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Flesh in Line with the Mind:
Gender in Caitlin Kiernan's
The Drowning Girl

By

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and
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University of Louisville

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Transgender authors are situated at the crux of many of the questions of feminist theory: is gender innate, social, or a combination of both? Is it fixed or malleable? Should gender be preserved, or ultimately abolished? Feminist theorists have attempted to answer these questions, and much intellectual work within the emerging feminist academic movements of the 1970s and 1980s sought to place women's experiences outside of biological determinism; to assert the legitimacy of their experiences, some theorists made claims about universal womanhood. In the twenty-first century, the growing visibility of transgender people has regenerated anxieties and debates of normative and descriptive claims about gender.

Since the 1970s autobiographies of transgender people have been the most popular of their written works. These writings mostly fit within the title of a "trans narrative," for these personal accounts played a vital role in legitimizing the experience of being transgender. In order to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria, the psychological condition of identifying with a sex/gender other than that assigned at birth, trans persons have had to prove their authenticity by performing "natural" heteronormativity. Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna's "Toward a Theory of Gender" demonstrates the pervasiveness of these accounts, and the subsequent dangers to trans people's mental health. However, Janice Raymond's "The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male" threw a wrench into feminist discourse by claiming that trans women actually are men infiltrating women's spaces in order to harm feminist movements. In "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Sandy Stone responds to Raymond's piece, calling for trans people to reject the pressure to pass as cisgender, for the reason that performing traditional heteronormativity as "natural" is a gross disservice to feminist theorists and queer theorists alike. Stone asserts that trans bodies are texts - they are complex, dynamic,

and canvasses upon which to subvert gendered oppression.

While feminists worked to create a framework to critique gender, some theorists and literary critics claimed unique and universal experiences of women as a category. These debates about biological essentialism and gender essentialism neglected the testimony and art of women that did not fit within a category of white, Western, upper-middle class women. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's 1979 work *The Madwoman In the Attic*, while much praised in its time for drawing attention to the erasure of women's writing from literary criticism, has since been criticized for creating an entirely white upper-class women's literary canon, and ignoring the writing of women of color. In an attempt to assert the legitimacy of their identity, some trans people have insisted on the existence of binary gender, in order to assert that they are no different than supposedly biological women.

At the same time that these theoretical debates rage on, trans people unconnected to literary and feminist studies have sought to inform the public through fiction. Caitlin R. Kiernan's 2012 novel, *The Drowning Girl* shows how some trans women view themselves as women, how they define being a trans person, and why their experiences matter. In Kiernan's novel, protagonist India Morgan Phelps, or Imp, struggles to narrate her fight with her demons: a family history of mental illness, loved ones' suicides, and internalized inadequacy of the writing process altogether. Imp is a short story writer and a painter in her mid-twenties writing from her apartment in Providence, Rhode Island. Imp's story reflects on the past year or so, beginning for the most part when she meets Abalyn, her romantic and sexual partner, and describes their evolving relationship and their breakup. During this process, she also meets Eva - a spectral-like stranger that Imp finds walking along a road naked next to a forest. Imp brings Eva into her

home to take care of her, sparking an obsession with Eva that brings about much of Imp's anxieties about her sanity: after Eva's departure, she remembers Eva through two equally detailed narratives with differing places, dates of occurrence, and symbolism that Eva embodies, while only one set of events could have factually occurred. Throughout the stream of consciousness narrative, she describes memories of her mother and grandmother who both committed suicide due to similar mental illnesses that Imp struggles with. Unable to trust her own judgment, and looking to heal from various traumas, Imp turns to her typewriter for liberation from self-destruction. Though cisgender herself, the other significant character is her partner, Abalyn - a transsexual woman who relays much of her experience in coming out and coming to know herself. Through Imp and Abalyn, Kiernan asserts the authenticity of trans women's experiences as women, un-hyphenated, through the existence of binary gender, along with many of the problematic baggage of such beliefs.

