged mascara and lipstick that has stained her mouth: “Mascara had streaked down my cheeks like a masquerade mask. Remnants of bright pink lipstick stained the outer edges and corners of my lips” (Moshfegh 187).

By wearing faded or extravagant makeup, especially when they are close to or already dead, the characters subvert makeup’s general function of making the wearer appear livelier and more youthful. Moreover, the use of makeup in the novels has a performative layer.

Makeup, especially heavily exaggerated makeup, is linked to stage-makeup and performance. The makeup becomes an attempt to conform to ideals of femininity, beauty, or sexuality. However, the fact that the makeup is smudged and has worn off suggests that the performance of femininity is not wholly successful. The characters' makeup becomes a visual metaphor for their failure to adhere to beauty standards but also for their self-destructive aim to break free from their oppressive circumstances.

5.2 Physical and Psychological Transformations

A central theme in both primary texts are the physical and psychological transformations that the female characters undergo throughout the narratives and throughout the worsening of their despair. In both *TVS* and *MYORAR*, the main characters are described as beautiful and lively at the beginning of the narratives. As the stories progress, their physical appearances deteriorate and even become unrecognizably monstrous. Moreover, as well as experiencing a transformation in beauty, the characters in both novels also experience their girlhood as a transitory period between childhood and womanhood.

Early on in *TVS*, the mystifying beauty of the five sisters is emphasized. The narrators provide a detailed description of the girls and their loveliness: "They were short, round-buttocked in denim, with roundish cheeks that recalled that same dorsal softness. Whenever we got a glimpse, their faces looked indecently revealed, as though were used to seeing women in veils. No one could understand how Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon had produced such beautiful children" (Eugenides 5-6). After Cecilia's first suicide attempt and her physical deterioration, her appearance is contrasted to that of her sister Lux, who "radiated health and mischief" (Eugenides 24). When one of the boys is invited to dinner at the Lisbon house and finds a used tampon in the bathroom, even this menstrual product is described as "a beautiful thing, you had to see it, like a modern painting or something" (Eugenides 8).

After Cecilia's death and the beginning of the sisters' depression, however, they are gradually considered less beautiful and become more wistful and melancholy: "Added to their loveliness was a new mysterious suffering, perfectly silent, visible in the blue puffiness beneath their eyes or the way they would sometimes stop in midstride, look down, and shake their heads as though disagreeing with life" (Eugenides 49). With this passage, Eugenides not only emphasizes the process of mystifying the girls' sadness, he also clearly shows that as the sisters' despair progresses, their physical appearance begins to mirror their mental state.

Along with the Lisbon sisters' physical deterioration, the house of the Lisbon family also undergoes significant changes and decay. Very soon after Cecilia's death, the house begins showing signs of neglect: "Dust balls lined the steps. A half-eaten sandwich sat atop the landing where someone had felt too sad to finish it" (Eugenides 47). As the story progresses, the family home increasingly exhibits a state of deterioration: "As October came, the Lisbon house began to look less cheerful [...] The yellow bricks turned brown. Bats flew out of the chimney in the evening [...] The illuminated doorbell went out. The bird feeder fell in the backyard and was left on the ground" (Eugenides 84-85). The house is even explicitly described as decaying: "Now the soft decay of the house began to show up more clearly" (Eugenides 155). The Lisbon home is truly personified and comes to mirror that girls' story when the narrators describe it as dead: "Now the house truly died" (Eugenides 157). After the girls' deaths, Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon have the house put up for sale. The description of the house being cleared and emptied comes shortly after the report of the coroner, who dissects the bodies of the girls, which suggests that the house has been taken apart and gutted just like the Lisbon sisters. At the end of the novel, the boys say that "a haunted quality persisted about the Lisbon house" (Eugenides 233), insinuating that the spirit of the sisters continues to haunt the house and the neighborhood. The deterioration of the Lisbon home has previously been interpreted as a critique of suburban domesticity and conservative, oppressive family values (Dines 959). I argue that the state of the house mirrors the physical and mental states of the Lisbon sisters as the house becomes a personified character in the story. Like the house, the sisters lose their beautiful appearance throughout the narrative and take on an uncanny characteristic that reflects their troubled inner lives.

Lux, the most rebellious sister, is the character in *TVS* that is described in the most ambivalent ways throughout the novel. While she is often depicted as the loveliest and most sexually-alluring of the sisters at the beginning of the story, she also appears in more ugly and monstrous ways. In particular, when she starts an intimate relationship with one of the boys from the local high school, Trip Fontaine. During a scene where he and Lux are physically intimate, the descriptions of Lux's body and actions heavily feature monstrous and brutal imagery:

[A] creature with a hundred mouths started sucking the marrow from his bones. She said nothing as she came on like a starved animal [...] [W]ith terror he put his fingers in the ravenous mouth of the animal that leashed below her waist [...] Two beasts lived in the car, one above, snuffling and biting him, and one below, struggling to get out of its damp cage [...] [T]he voracity of those hundred mouths that had sucked out his juice in the dark [...] Never again were his intestines yanked with such delectable force [...] [H]er mythic mutability that allowed her to possess three or four arms at once [...] [N]o erotic intensity ever matched the silence in which Lux flayed him alive. (Eugenides 82-83)

Lux's metaphorical transformation into a ravenous monster also marks her growing defiance of her parents' strict rules. As such, as she begins to rebel against her circumstances and her despair grows, her physical appearance is also drastically different. The scene further includes many words and phrases that are connected to brutality and death, such as "sucking the marrow from his bones," "his intestines yanked," or "flayed him alive" (Eugenides 82-83). This word choice is a clear deviation from the lovely and romanticized descriptions of the girls found earlier in the novel. Lux's monstrous appearance also links to the haunted and decaying state of the house mentioned above, showing that as the girls undergo a physical transformation, so does their home.

In *MYORAR*, a similarly monstrous description of the main character can be found. Looking in the mirror, the narrator is startled by her own reflection and does not recognize herself:

My own face startled me. [...] Wrinkles in my forehead and lines around my mouth looked like they'd been drawn in pencil. My cheeks were slack. My skin was pale. Something flashed in the gloss of my eyeballs. [...] There I was, a tiny dark reflection of myself deep down in my right pupil. Someone said once that pupils were just empty space, black holes, twin caves of infinite nothingness. (Moshfegh 187)

Although the narrator's appearance is not described with the violent and supernatural references used for Lux's depiction in the section quoted before, the picture that is painted here still exhibits a dark and uncanny quality. The pale skin and worn out facial features along with the "dark reflection" (Moshfegh 187) illustrate the toll that her sleeping project is taking on her body and show how her sadness and self-destruction manifest on her physical body.

Another similarity between Lux and the main character in *MYORAR* is the description of their incredibly thin bodies as their despair worsens. In *MYORAR*, the narrator describes her body as thin and fragile:

I still looked good in my clothes, but naked I looked fragile, weird. Protruding ribs, wrinkles around my hips, loose skin around my abdomen. My collarbones jutted out. My knees looked huge. I was all sharp corners at that point. Elbows, clavicles, hip points, the knobby vertebrae of my neck. My body was like a wooden sculpture in need of sanding. [...] 'You look like a skeleton'. (Moshfegh 143)

In *TVS*, Lux's body is described in a very similar manner by the boys who have sex with her:

All six mentioned her jutting ribs, the insubstantiality of her thighs, and one, who went up to the roof with Lux during a warm winter rain, told us how the basins of her collarbones collected water. A few boys mentioned the acidic taste of her saliva – the taste of digestive fluids with nothing to do - but none of these signs of malnourishment or illness or grief (the small cold sores at the corners of her mouth, the patch of hair missing above her left ear) detracted from Lux's overwhelming impression of being a carnal angel. (Eugenides 143)

The fact that these descriptions are so alike and that both clearly show characters experiencing eating disorders due to their mental illnesses illustrates the common trope of the thin, fragile ‘sad girl.’ The authors of both texts make a point to still highlight the characters’ beauty despite their suffering, playing into a romanticized notion of sadness and suffering as beautiful. Furthermore, the characters’ eating disorders can be read as a reaction to patriarchal beauty ideals and capitalist culture, as suggested by Susan Bordo (1993) in her analysis on how culture shapes disordered eating. Lux and the narrator in *MYORAR* are visibly wasting away with their bodies reflecting their inner turmoil.

While the female main characters in both primary texts undergo significant physical changes, the girlhood represented in the texts also leads the characters to experience internal changes and functions as a period of identity construction. According to Gayle Wald, girl studies is “a subgenre of recent academic feminist scholarship that constructs girlhood as a separate, exceptional, and/or pivotal phase in female identity formation” (587). Importantly, in girlhood studies, girlhood is not seen as a fixed concept but rather as a set of different identities (Franz et al. 146). Glaws et al. (30) understand girlhood as a transitional period between childhood and adulthood and a time of identity construction. Current scholarship on girlhood also increasingly works with a more expanded and intersectional definition of ‘girl’ as a cultural construct rather than as a fixed category defined by age or biology. As a cultural construct, the notion of the ‘girl’ encompasses factors such as social class, race, sexuality, gender identity, and ability (Allen and Green-Barteet 616). Cristina Santos draws attention to the fact that the term ‘girl’ “can also be used to contain women in a child-like state characterized by relational interdependence and not a fully realized self-identity” (6). She further states that in order to analyze girlhood, the construction of identity over an extended period of time as well as the external pressures placed on girls must be examined (Santos 6).

The five Lisbon sisters all clearly fall into the category of ‘girl’ as we would typically imagine it. On first glance, they are what Allen and Green-Barteet call “normative girls (i.e., white, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual, cis-gender, and non-disabled)” (616). The text also explicitly assigns them to this category. The title of the novel alone, *The Virgin Suicides*, includes a direct reference to a word commonly found within the semantic field of girlhood and innocence, namely ‘virgin’. The term ‘virginity’ is closely associated with girlhood and represents a contrast to adulthood as the figure of the virgin has no sexual history. According to Catherine Driscoll, virginity connotes an intact and fixed position and represents female adolescence “as a moment rather than a process” (141). However, despite the overt title, the novel presents the sisters in a state of flux between girlhood and adulthood. Their bedrooms

contain numerous symbols of both girlhood and womanhood: Stuffed animals and canopy beds as well as cosmetics, perfumes and scouring pads. The rooms represent “so many young girls becoming women together in the same cramped space” (Eugenides 7), indicating the period of transition they are in. At other points in the novel, the girls are said to display “a dramatic womanliness” (Eugenides 21) and are seen by the narrators as “women in disguise” (Eugenides 40). The youngest sister Cecilia surprises the boys with “the maturity of her voice” (Eugenides 26) and Mary is described by her singing teacher as having had a voice filled with “dolefulness and maturity beyond her years” (Eugenides 228-29). Again, there is a clear discrepancy between their seemingly girlish qualities and their mature traits. Only in death are these “women in disguise” (Eugenides 40), the figures that fluctuate between childhood and adulthood so much, returned to their original and pristine virgin state. In the autopsy report, the coroner describes the clean and “unblemished bodies” (Eugenides 216) of the girls. The novel presents female adolescence as a grey space between childhood and adulthood with the Lisbon sisters moving between the two ends of the spectrum. Their adolescence is presented as dynamic and non-linear. On the one hand, they are clearly childlike with their youthful appearances and behaviors. On the other hand, however, the boys often describe the sisters as older and more mature than themselves.

In *MYORAR*, the main character’s girlhood as a transitional and identity-forming period is even more prevalent. As mentioned above, the term ‘girl’ is often expanded and used as a cultural construct that is not necessarily limited by age. As such, I argue that the protagonist fits into the category of ‘girl’ and experiences a process of transition and maturation similar to girlhood through her self-prescribed rest cure. She reflects on her own adolescence at one point, showing awareness of the expectations placed on young women to be silent and agreeable: “I did crave attention, but I refused to humiliate myself by asking for it. I’d be punished if I showed signs of suffering, I knew. So I was good. I did all the right things. I rebelled in silent ways, with my thoughts. My parents barely seemed to notice I existed” (Moshfegh 65). It is her aim to emerge from her year of sleep as a newly formed and happy individual. She explicitly states how she wants to undergo a transition and that she feels hopeful about it, at least the beginning: “It was an exciting time in my life. I felt hopeful. I felt I was on my way to a great transformation” (Moshfegh 54). She clearly lays out her goals of being regenerated through sleep and becoming a new person: “[W]hen I’d slept enough, I’d be okay. I’d be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person” (Moshfegh 51). She believes that the rest cure will heal her and transform her into a perfect individual who will finally be happy and able to live an ideal life. This desire to achieve happiness by undergoing some dramatic change to fit into

societal and capitalist norms is linked to Ahmed's concept of *The Promise of Happiness*. The narrator is convinced that she will achieve true happiness once she has undergone her year of hibernation and, as a result, finally embodies the ideal neoliberal woman.

As her hibernation continues, however, she grows more and more skeptical and disillusioned with the idea that the rest cure will truly benefit her. After the initial optimism at the beginning of the sleeping project wears off, the main character reports that her sleep feels "thin and empty [...] superficial, even boring at times" (Moshfegh 78-79) due to her lack of stimulation and social connections. As the medications she takes to prolong the periods of sleep affect her more seriously and she starts to experience blackouts, doubts about the success of the hibernation project seep in: "It was lunacy, this idea, that I could sleep myself into a new life" (Moshfegh 260). The narrator continuously lives in a grey space between being asleep and being awake as she sleepwalks, writes messages, goes shopping or attends parties under the influence of the medications, never remembering what happened: "I had no recall of what had happened under the influence of Infermiterol" (Moshfegh 188). This grey space where she is both active and passive at the same time reflects the liminal space between childhood and adulthood that girlhood represents. The protagonist not only experiences self-doubt but is also questioned by her friend Reva on the benefits of her hibernation: "I'm concerned about your health [...] I just don't think it's healthy to sleep all day" (Moshfegh 56). Her doubt and the pushback from her friend, however, eventually motivate her even more to fulfill the project's purpose and awake as a newly formed person. Thus, as in growing up, the protagonist experiences setbacks and difficult situations but ultimately achieves her goal. Towards the end of the story, she is convinced that she will find a way out of the darkness she has been feeling and learns to negotiate how to live her life moving forward. Despite her questionable methods, the main character's sleep project shows her psychological transformation from a person riddled with self-doubt and sadness into a mature person willing to tackle the challenges of life.

Both primary texts represent their female main characters as undergoing a period of transition, on a physical as well as a psychological level. With an increase of despair, the characters' physical appearances worsen, illustrating how their sadness manifests on their bodies. Moreover, they experience girlhood as a period of identity construction and inhabit an ambivalent position between childhood and adulthood. These periods of transition also show that the characters in both novels do not adhere to societal expectations of femininity, as they fluctuate between girlish qualities and maturity and experience emotional turmoil, self-doubt, and depression. As 'sad girl' figures, they enact their sadness to make their deviation from

normative affective scripts visible. The following chapter focuses on the oppressive circumstances that the characters experience and their acts of resistance.

6. Enacting and Performing Sadness: Strategies for Resistance

The previous chapter focused on the representation of sadness and mental illness in the two primary texts and examined how the characters' physical appearances and psychological transformations throughout the narratives are portrayed. This chapter analyses the circumstances that lead the female characters to their despair and suffering before illustrating how sadness and self-destruction can be used as tools of resistance. The analysis also focusses on how the characters function as 'sad girls' in accordance with Wollen's Sad Girl Theory and how they enact sadness to make their suffering visible. Both *TVS* and *MYORAR* make a point to portray the main characters as suffering under the circumstances they live in, be that parental confinement in a suburban neighborhood, impossible ideals of femininity and girlhood or neoliberal work culture. The Lisbon sisters in *TVS* live under extreme scrutiny from their parents as well as from the people in their neighborhood. They employ suicide as the ultimate form of self-destruction to reclaim their agency and rebel against the isolation enforced on them. In *MYORAR*, the main character suffers from the expectations of a capitalist society and the grief and guilt she feels over her parents' deaths. She chooses a year of drug-induced hibernation to escape into emotional apathy and overcome her sadness.

6.1 *The Virgin Suicides*: Suburban Oppression and the Politics of Self-Destruction

In *TVS*, the Lisbon sisters are subjected to extreme control and isolation by their parents. Even before Cecilia's suicide, they rarely have social interactions with other teenagers, and they do not seem to have any friends. They are not allowed to have romantic relationships with boys or attend parties: "It was well known that Mr. and Mrs. Lisbon didn't allow their daughters to date, and that Mrs. Lisbon in particular disapproved of dances, proms, and the general expectation that teenagers should be allowed to paw one another in backseats" (Eugenides 64). After Cecilia's first suicide attempt, one of the neighbors remarks "That girl didn't want to die [...] She just wanted out of that house" (Eugenides 15), indicating very early that the sisters' deaths might be attempts to escape the confines of their suburban home. At another point, Trip Fontaine, a boy who becomes romantically involved with Lux, states: "You would have killed yourself just to have something to do" (Eugenides 80). These relatively early references to

suicide as a means of escape show that the other characters in the novel are aware of the sisters' situation and might even empathize with them.