To date, no peer-reviewed academic journals have published literary criticism of *The Drowning Girl*, though a handful of masters and doctoral theses tackle the novel. Brit Mandelo's master's thesis "Necessary Fictions: Self and Text in Caitlín R. Kiernan's *The Red Tree* and *The Drowning Girl*" describes the duality of text and self as explored in *The Drowning Girl*, and analyzes how authors transcend traumatic events through writing. While Mandelo writes of the relevance of queer characters in the novel, they do not expand upon the significance of Kiernan's identity as a trans woman. Jaime Weida, in her PhD dissertation "'I Have Heard the Mermaids Singing, Each to Each: Modernism, Science, Mythology, and Feminist Narratives,'" tackles how Kiernan's novel lies at the intersection of science fiction, modernist themes, and feminist criticism. While she analyzes part of how Virginia Woolf's writing influenced *The Drowning*

Girl, and mentions Kiernan's queer identity, she fails to consider what Kiernan's work claims about women's writing as a genre, and how transgender characters and themes are key to understanding her feminist intent.

To answer questions about the embodiment of gender, a seemingly basic question must be asked: What is gender? Imp's relationship within her flesh-and-blood family of women reveals the legacy of the subordination of women to men in their personal and creative lives. Her familial relationship in the novel is also distinctly literary, for Imp's family connects within a chain of writers. This literary relationship becomes canonical, for Imp's writing directly responds to the texts that have come before her. Analyzing a key feminist work that ripples implicitly through Kiernan's writing, "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, connects *The Drowning Girl* to a larger conversation of the purpose of writing in the women's literary tradition. By analyzing literary allusions from the women's literary canon and the history of suppressing women's voices through medicalized and culturally mandated systems, Kiernan crafts a methodology of fictionally transcending the gatekeeping tactics that exclude "others" and utilizes art as a means of liberation from trauma and oppressive social structures. With connecting trans women's experiences to canonical literary and cultural theories about women's oppression, however, the novel risks implicitly perpetuating claims about women's writing which lack intersectionality. Kieranan's construction of masculinity and femininity, through the portrayal and characterization of women and men, upholds and supports stereotypical, binary depictions of gender, and perpetuates the notion of a universal woman's experience.

This paper does not try to make a normative claim about the ability of a trans person to speak for cisgender women, or their place in the community of women discussing what it means

to be oppressed as a woman. Transgender studies encompass a wide range of opinions regarding questions about the biological and social constructions of sex and gender, so making any definitive stance at this time is far too premature. Additionally, trans people, as a social group, are not monolithic - division exists within the community in regards to what it means to be trans, and the extent to which they conform, reject, or subvert binary gender norms. I aim to analyze Kiernan's novel's perspective, through the narrative structure, literary allusions, and character development, to understand what the novel suggests about the construction of gender and how she responds to feminist critiques of the experiences of trans women.

Certain terms need to be defined because the meanings of these words can vary in cultural, political, and individual contexts. While much feminist criticism still is figuring out the difference between these words, "sex" and "gender" will be separated in this argument. "Sex" refers to the biological categorization of a person, typically assigned at birth based off of external genitalia, but in actuality is comprised of secondary sex characteristics, chromosomes, gonads, etc. The most common definitions would encompass sex in "male," "female," and "intersex." "Gender" refers to the social categories of identity, both socially and individually constructed, such as "man," "woman," "transgender," etc. "Cisgender" refers to any person who self-identifies as the gender identity that was assigned to them at birth; a cisgender woman would be someone who was assigned "female" at birth and identifies with the gender "woman." "Transsexual" refers to a person who undergoes a medical transition; a transsexual man would be someone who was assigned "female" at birth, identifies with the gender "man," and has had any surgery to change their biological sex to align with that designation. "Transgender" refers to a broad category of individuals who self-identify in the spectrum of a gender other than cisgender,

including but not limited to transgender, transsexual, gender non-conforming, and non-binary people.

Section I: Imps, Pens, and Authors: Kiernan's Constructions of Binary Gender

While the novel does say much explicitly about trans women, the implications become much clearer when analyzing how the novel portrays the categories of "women" and "men" in general. The centrality of women characters distinguishes Kiernan's novel from much fiction, with men acting only through memories, stories, and nonessential referents, placing them firmly as background characters or antagonists. Through Kiernan's construction of mental illness as liberatory from male artistic structures, Kiernan follows an approach to analyzing gender that was popular in earlier feminist literary criticism. Examining how Kiernan constructs masculinity and femininity in her novel shows the extent that Kiernan's work subverts and perpetuates binary gender differences, and shapes how Abalyn as a transsexual character functions within this gendered framework.