In an effort to help Cecilia after she first attempts to end her life, the parents briefly become more lenient with their rules and allow boys inside the house, first only the young neighbor employed to cut the grass and eventually all of the neighborhood boys when they are invited to a party. The fact that the boys are not allowed to enter the house illustrates that previously not only was the house locked so the Lisbon sisters could not get out, there was also no possibility for anyone to get in, heightening the sisters' imprisonment.

After Cecilia's suicide, the remaining sisters are even allowed to attend the high school prom with some of the boys from the neighborhood. The evening ends badly, however, as Lux arrives home late, which leads the parents to enforce even stricter rules on their daughters. The boys watch the house and see one of the girls looking out of a window, "but just as the girl put her palm to the glass, the light went out" (Eugenides 135). The hand against the glass signifies the girls reaching out into the world, yet just as they experience some freedom, it is stripped from them, leaving them in darkness and confinement. The novel even uses words related to imprisonment, such as "maximum-security isolation" and "incarcerated" (Eugenides 136), highlighting the sisters' isolation.

Aside from being shut into their parental home, the girls must also give up aspects of their lives, which their parents deem inappropriate; for instance, Lux is forced to burn her collection of rock records. Throughout their isolation, the Lisbon sisters seem to fade away from life more and more, and they also slowly recede from the boys' memories: "Though we felt for the Lisbon girls, and continued to think about them, they were slipping away from us [...] we were beginning to forget the Lisbon girls, and we could remember nothing else" (Eugenides 180). The boys' remark that the girls are fading away from them mirrors the sisters' deepening of sadness and their gradual removal from existence due to their isolation.

Throughout the novel, the parent who is portrayed as primarily responsible for isolating the sisters and confining them to the home is their mother, Mrs. Lisbon. She is presented as a matriarch, who has control over the family and who is blamed for the girls' sadness and confinement by the other characters: "The old bitch had locked them up again" (Eugenides 134). The girls' imprisonment by an 'evil' mother figure mirrors classic fairy tale tropes of the damsel in distress and the wicked stepmother. The representation of mother figures in fairy tales is typically twofold: the saintly and often natal mother and the monstrous stepmother (Schwabe 18). Although Mrs. Libson is their natal mother, she takes on the role of the classic villainous stepmother by imprisoning her daughters. The trope of the imprisoned maidens at the hands of

an older, perhaps jealous mother figure, shows the powerlessness that the sisters must endure. Moreover, it paints Mrs. Lisbon, an older woman, as evil and abusive, illustrating the blame that is often put on mothers for seemingly failing to raise their children properly.

Another aspect that affects the Lisbon sisters' sadness and despair is the fact that nobody in their suburban neighborhood seems to view them as individual people with agency. The sisters are always grouped together; at several points in the novel the narrators point out that they, despite watching them obsessively, cannot distinguish between the girls: "One of the girls came in – can you tell them apart?" (Eugenides 46) or "Fortunately, their dresses and hairdos homogenized them. Once again the boys weren't even sure which girl was which" (Eugenides 177). After the night when Lux, Bonnie and Therese commit suicide, but Mary survives, she is still grouped together with her dead sisters: "Technically, Mary survived for more than a month, though everyone felt otherwise. After that night people spoke of the Lisbon girls in the past tense, and if they mentioned Mary at all it was with the veiled wish that she would hurry up and get it over with" (Eugenides 214). After Mary's eventual death through an overdose of sleeping pills, a funeral is held for the four eldest sisters, where the priest is unable to keep the girls apart: "Father Moody claimed the constant getting into and out of the limousine made him lose track of which girl lay at which grave. 'I had to keep the eulogies sort of general,' he said" (Eugenides 234). Even in death, the Lisbon sisters are not treated as individuals and are not prescribed their own identities. They are also described as passive throughout the story, for instance in newspaper articles reporting on the suicides: "The newspapers, later writing about what they termed a 'suicide pact,' treated the girls as automatons, creatures so barely alive that their deaths came as little change" (Eugenides 170). The boys also mention the idea that some outside power possessed the girls and forced them to end their lives, removing any agency from the sisters and simultaneously denying their own responsibility: "The song certainly ties in nicely with the notion that a dark force beset the girls, some monolithic evil we weren't responsible for" (Eugenides 171). Moreover, the narrators view the sisters as helpless damsels in distress in need of saving: "And so they hid from the world, waiting for someone – for us – to save them" (Eugenides 193). However, this notion is subverted by the girls, as they seemingly invite the boys into the house under false pretenses but actually use the boys as a distraction while executing their plan to end their lives. This subversion and act of taking back agency will be discussed in more detail at a later point in this chapter.

Another factor contributing to the sisters' suffering is the suburban conformity that is imposed on them. David Coon (2-3) analyzes portrayals of American suburbia in visual media and discusses the myth of the ideal suburban life, which is built on conservative values, focus

on the nuclear family, and traditional gender roles. Portrayals of suburban spaces often challenge these ideals and criticize the conformity and oppression that hide underneath the imagined suburban utopia. Coon uses the concept of the “suburban façade” (18) to describe how suburban life seems idyllic on the surface but can be peeled away to reveal desires, secrets, or problems that threaten suburban harmony. At first glance, the Lisbon family lives in “the ultimate realization of the American Dream” (Coon 4) as they own a single-family detached home in the suburbs, a traditional marker of the aspiring middle-class. The community of neighbors seems friendly and social, even helping the family on several occasions:

We didn’t stop with our own houses. Once our walls were clean, Mr. Buell told Chase to start cleaning bugs off the Lisbon house. [...] Because Mr. Lisbon only had daughters, boys and men had gone over in the past to help him drag away lightning-struck limbs [...] Then, however, Mr. Krieger told Kyle to go over and sweep some, and Mr. Hutch sent Ralph, and soon we were all over at the Lisbon house, brushing walls and scraping away bug husks. (Eugenides 54)

Nevertheless, the pressures of suburban conformity and constant scrutiny affect the sisters negatively, and as their mental states deteriorate so do their family home and the “suburban façade” (Coon 18) they live in. The clearest example of the harm of suburbia can be seen in Cecelia’s death scene at the end of the first chapter. When she jumps out of the window and lands on the garden fence, she is both literally and metaphorically killed by the white picket fence. The white picket fence symbolizes middle-class suburban life and the ideal American household (Dolan). Cecelia impaling herself on the fence functions as a metaphor for how damaging suburban conformity and isolation are for the young women. After Cecilia’s death, the Lisbon family becomes a subject of gossip, which turns the girls into a spectacle. The neighbors constantly offer opinions on the girls’ behaviors and share snippets of observations with the narrators. With their connection to suicide and their visible sadness, the Lisbon girls deviate from the ideal of suburban harmony and do not fit into the script of cheerful and polite girlhood. They are punished for their nonconformity by becoming social outcasts and the focus of social policing through gossip. This illustrates the forms of quiet oppression that the Lisbon sisters suffer. Strict parental control isolates them from the outside world. Under the constant suburban scrutiny and male gaze, they are not prescribed agency and are seen as damsels in distress by the narrators. The polished “suburban façade” (Coon 18), which is supposed to disguise the deeper and darker secrets of the neighborhood, contributes to the sisters’ oppression and their sense of entrapment.

The Lisbon sisters’ suicides are the central theme and mystery of the novel, which the narrators attempt to reconstruct and understand throughout the whole book. The girls and their actions are at once seen as desperate acts by helpless damsels in distress and self-affirming

instances of empowerment. They are turned into mystical figures, whose deaths are inexplicable but also symbolize everything that is wrong with society. According to the narrators “[s]omething sick at the heart of the country had infected the girls [...] The Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong with the country, the pain it inflicted on even the most innocent citizens” (Eugenides 226). The sisters’ deaths are seen as the trigger for the collapse of the idyllic suburban neighborhood: “Everyone we spoke to dated the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls. [...] [T]he girls were seen not as scapegoats but as seers” (Eugenides 238). As such, the girls’ sadness and ultimate suicides draw attention to their own suffering and make wider societal ills visible. In accordance with Wollen’s Sad Girl Theory, the Lisbon sisters confront the people around them with sadness and suffering and “fearlessly act out [their] pain for others to see” (Alderton xx).

The Lisbon sisters and their self-inflicted deaths also function as a device that familiarizes death. According to Bronfen (xi), death and femininity both lie outside the norm and occupy a role of otherness. The Lisbon sisters are constantly portrayed as ‘other’ and different from the rest of the people living in their suburb. From the way their lives and behaviors are almost methodically studied and the analysis of numbered exhibits that the narrators have procured, the girls are often presented as mythical beings beyond understanding. The concept of death is similarly inexplicable and defies explanation. However, by bringing death into the neighborhood and seemingly prophesizing the suburb’s demise, “[t]he Lisbon girls [make] suicide familiar” (Eugenides 239). Positioning death, and in this case suicide, at the site of the female body makes death seem tame and more familiar. The horrors of death are made bearable by being encapsulated into the bodies of the beautiful girls. Like pictorial representations of beautiful dead women, the sisters and their deaths become objects of the male gaze and allow the narrators, as well as the other residents of the neighborhood, to “experience death by proxy” (Bronfen x).

The girls’ suicides are also repeatedly framed as an attempt to escape the suburban neighborhood and parental control under which they live. The narrators say: “The girls took into their own hands decisions better left to God. They became too powerful to live among us, too self-concerned, too visionary, too blind” (Eugenides 242). As such, the Lisbon sisters’ deaths can be seen as taking back the agency that has been denied to them. This aligns with Bronfen’s reading of female suicide as implying “an authorship of one’s own life” (142). The suburban neighborhood that the girls grow up in, as well as society at large, is obsessed with objectifying and constantly scrutinizing the female body. According to Bronfen (149), the most radical disruption to the human body, namely death, becomes a means to regain control over

one's own body. The sisters' self-afflicted deaths, thus, allow them to regain self-assertion and autonomy. Importantly, Bronfen also highlights that suicide as an autobiographical act is "ambivalently poised between self-construction and self-destruction" (142). The Lisbon sisters and their deaths assume the same ambiguous position between empowerment and despair. Throughout the novel, the narrators fluctuate between interpretations of the girls as self-asserted or helpless. Ultimately, however, with the sisters' final communal suicide, they show that they have tricked the boys and were in control of the situation and thus take back agency over their fates. In accordance with Sad Girl Theory and the idea that sadness can be a gesture of liberation, the Lisbon sisters express their sadness by protesting their unjust circumstances in the most extreme way available to them.

The theme of longing for freedom is also frequently connected to the girls and their tragic fate. When the sisters are not allowed to leave their house anymore, the narrators report Therese communication with various people via an amateur radio, stating: "Therese was reaching out toward a freer world" (Eugenides 163). Shortly before the girls end their lives, they contact the boys directly via telephone and seemingly send them hidden messages by exchanging songs. While the boys play songs for the girls that share themes of romantic longing and desire, the girls' song choices reveal their isolation and loneliness as well as lost youth. Again, the girls draw attention to their despair and express their desire to escape their circumstances. Their attempt to gain freedom is ultimately successful when they all end their lives, and the narrators describe Lux as having escaped: "They found her in the front seat, gray-faced and serene [...] She had escaped in the car just as we expected" (Eugenides 211).

The interpretation of the Lisbon sisters as 'sad girls' as described by Wollen's Sad Girl Theory also encompasses the aspect of the performance of sadness. The 'sad girl' aesthetic as it can be found in social media spaces is heavily connected to specific visual performances and self-fashioning. According to Alderton's (95) analysis of online 'sad girl' content, while the performance of sadness is often ironic or exaggerated, the practice of sharing emotions online allows young women to genuinely express themselves. In *TVS*, the aspect of performing sadness does not take place online but manifests in the real world, specifically in the Lisbon sisters' death scenes. Cecilia's first suicide attempt, cutting her wrists in the bathtub, heavily references famous representations of Ophelia's suicide and thus aligns with 'sad girl' aesthetics. Her eventual death, where she jumps out of a window and impales herself on the garden fence, evokes ideas of a circus performance: "Cecilia merely seemed balanced on the pole like a gymnast. The fluttering wedding dress added to this circus effect" (Eugenides 28). Even more striking as an act of performance is the remaining sisters' communal suicide at the end of the

novel. They seemingly lure the neighborhood boys into the Lisbon house under the pretense that they need the boys' help to escape from their home. The boys have acted as hidden, voyeuristic observers of the sisters throughout the novel; now, however, they believe that they are explicitly invited as rescuers and are supposed to aid in the girls' final act of escape. Instead, they become the audience to the sisters' suicides. Lux, who the boys meet as they enter the house, puts on a performance by letting the boys conduct a plan to help the sisters escape in Mrs. Lisbon's car. She stalls for time, distracting the boys from the sisters' real plan and making them believe that the other girls will be ready to leave shortly. The boys eventually wander into the basement and discover that Bonnie has hung herself from the ceiling. Terrified, they run out of the house and later learn that Therese took an overdose of sleeping pills before they even entered the house, Bonnie died while they were in the living room with Lux, Mary put her head inside the gas oven, and Lux died by carbon monoxide poisoning from letting the car engine run inside the garage. The narrators realize that the sisters never intended to be rescued and that Lux's conversation was a performance to buy her sisters time: "But she had unbuckled us, it turned out, only to stall us, so that she and her sisters could die in peace" (Eugenides 211).

While the boys initially believe that the Lisbon sisters have been contacting them to be rescued ("And so they hid from the world, waiting for someone – for us – to save them" (Eugenides 193); "they were calling to us" (Eugenides 199)), the girls actually take back their own agency and subvert the notion that they need to be saved by anyone. Instead, their desperate communal suicides turn into their one opportunity to take action and control the situation. They reject the passivity and vulnerability that is imposed on them and use sadness as an active means to write their own narrative.

6.2 *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*: Apathy as a Response to

Neoliberal Demands

In *MYORAR*, the narrator faces pressures both from society and from within herself that lead her to begin her hibernation project and seek a state of emotional apathy in sleep. As a young woman in 21st-century U.S. America, the narrator experiences the impossible expectations of neoliberal femininity. She is supposed to have a successful career, a fulfilling social and family life and always display a positive outlook. Exhausted and overstimulated by the demands of capitalism and neoliberalism, the narrator yearns for a break from these societal pressures. Her friend Reva, who functions as the protagonist's opposite, seems to fully subscribe to the self-improvement ideals promoted by neoliberalism:

Reva was partial to self-help books and workshops that usually combined some new dieting technique with professional development and romantic relationship skills, under the guise of teaching young women ‘how to live up to their full potential.’ Every few weeks, she had a whole new paradigm for living, and I had to hear about it. ‘Get good at knowing when you’re tired,’ she’d advised me once. [...] I really hated when she talked like that. (Moshfegh 15)

Even the therapist Dr. Tuttle makes a comment about the demands of work culture under capitalism: “The modern age has forced us to live unnatural lives. Busy, busy, busy. Go, go, go. You probably work too much” (Moshfegh 22). The novel shows how neoliberal feminism and work culture encourage women to pursue success in the workplace and self-improvement as well as fulfillment in social and family life, which is supposed to lead women to happiness. The narrator rejects these demands by removing herself from society and the workplace.

The protagonist is also exhausted by neoliberal and capitalist messaging and attempts to avoid overstimulation, hinting early on in the novel that she wants to avoid her emotions: “I didn’t want to read more than newspaper headlines. I steered clear of anything that might pique my intellect or make me envious or anxious” (Moshfegh 6). At another point, when the narrator watches television adverts because her videocassette recorder breaks, she describes the mass of ads that she is confronted with:

So now I was stuck with TV. I surfed the channels. A commercial for cat food. A commercial for home saunas. A commercial to low-fat butter. Fabric softener. Potato chips in individually portioned packages. Chocolate yoghurt. Go to Greece, the birthplace of civilization. Drinks that give you energy. Face cream that makes you younger. Fish for your kitties. Coca-Colas means ‘I love you.’ Sleep in the most comfortable bed in the world. Ice cream is not just for children, ladies: your husbands like it, too! If your house smells like shit, light this candle that smells like freshly baked brownies. (Moshfegh 197)

This passage shows the narrator bombarded with advertisements and emphasizes how capitalism has taken hold of every aspect of people’s lives, which the narrator tries to escape.