Mental illness is a major theme in *The Drowning Girl*, for much of Imp's narrative centers around the battle between her and her own mind. Due to her schizophrenia and other disorders, her written word seems to take on its own persona - from the very first lines of the book, Imp's two selves appear: "I'm going to write a ghost story now," she typed. "A ghost story with a mermaid and a wolf," she also typed. "I also typed" (Kiernan 1). Though written from the first person perspective, "Imp" will jump in, writing from both perspectives at the same time, either to critique or add details to her own narrative. Third person Imp often interjects to direct the narrative ("Only write what you saw," Imp typed. "Don't interpret. Only describe" (96)),

give the first person Imp advice (“‘Nothing is ever straightforward,’ Imp typed, ‘though we lose a lot of the truth by pretending it is so’” (50)), or to call out an inconsistency in the narrative (“Imp typed, ‘But we both know better, don’t we?’” (68)), juxtaposing a “sane” Imp and a more honest, truer form of self. This narrative structure shows some of the ways that Kiernan exposes the supposed differences between sanity and insanity as false, resulting in much of the novel’s transformative messages: ultimately, Imp’s embracing of her madness becomes her salvation.

The novel suggests that mentally ill women possess extraordinary insight. In Imp’s world, insanity becomes a lens through which knowledge is created, for “Madwomen can see such apparitions, and our touch can render them corporeal” (Kiernan 215). The novel’s slippage between truth and fact, that things can be truthful on one level but not factually true, creates a postmodern subjective reality that consumes Imp. Much of her story rests in trying to discern between two narratives of past events: one in which Eva appears to her in July, and is framed with mermaid imagery, or the other, in which Eva appears to her in November, and these specific memories are associated with werewolves. As she tries to decipher which story actually took place, because both narratives are as coherent and detailed in her own mind, she laments: “I’m a crazy woman who knows damn well she’s crazy, but who doesn’t want to be reminded just *how* crazy she is by having to tell two stories that are true, when only one can be *factual*? ...Am I panicking because I think I need or I wish to force a straight, sane line, a narrative that begins *here* and proceeds to *there* by a conventional, coherent route?” (49). Her anxieties about her mental health, then, slip into her writing: because she is crazy, her writing must be. She feels that she has to produce one, true, linear, coherent narrative without any kind of ambiguity. However, the novels suggests that embracing this ambiguity aids in her discovery of the truth.

Imp's mental state influences her opinions about her writing. She thinks, "I wish I were a writer, a real writer, because if I were, I expect I wouldn't be making such a goddamn mess of this story" (Kiernan 98). These anxieties extend beyond a personal self-consciousness, but are stemmed from her gender identity. She wonders, "Am I a crazy woman only transferring her delusions and disordered consciousness into the written word?" (50). Literary critics in the 1970s wrote much about the specific nervousness about writing that they claimed women face; Cixous articulates this anxiety, for "Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives...hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her...to write...hasn't thought she was sick?" (1233). Throughout *The Drowning Girl*, Imp constantly critiques her work, frequently bashing her own abilities to tell her story: "My words aren't good enough...A woman struggles to describe demons, angels, and, being *only* a woman, she does their beauty and terror a disservice" (Kiernan 284). This idea of being *only* a woman, of believing that "writing is at once too high, too great for you, it's reserved for the great...you've written a little, but in secret" (Cixous 1233) is infamous for being so utterly able to make women feel self-conscious, and guilty, for expressing themselves in a form that is reserved only for geniuses, a title reserved for men. The denial of the validity of experience and emotion is one that Joanna Russ claims serves to "pollute the agency—that is, to promulgate the idea that women make themselves ridiculous by creating art...hence impossible for any woman, or that creating art shows a woman up as abnormal, neurotic, unpleasant and hence unlovable" (25). While Imp has published short stories, she believes that doing so "does not make me a real writer. Not an author, I mean" (Kiernan 31). This anxiety of authorship comes not only from her misgivings about her sanity, but from her status as a woman.

Knowing that Imp's mental illnesses are transmitted through her family further blurs the lines between sanity and insanity, and contextualizes Imp's narrative in a tradition beyond her as an individual. Imp is the latest in line of "the Phelp's Family Curse" (Kiernan 4), indicating a lineage including her grandmother, passed to her own mother, and continuing with her - "Me. Rosemary Anne. Caroline. Three crazy women, all in a row" (26), admitting that "Maybe the Curse goes even farther back than that" (6). Imp's own mother, Rosemary Anne, and her grandmother, Caroline, both committed suicide as a result of their illnesses. As subverting the typical patriarchal hierarchy within a family, this matriarchal lineage has profound effects on Imp's character. The influences of other people (thus other texts) in Imp's own story are very apparent - Mandelo notes that "within the first fifteen pages, we are informed of Imp's family history of madness and her schizophrenia" (20). While Mandelo describes this as a function of creating an unreliable narrator, it also places Imp within the historical silencing of women's voices, and the inability to convey their emotions in response to patriarchal abuses of power without being pathologized. This family history, if people are understood as texts, places Imp's relationship to her mother and grandmother, and maternal figures beyond, as directly relational to Imp's understanding and constitution of herself; thus, her family tradition is not simply by blood, but distinctly literary through the ways that her family history haunts her.

Imp comments significantly on the pervasiveness of hauntings, realizing that they can transcend their conventional conceptions as spectral entities. She describes ghosts as "memories that are too strong to be forgotten for good...refusing to be obliterated through time" (Kiernan 12). As the story progresses, we learn that the memories Imp seeks to work through are those of the loss of a partner to suicide, and her inability to escape the trauma, or "ghosts," that follow

her: “once you start seeing them, you can’t ever *stop* seeing them...you accidentally or on purpose start seeing them, you make that gestalt shift that permits you to recognize them for what they are” (13). In Imp’s narrative, “haunting is the action of text—the manner in which it influences and pressures individuals in the world despite its seemingly inert status as object. Text...does not need volition or even reality to hook into the mind of an individual, to rewrite their awareness or self-conception, to *infect*” (Mandelo 16, emphasis theirs). This reading makes more sense when we understand Imp as an author, creating herself through her relationship to her own writing and other texts, aware of the ghosts of the women that have come before her, for “Nobody is without origins...nobody whose work is read at all is without influence” (Russ 124). The conversation between multiple texts throughout *The Drowning Girl* further upholds this assertion, for Imp herself states that “Dead people and dead thoughts and supposedly dead moments are never, ever truly dead, and they shape every moment of our lives” (Kiernan 110). She recognizes that, once inscribed, a text has the potential to live on forever, through contemporary readers and social change made in response to a book; therefore, the act of writing preserves knowledge, and can be used to create ghosts, or to grapple with the aftermath of becoming haunted.

Imp’s insistence that her family history matters within her story reflects this haunting nature of texts. Imp talks about the Phelp’s family curse, and while wondering how far back it even stretches, admits that she cannot know the “secrets my great-grandmothers and great-great-grandmothers might have harbored and taken to their graves.” However, her mother and grandmother are “too much a part of *my* story, and I need recourse to them to tell it...I can’t tell my story, or the parts of my story that I’m going to try to tell, without also telling parts of

their stories” (Kiernan 5-6). She admits that she “could be writing fabricated versions of them, fictional avatars to stand in for the women they actually were” (5), showing one of the triumphs and downfalls of the written word: survival of some kinds of truths, separated from their origins, to only be guessed at by those who read their words contemporarily. On the surface, her connections to her family seem to be purely flesh-and-blood; however, through writing them into her story, she implicitly invokes the texts of women writers that have come before her. These literary references, like the “ghosts” that haunt Imp, are pernicious, everlasting, and ever influencing. Therefore, the things that previous women writers have written, according to Imp, cannot be separated from her own story.