MYORAR also illustrates the narrator’s exhaustion with the neoliberal demand of self-transformation, self-care, and the “beauty imperative” (Elias et al. 25). As discussed in chapter five, the narrator has a complex relationship with the beauty labor she engages in. Throughout the story, she periodically stops getting beauty treatments, only to start again unconsciously. Her unconscious engagement in beauty and wellness treatments, such as waxing or manicures, shows how entrenched she is in the “beauty imperative” (Elias et al. 25).

The narrator also suffers under the importance attributed to the healthy body under neoliberalism and the requirement to engage in behaviors that are deemed healthy and thus morally correct. According to Verbeke (56), neoliberal ideals see the body as an enterprise with ethical features. We are supposed to achieve the best versions of ourselves under our own responsibility. Bodies that fall short of these requirements are deemed moral failures. In health

discourses, unhealthy bodies need better behavior management, whereas healthy individuals are seen a morally superior (Welsh 32). In *MYORAR*, this contemporary focus on health and individualism is best exemplified by Reva's unsuccessful comments and interventions against the narrator's behavior: "The summer I started sleeping, Reva admonished me for 'squandering my bikini body.' 'Smoking *kills*.' 'You should get out more.' 'Are you getting enough protein in your diet?'" (Moshfegh 8-9). Later on in the narrator's sleep project, Reva says: "I'm concerned about your health. You've lost at least three pounds since you started taking all those medications. [...] What about long term? Are you going to take pills for the rest of your life? [...] I just don't think it's healthy to sleep all day" (Moshfegh 56). Reva's concern about the narrator's unhealthy behavior shows the focus of body work within neoliberal culture. Reva believes in the importance of self-improvement, for instance through self-help literature as seen above, and maintaining one's body according to the beauty standard: "She was always getting her hair blown out, her eyebrows waxed into thin arched parentheses, her fingernails painted various shades of pink and purple, as though all of this made her a wonderful person" (Moshfegh 59). Again, this passage highlights the moral superiority seemingly connected to a healthy and well-maintained body, which the narrator rejects.

Another aspect that contributes to the narrator's sadness and her desire to lose herself in apathy is her relationship with her parents and the guilt and grief she feels over their deaths, in particular her mother's. The narrator's father, a renowned university professor, dies of cancer when she is still in college. She describes her desire to build a better, more comforting relationship with her mother after her father's death: "I reached for her hand and held it. It was bold of me to make such a move, but I thought we might bond now that we had something so huge in common – a dead man whose last name we shared" (Moshfegh 141). She also wants to fully mourn her father and be comforted by her mother:

I wanted to do what I thought I was supposed to do – to mourn. [...] And I wanted a mother. I could admit that. I wanted her to hold me while I cried, bring me cups of warm milk and honey, give me comfy slippers [...] Of course I didn't tell her that this was what I wanted. She was usually passed out in her bed with the door locked. (Moshfegh 146-47)

It becomes clear that the protagonist has a complicated relationship with her mother and feels disappointed by their lack of familial closeness. Her mother also suffers from substance abuse, which becomes even worse in the period after the father's death. The narrator mentions buying alcohol for her mother but not seeing the seriousness of the situation. She admits, however, to having derived some pleasure from contributing to her mother's addiction: "Maybe I did take some pleasure in aiding her self-destruction by buying her booze, but I didn't want my mother to die" (Moshfegh 147). Ultimately, seven years before the events of the novel take place, her

mother is hospitalized after an overdose and dies after being in a coma for three days. The narrator later finds a note that her mother wrote before her death:

The letter was totally unoriginal. She felt she wasn't equipped to handle life, she wrote, that she felt like an alien, a freak, that consciousness was intolerable and that she was scared of going crazy. 'Good-bye,' she wrote, then gave a list of people she'd known. I was sixth on the list of twenty-five. [...] I took the note out and read it as a reminder of what she'd actually been like and how little she cared about me. (Moshfegh 152-53)

Again, this passage clearly indicates that the protagonist's relationship with her mother was very strained and ambivalent. On the one hand she wishes to have a closer bond with her mother and mourns after her death, on the other hand, however, she resents her mother and forces herself to recall the rejection she had to experience growing up.

At a later point in the novel, the main character asks herself if she could have prevented her mother's death and experiences feelings of guilt:

I wondered, would my mother have been better off if I had stolen all her pills, as Reva had stolen all of mine? [...] My dead mother was lying in a coffin, a shriveled skeleton. [...] Did she blame me? What if I'd flushed away all those prescriptions before I went back to school, poured all her alcohol down the sink? Did she secretly want me to do that? Would that have made her happy for once? Or would it have pushed her further away? [...] I sensed a bit of remorse in me. (Moshfegh 244-45)

When Reva hides the main character's supply of medications in an attempt to help her become sober, the protagonist says to Reva: "You know that killing someone you love is the ultimate self-destructive act" (Moshfegh 242). While the narrator is talking to Reva in this moment, she also remembers her mother and the fact that she never attempted to stop her mother's substance abuse. This line covertly shows that she does not only feel responsible for her mother's death but has also been deeply affected by the grief and guilt. The debilitating and complicated emotions she feels after the death of her mother bring on her desire to escape the real world soon after: "I spent a lot of time staring at the ceiling that year, trying to cancel out thoughts about death with thoughts about nothingness" (Moshfegh 156). As she recounts the events after the deaths of her parents, she already hints at wanting to achieve a state of apathy before she eventually forms her plans for the hibernation project several years later.

As the discussion above shows, *MYORAR* features a similarly complex and ambivalent mother-daughter relationship as *TVS*. Like Mrs. Lisbon, the mother of the main character in *MYORAR* has a big influence on her daughter and the mother's actions, despite taking place in the past, still affect the protagonist's mental state in the present. However, while Mrs. Lisbon is an overbearing and controlling mother figure, akin to the typical 'evil' stepmother trope, the mother in *MYORAR* is distant, apathetic, and, crucially, dead at the time the story takes place. Thus, her character conflates the two classic mother figure representations of the dead natal

mother and the abusive stepmother. In life, she neglects her daughter and does not seem interested in building a close bond with her. Her death leaves the main character orphaned and in a state of mixed emotions and contributes to the protagonist's ultimate goal of hibernation.

As this analysis indicates, the narrator in *MYORAR* becomes increasingly overwhelmed by intersecting pressures that shape her daily life, in particular the expectations under neoliberal feminism and the accompanying demand of constant self-improvement. These external pressures intertwine with her unresolved grief and guilt over her parents' deaths. Particularly memories of her mother affect the protagonist deeply and raise the wish in her to escape emotions and society. Withdrawing into sleep seems to be only escape from a world of emotional exhaustion and neoliberal ideals.

Similar to *TVS*, *MYORAR* also draws on the themes of death and suicide. The suicides by the Lisbon sisters in *TVS*, despite their transgressive potential, still tend to be portrayed in a mysterious and romanticized way by the narrators. In *MYORAR*, the narrator seems to similarly romanticize death as a means to escape. As the main character's year of sleep progresses, she increasingly thinks about death as a solution to her problems and begins to idealize it. For instance, she asks "What if the only way to sleep is death?" (Moshfegh 227) and continues: "I wondered if I might be dead, and I felt no sorrow, only worry over the afterlife, if it was going to be just like this, just as boring. If I'm dead, I thought, let this be the end" (Moshfegh 228-29). At the worst times of her depression, she even already sees herself as dead: "I was dying. [...] I was the walking dead" (Moshfegh 230). Later, she bargains with herself that suicide would be a viable alternative if her self-prescribed rest cure fails:

I figured that if I jumped out while I was on the Infermiterol, it would be a painless death. A blackout death. I'd either wake up safe in the apartment, or I wouldn't. It was a risk I'd take forty times, every three days. If, when I woke up in June, life still wasn't worth the trouble, I would end it. I would jump. This was the deal I made. (Moshfegh 260)

These passages illustrate the main character's despair and desire to escape her life within the confines of neoliberal culture. She is unable to see any merit in continuing to live under the circumstances she tries to avoid.