Imp’s narrative contains traces of hauntings by other women writers. She writes with “the manual typewriter that used to be Grandmother Caroline’s” (6). Composing her story with this typewriter not only subverts the phallic imagery of writing with a pen, where a male artist “fathers” a text through writing, but directly connects Imp’s writing with her grandmother as an artist. Beyond her immediate family, Imp is also placed within a feminist literary context of works such as “The Yellow Wallpaper,” whose narrator battles mental illness, and *Jane Eyre*. In the latter, Bertha’s character, by being so “Grounded in her body, her madness is contextualized as a matrilineal legacy of national, ethnic identity and physical disorder: ‘Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations!...’ (277)” (Donaldson 106). Imp notes that this memoir she writes “might be my pocket full of stones” (Kiernan 27). This quote refers to Virginia Woolf’s suicide, and implies that the weight of the narrative Imp tries to write may lead to her demise. Therefore, her relationship to these women in her family and in literature, becomes grounded through Imp’s depression and mental illness.

One of the most common methods by which writers respond to established literary canons is by harking back to previously written works, and showing the ways that their own work connects within a conversation about authorship. Kiernan demonstrates an awareness of the literature that precedes her, and responds directly to feminist works which detail the ways that women have been excluded and suppressed from their writing. Weida describes how Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* ripples through *The Drowning Girl*, and Imp's response to such writings demonstrates how Imp inserts herself into a distinctly feminist literary tradition. However, one of the women's written works most prominent in academia could easily be missed while reading Kiernan's novel. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," a landmark of feminist literature, focuses on the relationship between insanity, women, and writing. *The Drowning Girl* pays tribute to this short story through the discussion of hauntings, the color yellow itself, and the relationship between women and perceived insanity. Through the frequent literary allusions to "The Yellow Wallpaper" located in *The Drowning Girl*, Imp establishes herself within the women's literary canon, connecting herself within a rhetorical tradition that experiences violence at the hands of the male gaze, and ultimately transcends the violent ends that Perkins Gilman's protagonist meets. Analyzing the connections between these two pieces of literature reveals the ways that Kiernan conceives of the tradition of women's writing, and further highlights some of the implicit assumptions that are made through binary gender constructions.

One of the most recognizable connections between the two stories should be rather obvious: the prevalence of the color yellow. The color is ubiquitous within Kiernan's story, and the color, as a connection to Perkins-Gilman's story, shows most significantly when Imp tries to

paint a particular shade of yellow. Throughout Perkins-Gilman's story, the narrator makes very clear the aversion she has to the specific kind of yellow, for the "color is repellent, almost revolting; a smouldering unclean yellow" (649). The "dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others" (649) echoes Imp, frustratingly watching the "wrong yellow became an entirely wrong orange" (Kiernan 117). Abalyn asks Imp the "color" that she is trying to achieve, to which Imp responds "'Don't you mean what *shade* of yellow?'" (119). Other than correcting her artistic jargon, Kiernan alludes subtly to "The Yellow Wallpaper" by describing how the wallpaper "has a kind of subpattern in a different shade...you can only see it in certain lights" (Perkins Gilman 650). Additionally, the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," muses that the wallpaper "is the strangest yellow, that wall-paper! It makes me think of all the yellow things I ever saw – not beautiful ones like buttercups, but old foul, bad yellow things" (653). Imp echoes this sentiment as she tries to concoct a yellow that is "bright...Sort of like a canary or goldenrod is yellow" (Kiernan 119), but instead creates a color that kept getting "wronger and wronger" (118), until finally Imp decides that "now I just felt sort of tired and weary of the color yellow" (122). The unbecoming attributes and associations of the kinds of yellow in these two stories demonstrate a clear connection between the two texts, made only more obvious by their shared anxieties about making art in a world that does not value their creative endeavors.

The narrator's fixation with the movement in the wallpaper parallels Imp's obsession with finding and making patterns. As a tactic to slow down her descent into insanity, the narrator of "The Yellow Wall-Paper" obsessively traces and follows the pattern in the wallpaper, trying to discern some kind of course or meaning. She describes how the curves in the wallpaper "suddenly commit suicide – plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of