A more important aspect of the novel, however, is not the protagonist's attitude towards death, since she does intend to emerge as a new and fully functioning person after her hibernation, but her use of sleep as a means to escape her emotions and overwhelming life. She explicitly mentions at the beginning of the novel that she does not view her sleep project as suicide: "Not that what I was doing was suicide. In fact, it was the opposite of suicide. My hibernation was self-preservational. I thought that it was going to save my life" (Moshfegh 7). For the protagonist, sleep becomes a means to achieve a state of apathy and escape her feelings

of depression and disillusionment with the world. Both external and internal pressures and unhappiness lead her to start the hibernation project that she hopes will renew her and transform her into a happy and content individual. She justifies her idea by saying “I was plagued with misery, anxiety, a wish to escape the prison of my mind and body” (Moshfegh 18). In the novel, sleep is associated with a state of emotional apathy and tranquility, in stark contrast with the narrator’s messy and hectic awake life:

This was the beauty of sleep – reality detached itself and appeared in my mind as casually as a movie or a dream. It was easy to ignore things that didn’t concern me. Subway workers went on strike. A hurricane came and went. It didn’t matter. Extraterrestrials could have invaded, locusts could have swarmed, and I would have noted it, but I wouldn’t have worried. (Moshfegh 4)

Before she begins hibernating full time, she spends many hours sleeping at her job at an art gallery: “[E]very time I lay down in that supply closet I went straight into black emptiness, an infinite space of nothingness. I was neither scared nor elated in that space. I had no visions. I had no ideas. [...] There was no response necessary. No inane conversation with myself. It was peaceful” (Moshfegh 39). The narrator even describes the state of nothingness she achieves through sleep as pleasurable and freeing: “Oh sleep, nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness. I was not a narcoleptic – I never fell asleep when I didn’t want to. I was more of a somniac. A somnophile” (Moshfegh 46). As her project continues, she describes losing track of time: “The speed of time varied, fast or slow, depending on the depth of my sleep. [...] My favorite days were the ones the barely registered” (Moshfegh 71). When she watches movies to fall asleep to, she explicitly avoids any kind of emotions or stimulations: “*The Color Purple* was too sad. *Ghost* filled me with too much longing [...] *Sister Act* was tricky because the songs got stuck in my head and made me want to laugh, run wild, dance be impassioned, or whatnot. That would not be good for my sleep” (Moshfegh 72). These passages show how sleep represents a withdrawal from overwhelming emotions and a disengagement with life. The narrator wishes to sink into emotional withdrawal to escape her grief, guilt, and the external pressures she experiences within a neoliberal society. Detaching herself from the constraints of society, not adhering to a schedule, and no longer going to work allows her to experience freedom. Her sleeping project represents a reclaiming of agency over her own time and conscious detachment from a fast-paced reality.

As such, while the main character uses sleep to escape her feelings of grief and depression, her self-destructive hibernation project also becomes a subversive act that serves to critique neoliberal tendencies of overworking and self-improvement. Sleep is typically perceived as a state of complete passivity; however, the protagonist turns it into an active form

of protest. In accordance with Sad Girl Theory, the narrator's enactment of sadness in the form of her year of rest and relaxation can be read as an informed act of protest: "Girls' sadness is not passive, self-involved or shallow; it is a gesture of liberation, it is articulate and informed, it is a way of reclaiming agency over our bodies, identities, and lives" (Wollen qtd. in Watson). Wollen advocates for the inclusion of different kinds of protests into the category of activism. Sadness, despite being primarily internal, can be seen as an active means of resistance:

I'm trying to open up the idea that protest doesn't have to be external to the body. [...] There's a long history of girls who have used their own anguish, their own suffering, as tools for resistance and political agency. Girls' sadness isn't quiet, weak, shameful, or dumb; It is active, autonomous, and articulate. (Wollen qtd. in Tunnicliffe)

As a 'sad girl' figure, Moshfegh's protagonist turns the seemingly passive routine of sleeping into an act of protest against neoliberal work culture and femininity. The narrator eventually feels that sleeping becomes productive and meaningful: "I was finally doing something that really mattered. Sleep felt productive" (Moshfegh 51). Despite neoliberal perceptions that high productivity is achieved through paid labor and indicated by stress, sleep makes the narrator feel productive. Her refusal to engage in any form of labor, be it as a job or beauty labor, subverts the neoliberal 'girl boss' trope, which focusses on positivity, productivity, and confidence, especially in the work place, but ignores systemic injustices.

As a young woman at the beginning of the 21st century, the narrator is supposed to display positivity and productivity, following the aspirational 'girl boss' figure, who works hard for her own success. With her background of familial wealth that she never had to work for, the narrator undermines the idea of the hyper-productive self-made 'girl boss.' She has a passive income from investments and renting out her parents' house, automatically receives unemployment benefits, and has savings from her inheritance:

I'd already paid a year of property taxes on my apartment and on my dead parents' old house upstate. Rent money from the tenants in that house showed up in my checking account by direct deposit every month. Unemployment was rolling in as long as I made the weekly call into the automated service and pressed '1' for 'yes' when the robot asked if I'd made a sincere effort to find a job. That was enough to cover the copayments on all my prescriptions, and whatever I picked up at the bodega. Plus, I had investments. My dead father's financial advisor kept track of all that and sent me quarterly statements that I never read. I had plenty of money in my savings account, too. ... I had a high credit limit on my Visa card. I wasn't worried about money. (Moshfegh 3)

None of this is money that she must actively earn, and she can simply conduct her sleeping project in passivity with the knowledge of financial security. As such, she embodies the opposite of the 'girl boss' figure, someone rejecting the mantra of productivity and positivity and still having financial privileges. The narrator's financial position also illustrates the unequal

distribution of wealth in neoliberal society and that wealthy individuals often become rich based on the exploitation of less fortunate people rather than through their own work.

However, with the main character's ultimate goal of transformation, she does still subscribe to neoliberal ideals of self-improvement. Neoliberal ideology demands that individuals, especially women, continuously work on themselves to not only fit into the current beauty standard but also maintain a productive and confident inner life (Gill and Elias 185). Thus, the individual becomes an enterprise that requires constant monitoring and improving. The narrator's sleep project can be read as the "ultimate self-transformation narrative" (Sykes 8). Without employment, she can focus full-time on her self-transformation, which follows the goal of turning her into a seemingly happy, confident, and productive person, the ideal neoliberal subject. Her unconscious engagement in beauty labor and capitalist consumption illustrates that even though she withdraws from society and its demands, she is still not immune to neoliberal ideals.

Nevertheless, the self-destructive nature of the protagonist's sleeping project stands in opposition to the self-improvement ideal. Her drug abuse and reclusiveness represent a clear contrast to self-optimization methods, such as exercising, clean eating, or avoiding alcohol. She becomes the opposite of the ideal neoliberal woman by rejecting these self-care practices, and thus, resisting neoliberal notions about individualism and optimization. The hibernation project turns her into a "self-destructive body" (Verbeke 56), which is a form of protest against societal regimes that dictate that it is an individual's responsibility to achieve the best possible version of one's body. Further, as a 'sad girl' character, Moshfegh's narrator chooses to engage in these self-destructive acts and subverts the idea that women under neoliberalism must maintain a perfectly healthy body and confident mind. Through her enactment of sadness, in the form of her sleeping project, she defies neoliberal and capitalist oppression.

A crucial aspect of the main character's sleeping project is her abuse and mixture of medications that result in emotional apathy and prolonged periods of sleep. The narrator's dubious psychiatrist, Dr. Tuttle, irresponsibly prescribes her a combination of pharmaceuticals, which are primarily used to treat insomnia, anxiety, and depression. Dr. Tuttle doesn't know about the narrator's hibernation, since she makes the psychiatrist believe that she suffers from insomnia: "My plan was to lie. I'd given it careful consideration. I told her I'd been having trouble sleeping for the past six months, and then complained of despair and nervousness in social situations" (Moshfegh 21). Dr. Tuttle's treatment plan with medications is extremely irresponsible and far beyond what clinicians would normally prescribe. This exaggeration aligns with the narrator's equally extreme plan to "sleep all day and become a whole new

person” (Moshfegh 26). The medications function as a means of escape into sleep and emotional numbness.

Some of the most important and real pharmaceuticals in the novel are, for instance, Ambien, Trazodone, Xanax, and Ativan. Ambien is a sedative commonly prescribed to treat insomnia and can be addicting when used for a long period of time or in high dosages (Osbourne). The narrator frequently uses irregular doses of Ambien and describes its effect as a “black veil” (Moshfegh 34). The medication also causes blackouts and leads her to engage in unconscious activities while sleeping: “Sleepwalking, sleeptalking, sleep-online-chatting, sleepeating – that was to be expected, especially on Ambien” (Moshfegh 115). Another sedating pharmaceutical typically prescribed as a sleep aid and to treat anxiety is Trazodone (American Addiction Centers “Trazodone”). In *MYORAR*, the protagonist uses Trazodone to induce sleep and reports that it “weigh[s] down the Ambien” (Moshfegh 251) and prevents her from having vivid dreams. Xanax and Ativan are both used to treat anxiety and panic disorders and have a high dependence risk after long-term usage and excessive dosages (Walker; American Addiction Centers “Ativan”). Again, the narrator takes both medications in irregular amounts to dull her emotions. While these drugs exist in real-world pharmacology and are commonly prescribed in treatment plans against depression, anxiety, or insomnia, the effects that the medications have on the narrator are inflated for the purpose of the novel. The effects are partially accurate but not as extreme as experienced by the narrator. With the exaggerated descriptions of the medications, Moshfegh blends fact and fiction to highlight the protagonist’s desire for oblivion and her passive protest.

The most extreme drug prescribed to the narrator by Dr. Tuttle is Infermiterol, a fictional medication invented by Moshfegh. Infermiterol is described as a powerful sedative that allows the narrator to remain in an unconscious state for prolonged periods of time. Thus, the drug enables the protagonist’s central goal of hibernation and escape from reality. Infermiterol causes severe blackouts and memory loss as well as sleepwalking behavior, which leads the narrator to perform automatic actions while she is asleep, such as shopping, interacting with other people or beauty treatments. She also puts herself in potentially risky situations by partying with strangers or travelling on public transport while unconscious. She only discovers afterwards what her dissociated self has done under the influence of the drug and struggles to piece together the fragments of the time spent asleep. Initially, the main character appreciates the blackouts caused by the Infermiterol, as the drug allows her to disassociate from the world completely for a few days: “One Infermiterol had taken days of my life away. It was the perfect drug in that sense” (Moshfegh 120). It symbolizes the narrator’s desire for oblivion and numbness and helps

her to escape the confines of her waking consciousness. However, as she continues to take the Infermiterol, she begins to lose control over her actions and starts fearing what she will do under its influence: “I wouldn’t take any more Infermiterol, at least for a while. It was working against my goal of doing nothing” (Moshfegh 185-86). The Infermiterol leads to a loss of agency and emphasizes a split between the narrator’s mind and body. The main character also realizes that Infermiterol impacts the effects of her other drugs, and she hides her experiences on the medication from Dr. Tuttle: “Telling Dr. Tuttle the truth – that the Infermiterol had made me do things out of my nature for days at a time without my knowledge, that the stuff had ruined me for all other medication – would raise too many red flags” (Moshfegh 216). Despite the fact that the pharmaceutical allows the narrator to completely withdraw from consciousness, her actions under the Infermiterol unsettle her. She deems the automatized sleepwalking-like behavior as leaving her too vulnerable and opposed to her central goal of sleeping in isolation.

However, towards the end of the novel and when the protagonist plans the final stretch of her hibernation, she reappropriates the unsettling effects of the Infermiterol and uses them to her advantage:

I knew exactly what I had to do: I needed to be locked up. If one tablet of Infermiterol put me into a state of vacuous unconsciousness for three days, I had enough to keep me in the dark until June. All I needed was a jailkeeper, and I could live in constant sleep without fear of going out and getting involved in anything. [...] The Infermiterol would work for me. (Moshfegh 254)

She tasks her artist acquaintance Ping Xi with locking her safely within her apartment while she undergoes a months-long Infermiterol induced blackout with only brief periods of wakefulness in between. In return, she gives Ping Xi consent to use her unconscious body for his art projects. In this way, she achieves an ultimate state of detachment and unconsciousness and uses the destructive effects of Infermiterol to aide with her hibernation. Her withdrawal from life into passivity illustrates how she uses sleep and self-destruction as resistance against capitalist demands of productivity. Rather than optimizing herself through mind and body labor, the protagonist chooses passivity to reach a renewed sense of self.

The protagonist’s prolonged unconscious phases and her emotional apathy also raise the question of her reliability as a narrator. She uses her blackouts to evade her feelings of guilt, grief and overwhelm. Sleep induced by pharmaceuticals and the resulting gaps in her memory become a defense mechanism for the main character to forget her struggles. She aims to escape her past and current problems and uses the medications to avoid self-knowledge. When she pieces together the events that happened while she was unconscious, neither the protagonist nor the reader can know whether her reconstructed account corresponds to what actually occurred.

As such, the narration is unreliable as the main character, intentionally or not, misleads both herself and the audience.

Regarding the performance of sadness in *MYORAR*, the main character's despair manifests on a much more private level than that of the Lisbon sisters in *TVS*. The narrator is primarily focused on her internal life, as she wants to achieve a state of emotional apathy. Although her sadness does show outwardly to some extent, for instance through her deteriorating appearance, most of her hibernation happens in private in her apartment without an audience. In contrast to classic coming-of-age stories where the protagonist ventures out into the world and undergoes a journey of personal growth, Moshfegh's protagonist opts to isolate herself in her home and finds a way to realize and eventually overcome her sadness. During the final part of her hibernation, Ping Xi uses her body in his art performances; however, the narrator is asleep and does not consciously engage in these actions. Her performance of sadness focuses on the private, domestic level, conducted not for an audience but for her own identity formation. This focus on the internal – both the protagonist's inner life and the inside of her home – frees her from having to adhere to neoliberal ideals of femininity and putting on the performance of the ideal neoliberal subject.

In accordance with Sad Girl Theory, the protagonist breaks with ideals of hyper-positivity and enacts sadness by not complying with normative affective scripts. Her expression of sadness is empowering, and as a 'sad girl' figure, she embodies a form of oppositional femininity. With her self-destructive hibernation project, she rebels against neoliberal self-optimization demands. She also embodies the Feminist Killjoy as defined by Ahmed by "not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising" (65). The protagonist challenges neoliberal expectations of productivity and engages in passivity to achieve the goal of her rest cure.

7. Conclusion: The Political Potential of Female Sadness

The goal of this thesis was to investigate the portrayal of female sadness and self-destruction in two contemporary U.S. American novels featuring young female characters who are experiencing some form of inner despair. The analysis focused on the depiction of sadness in young women and adolescent girls and examined how the characters employ sadness and self-destructive acts to make their suffering visible and resist their oppressive circumstances. The research aim was achieved with the help of a close reading of the novels *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) informed by feminist approaches to female sadness and critiques of neoliberal femininity. Elisabeth Bronfen's (1992) and Margaret Higonnet's (2000) readings of female suicide provided one foundation of this project and helped to analyze the romanticization of women's suicides as well as women's reclaiming of agency through self-afflicted death. Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) built an additional theoretical basis regarding the characters' defiance of neoliberal ideals through sadness and self-destruction. These approaches were applied in connection with Audrey Wollen's Sad Girl Theory, which situates female sadness as a political act of protest.

The analysis showed that the descriptions of the female characters in both novels heavily feature references to their physical appearances in connection with their despair. Their appearances change as the narratives progress and always display a stark contrast between beauty and physical deterioration. Both novels juxtapose imagery of beautiful young women with grotesque and even monstrous descriptions. In *TVS*, for instance, the portrayal of Cecilia's suicide evokes the notion of the young woman as a 'beautiful corpse' and includes references to the aesthetics of the scene. At the same time, however, this imagery is contrasted with more gruesome descriptions of her dead body. The remaining sisters are similarly described as mystifyingly beautiful and "visibly wasting away" (Eugenides 158). In *MYORAR*, the narrator frequently undergoes beauty treatments but as her hibernation continues and her mental state worsens, her physical appearance also begins to reflect her despair. Both novels have their characters experience significant bodily transformations to illustrate how the young women's mental struggles manifest physically.

The close reading also showed that the female characters in the two novels under analysis experience internal changes in the course of the narratives, in particular in relation to their girlhood. *TVS* positions the Lisbon sisters in a transitional grey space between childhood and adulthood and portrays their girlhood as dynamic and non-linear. In *MYORAR*, the protagonist's

sleeping project functions, like girlhood, as a period of identity construction. She undergoes a psychological transformation from self-doubt and sadness to maturity and a more positive outlook on life.

Regarding the enactment of sadness and self-destruction as acts of resistance, the analysis illustrated the political potential of female sadness through the characters' reclaiming of agency and subversion of gendered tropes. The Lisbon sisters defy their oppressive suburban upbringing and constant scrutiny of the neighborhood through their self-inflicted deaths. The novel frames their suicides as an act of escape and a gesture of liberation, in accordance with Bronfen's notion of suicide as "an authorship with one's own life [...] ambivalently poised between self-construction and self-destruction" (142). The sisters make their suffering visible in the most extreme form and simultaneously subvert the boys' belief that they need to be rescued. They function as 'sad girls' as discussed by Wollen, since they act out their despair for others to see and eventually reclaim agency in their sadness.