contradictions” (Perkins Gilman 648), similar to Imp wishing her narrative could be “free of paradox and contradiction” (Kiernan 81). The compulsive behavior of the narrator is shown again by her assertion that “I *will* follow that pointless pattern to some sort of a conclusion” (Perkins Gilman 650). Imp similarly felt that she was painting “myself into the canvas...Locking my *physical* self up within my paintings” (Kiernan 116). The notion of being trapped in one’s obsession, but also within the confines of one’s social walls, mimics the narrator’s feelings in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” as she watches the women who are trapped behind the paper, while losing herself within it. These two texts both create a struggle against the confines of a literary tradition that rejects emotion, for “the woman writer’s self-contemplation may be said to have begun with a searching glance into the mirror of the male-inscribed literary text...But looking hard enough, she would see...an enraged prisoner: herself” (Gilbert and Gubar 14-15). Just as Imp paints herself into the canvas, both she and the narrator write themselves into their art; they recognize the anguish that women feel when they are simultaneously compelled to make art, but have been conditioned to believe that they do not have the intellectual capability to do so.

These two stories are further supported through both text’s ubiquitous use of the term “creep,” as the narrator’s recognition of a tradition of women haunted and haunting others through writing. Imp explains that, in her world, when “moving through a ghost story, Gothic and Victorian law applies. Here I creep my footpath through both at once” (Kiernan 216) – she specifically inserts herself into the same Gothic and Victorian tradition with which Perkins identifies. The way she notices that “Eva... creeps along country roads and railroad tracks” (209) is almost exactly like the narrator seeing the woman from the wallpaper outside of her window: “And though I always see her, she may be able to creep faster than I can turn! I have watched her

sometimes away off in the open country, creeping.” Additionally, the narrator makes clear that the woman in the wallpaper is not alone, but in a tradition of women: “I don't like to look out of the windows even-- there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wall-paper as I did?...It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!” (Perkins Gilman 656). Imp inserts not just Eva, but herself into this place: “She, she who is me, and I creep around the edges of my own life” (Kiernan 202). This creeping around the edges of trauma, of writing and living in secret, is an anxiety firmly fixed in this tradition of women’s literature. The women within the Yellow Wallpaper who “creep” inside of the paper are the unnamed women who have also been bound in the confines of a social reality that keeps them from taking up the pen.

The idea of using writing to keep sane appears in both works. The narrator’s husband says “with my imaginative power and habit of story-making, a nervous weakness like mine is sure to lead to all manners of excited fancies, and that I ought to use my will and good sense to check the tendency” (Perkins Gilman 649), so her husband becomes the gatekeeper to creativity under the guise of medical care. The narrator’s diagnosis by her husband, saying that “there is really nothing the matter with one but temporary nervous depression--a slight hysterical tendency” (Perkins Gilman 648), shows the centrality of the theme of men pathologizing women’s experiences. This idea of female authors being overcome and consumed by their depression is quoted often within *The Drowning Girl*, made especially prominent through the usage of Virginia Woolf as a key literary influence for Imp (Kiernan 3). Furthermore, placing “The Yellow Wallpaper,” a tale about the dangers of being kept from writing, within Imp’s story, places Imp in the same literary tradition as the narrator, further establishing Imp belonging in this

family of nervous women writers.

Another connecting factor resides in the conversation between physical bodies and texts. While women's writing was absent (and still is) from much of the literary discourse, Cixous notes that women are the originators of literature by producing the "text: my body" (1237); just as women's bodies are censored, women must reclaim their agency through an "impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics" (1239). The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" clearly *embodies* this relationship between the text and the self, "she turns her reading of the other into a knowledge of herself, a knowledge that gives power," so in the act of disrupting the wallpaper and "erasing the text of her husband's world...she writes her story of suffering and liberation...she can then become a writer of her own text" (Wolter 203-204). Imp further supports the interconnectedness of selves and texts. In dealing with trauma, "We weave necessary fictions, and sometimes they save us. Our minds, our bodies" (319). This rejection of the duality of the body and the mind, instead entwining them, further supports the notion that healing of the body must come from the ability to forge one's own narratives, to write oneself as a text. Additionally, Imp encounters a woman on the bus who was "like me, not sane, except I don't think that she was on any medication" (236). When Imp tells her that she was named after a character in *Gone with the Wind*, the woman says: "'It's your name. You're a book'" (237). This meeting not only further solidifies Imp's connection with women's illnesses, but further establishes the reading that *we are* texts; we write ourselves into existence, and we can create our healing. Analyzing "The Yellow Wallpaper" shows how Imp belongs within a tradition of women fearing to write because of their internalized inadequacies - further delving into the specific medicalization of Imp's thoughts shows how Kiernan places men and women at odds

within her novel according to conceptions of gender roles similar to that of Perkins Gilman's writing.