The thesis further illustrated how the narrator in *MYORAR* suffers under the impossible demands of neoliberal feminism and how she uses sleep and emotional apathy to escape these societal pressures. Her year of rest and relaxation becomes a means to turn off her feelings of exhaustion and grief and simultaneously becomes a subversive act that critiques neoliberal tendencies of overworking and self-improvement. Aligning with Wollen's view that "[g]irls' sadness is not passive, self-involved or shallow" (Wollen qtd. in Watson), the seemingly passive state of sleep is turned into an active form of protest against neoliberal work culture and femininity. Through her refusal to engage in paid labor and beauty treatments, the novel's protagonist subverts the neoliberal 'girl boss' trope. Despite her focus on self-transformation to emerge as a content and happy individual at the end of the hibernation, the self-destructive nature of the sleep project clearly opposes typical neoliberal self-care practices and ideas about optimization. The narrator's abuse of pharmaceuticals and resulting loss of consciousness and withdrawal into passivity further shows her use of sleep and self-destruction to resist capitalist demands of productivity.

Both primary texts feature 'sad girl' characters that oppose demands of hyper-positivity and enact their sadness to draw attention to their mental struggles as well as unfair societal pressures. While the female characters in the two novels share many common features and their sadness manifests in similar ways, the anxieties about and ideals of femininity expressed in the narratives differ. *TVS* was published in 1993 and takes place in suburban Michigan in the 1970s. As such, a central aspect of the novel and a large contributor to the girls' feelings of confinement is the late 20th-century U.S. American suburb. The Lisbon sisters rebel against the myth of the

ideal suburban life, which values conservatism, the nuclear family model and traditional gender roles. Their parents fear the girls' desire to escape suburban conformity and confine them to the family home, hoping to keep up the image of the ideal suburban middle-class family. The sisters are also a constant subject of neighborhood gossip and are turned into a spectacle due to their deviation from the script of cheerful and polite girlhood and suburban harmony. The Lisbon girls and their suicides peel back the "suburban façade" (Coon 18) and reveal late 20th-century anxieties about the changing roles of women, female sexual liberation and hidden decay within suburbia. *MYORAR*, on the other hand, was first published in 2018 and is set in the years 2000 and 2001 in New York City. Accordingly, the societal background of the narrative is shaped by post-feminist and late-capitalist culture emphasizing consumption and individualization. The novel exposes the unjust conditions of neoliberalism with the narrator's extreme financial privilege that allows her to even conduct her hibernation project in the first place. The text also highlights the fatigue caused by overconsumption and hyper-productivity and emphasizes the impossible demands of neoliberal femininity. These different cultural backdrops of the novels, one taking place in the late 20th century and one in the early 21st century, illustrate how the 'sad girl' figure can embody diverse iterations but always serves to highlight societal ills through her enactment of sadness.

This thesis contributes to feminist literary scholarship by connecting Sad Girl Theory with literary close reading and demonstrating its application as an interpretative lens for contemporary fiction. In addition, this project expands approaches that treat female madness and sadness as empowering by including how enacting sadness and self-destruction can defy patriarchal oppression and critique imperatives of neoliberal feminism. Reading female sadness as political and productive complicates dominant narratives that prioritize empowerment and resilience. This approach reframes sadness and self-destruction as ambivalent modes of agency within neoliberal ideals of happiness and self-optimization. Moreover, this thesis offers a comparative reading of *TVS* and *MYORAR* that foregrounds the characters' complex affective states and challenges interpretations of the protagonists as mere 'damsels in distress.' By examining female sadness and its political potential, the analysis challenges reductive notions of agency and highlights the primary texts' capacities to reimagine feminist resistance as ambivalent and at times self-destructive. Overall, this perspective contributes to broader interdisciplinary discussions of affect, gender, and resistance under neoliberalism.

While the aim of this thesis was to provide a nuanced reading of female sadness and self-destruction, a central limitation of the project is the restricted textual corpus. The analysis focused on only two primary texts, both written by U.S. American authors within a relatively

narrow cultural context. The small corpus limits the extent to which conclusions about ‘sad girl’ characters as a broader cultural or literary figure can be generalized. Other manifestations of the ‘sad girl,’ particularly in non-Western media, might complicate or challenge the findings. Additionally, both novels under analysis feature predominantly white, middle- or upper-class female protagonists. The political potential of sadness and self-destruction may function differently for women who do not occupy these privileged positions. It is also important to mention this approach’s risk of overstating the female characters’ degree of agency and the danger of idealizing sadness. In both *TVS* and *MYORAR*, sadness and self-destructive acts function as responses to oppressive circumstances but remain ambiguous and impossible to define definitively as either resistance or resignation. This tension highlights the complexity of affective resistance within neoliberal and patriarchal frameworks.

Future studies could expand the scope of this thesis and focus on additional literary texts that feature ‘sad girl’ figures, in particular non-Western, queer, or racially diverse narratives, to explore how the politics of female sadness shifts for characters outside privileged social positions. In addition, since Sad Girl Theory originated in online spaces, further research could explore ‘sad girl’ representations across different media and illustrate how literary portrayals of female sadness interact with representations on social media platforms, films, or visual art. Ultimately, this thesis has shown how, within a literary context, female sadness can be reimagined as an act of resistance against patriarchal and capitalist oppression. As ‘sad girl’ figures, the female characters in *TVS* and *MYORAR* make their suffering visible, challenge normative affective scripts and reappropriate sadness as an active means of protest.

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9. Appendix

9.1 Abstract English

The ‘sad girl’ has been a recurring presence in literature, film, and online spaces in recent years. In her Sad Girl Theory, online personality and artist Audrey Wollen interprets female sadness as an act of resistance against an overly optimistic popular culture and sees the ‘sad girl’ as a figure who protests systems of oppression within a long history of pathologization of women’s affective states. This thesis explores the portrayal of female sadness and self-destruction in Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018). The analysis examines how the novels depict female sadness and how the ‘sad girl’ characters employ sadness and self-destructive acts to resist their oppressive circumstances. The thesis is informed by feminist readings of female sadness and self-destruction as well as critiques of neoliberal ideals of femininity, which build the foundation for a close reading of the portrayal of female sadness and its political potential. I argue that while both the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides* and the unnamed protagonist in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* are on the one hand portrayed as girls in a crisis, both narratives also highlight their complexity and subvert the ‘damsel in distress’-trope. Through sadness and self-destruction, the female characters make their suffering visible and gain agency. Thus, enacting female sadness becomes a productive and political act which opposes neoliberal ideas of ‘girl power’ feminism.

9.2 Abstract German

Das „sad girl“ taucht in den letzten Jahren immer wieder in Literatur, Film und digitalen Räumen auf. In ihrer Sad Girl Theory interpretiert die Online-Persönlichkeit und Künstlerin Audrey Wollen weibliche Traurigkeit als einen Akt des Widerstands gegen eine übermäßig optimistische Populärkultur und versteht das „sad girl“ als eine Figur, die innerhalb einer langen Geschichte der Pathologisierung weiblicher affektiver Zustände gegen Unterdrückungssysteme protestiert. Diese Arbeit untersucht die Darstellung von weiblicher Traurigkeit und Selbstzerstörung in *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) von Jeffrey Eugenides und *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018) von Ottessa Moshfegh. Die Analyse beleuchtet, wie die Romane weibliche Traurigkeit darstellen und wie die „sad girl“-Figuren Traurigkeit und selbstzerstörerische Handlungen nutzen, um sich gegen ihre unterdrückenden Lebensumstände zu wehren. Die Arbeit stützt sich auf feministische Lesarten weiblicher Traurigkeit und Selbstzerstörung sowie auf Kritiken neoliberaler Ideale von Weiblichkeit, die die Grundlage eines Close Readings der Darstellung weiblicher Traurigkeit und ihres politischen Potenzials bilden. Ich argumentiere, dass sowohl die Lisbon-Schwestern in *The Virgin Suicides* als auch die namenlose Protagonistin in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* einerseits als Mädchen in einer Krise dargestellt werden, die Erzählungen jedoch zugleich ihre Komplexität hervorheben und den „Damsel-in-Distress“-Topos aufbrechen. Durch Traurigkeit und Selbstzerstörung machen die weiblichen Figuren ihr Leiden sichtbar und gewinnen Handlungsmacht. Damit wird die Inszenierung weiblicher Traurigkeit zu einem produktiven und politischen Akt, der sich neoliberalen Vorstellungen eines „Girl-Power“-Feminismus widersetzt.