Much of Imp's anxieties come from a male-centric medicalized institution that suppresses the creativity of women. Imp cites one of the specific reasons for her frustration as an artist as coming from masculine sources. She believes that her medication creates her inability to articulate her experiences through artistic expression. She writes, "I think of all my pills as male," but she has not told her psychiatrist about this belief, for Imp feels that "she may feel compelled to make something troublesome of it" (5). This anxiety stems from a phenomenon of unnecessarily pathologizing women's mental state, where the psychiatric field has historically "recast women's responses to subordination as disorder, hysteria, or madness" (Blum and Stracuzzi 271). While Imp's psychologist may not intentionally invoke oppressive notions of women's health, she cannot help but have internalized these measures. Throughout the novel, Imp complains of being at the mercy of "Messieurs Risperdal, Dapakene, and Valium" (208), signifying their male authority over her mental state. Her medication, then, becomes a means of suppressing her disgust by, and resistance of, patriarchal authority.

Imp's prescription for Valium has much significance in this masculinized, medicalized control of women's thoughts. Valium was routinely prescribed to white housewives to ameliorate their condition as "naturally sickly, or as frivolous complainers" (Herzberg 90). This experience, which was found common among many white affluent women, became a rallying cry for feminist activists wanting to demonstrate how the oppression of women has been naturalized and medically instituted. Imp complains of her needing to write the words that refuse to leave her mind, and "The compulsion to set the words to paper, and the inability to stop. I

doubled my Valium dose, then tripled it” (190); so she tries to curb these impulses by taking her medication. Additionally, the feminist activists made narratives of experiences of women with Valium “a central symbol of sexism and its consequences, and they held up liberation from ‘mother’s little helper’ as an archetypal story of emancipation through feminism” (Herzberg 80). Imp, when she stops taking her medicine and writes the chapter “7777777”, she takes it to her psychiatrist, who exclaims “‘It’s a bold thing you’ve set down on paper. Obviously, you shouldn’t have stopped taking your medication, but...’ And she trailed off” (232). Imp’s breakthrough in her mental state and her writing only comes from her refusing to take her medication; embracing her madness results in her triumph.

While this symbolism, utilized in *The Drowning Girl* and other works of fiction, seems liberatory, it actually promotes an essentialist understanding of womanhood. During the second wave feminist movement, particularly that taking place in 1960s and 1970s academic literary criticism, “these mad women rebel against the strictures of patriarchal authority. Since then, the figure of the madwoman as feminist rebel has had a sustained cultural currency” (Donaldson 99). One of the most prominent examples can be seen in the popularity of *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which laid much of the basis of feminist criticism for years after its publication. At the time, the work was a transgressive leap forward for literary criticism. However, “*The Madwoman in the Attic* succeeded...because it reinforced as many literary practices as it undercut...*The Madwoman in the Attic* takes not history but literary history as the sphere in which its arguments circulate, engaging in androcentric theories like Harold Bloom’s vision of poets as fathers and sons, constructing women writers as ‘Milton’s daughters,’ and reading, within a lush field of canonical myths and images, a highly selective set of works by white, educated, mostly British

women who are said, however, to be telling ‘*the* story that all literary women would tell if they could speak their ‘speechless woe’” (Lanser 7). Collapsing all of women’s writing into these narrowly defined themes, without paying attention to other aspects of identity such as race and class, promotes a false sense of unity among women’s lived experiences. While, ironically, much of the work of these feminist theorists sought to undo sexist assumptions and reinvent the male-based literary canon through centering women’s literature, the role in affect produced new limited readings and narratives for female authors, such as how “the madness/rebellion configuration subtly reinforces what has become an almost monolithic way of reading mental illness within feminist literary criticism and perhaps in the larger culture of women’s studies scholarship” (Donaldson 101). In this way, among other theorists such as Cixous, “*Madwoman’s* dazzling and in many ways radical entry into the scholarly canon... perpetuated a female equivalent of the ‘great tradition,’ and maintained notions of ‘women’s writing’ that are unwittingly exclusive and essentialist” (Lanser 8). By linking itself within this tradition, Kiernan’s narrative fails to escape the critiques that have since been levied at these feminist theories. Further analyzing how men are characterized in the novel demonstrates how gender functions in a very limited scope.

One of the ways that Kiernan’s narrative falls within tropes of women’s and men’s thinking is through the usage of characteristics based on sex to determine masculinity and femininity. Imp writes, “The weight and impotence of my own narrative becomes painfully acute” (Kiernan 256); this harkens to theories that liken the penis to a pen, therefore ensuring women are kept from the process of writing. This imagery, ironically, reinscribes a binary viewpoint that links sex and gender: a penis, because it is read as masculine, carries the weight of

patriarchal influence. One afternoon in their apartment, as she walks in on Abalyn watching a TV show, Imp asks ““Are all the central characters male?”” (32). In this passage, Imp establishes herself as possessing a feminist consciousness - her perception of the world is colored by her ability to see gender discrimination. In addition, Imp draws the reader’s attention directly to the text she writes, for in Imp’s narrative, *all* of the active characters are women: herself, her mother, her grandmother, her therapist, Abalyn, and Eva. The only male presences in her novel exist outside of any plot action and have been placed in a very sinister role.

Because her novel explicitly tackles issues about women and femininity, Kiernan’s depiction of masculinity is central to understanding the novel’s assertions about gender roles. Through Imp’s explicit connection between masculinity and her mental health, her and Abalyn’s relationships with their fathers, and her reactions against male artists telling stories about women, Kiernan solidly depicts men as major antagonists by virtue of being men. In this regard, Kiernan reestablishes binary gender construction. Imp writes about Abalyn: “it was difficult for me to imagine this beautiful woman had ever been a boy. I mean, that she’d ever been caught inside the body of a boy” (Kiernan 104). While this passage promotes a rigid understanding of the trans narrative as being caught in the wrong body, this language also suggests that virtue, ethics, and goodness in Imp’s world is reserved only for women.

The characterization of men in this novel follows many similar themes: they are the perpetrators of physical, emotional, and rhetorical violence against women. From Imp and Abalyn’s own fathers, to those texts that Imp is obsessed with during the novel, to her medication, Imp associates the male sex and the man gender with the harm of women. Imp’s father, who has been absent all of her life, “left my mother because she was insane” (Kiernan 2);

she later describes her conception in very violent terms, referring to it as “the rape of my mother by a man I have called father” (295). She keeps a “how Daddy should die” list” (5), in which she catalogues “various unpleasant ends that may have befallen my father,” in which hoping that “my father died of venereal disease, after his dick rotted off” was at the top of the list” (2).

Through this passage, she links sex and gender - by inscribing his awful behavior located within his penis, the ultimate irony of his masculinity would be emasculation. Abalyn calls her dad “the Holy Grail of Douchebags,” and describes incidents of abuse such as when “he’d punched her in the face when she came out, and showed me a scar above her left eyebrow” (148). Unlike Imp’s matriarchal lineage, though mad, possessing beautiful, connective, and caring qualities, in both of these main character’s lives their fathers unambiguously represent the pinnacle of suffering and abandonment. This kind of characterisation for men, which enforces a binary understanding of sex and gender differences, continues throughout the novel, beyond Imp and Abalyn’s flesh and blood parents.

As Imp struggles to discern the true narrative between two of Eva’s stories, each narrative is linked to a fictional male artist: Albert Perrault, who paints *Fecunda ratis*, depicting the impending assault of a young girl by wolves, and Phillip Saltonstall, who painted mermaids. Each of these figures utilize their art to either speak for women, or to commit violence against them. “Little Red Riding Hood” is the subject of much of Perrault’s work, and Imp says that in the story “I never pictured the wolf as a real wolf, but a something that walked upright on two legs, and looked a lot more like a man than a wolf...men are much more dangerous than wolves. Especially if you’re a wolf, or a little girl” (Kiernan 23), demonstrating how she is primed to expect violence towards women and girls by men. When she and Abalyn visit an exhibition of

his work, Imp becomes so disturbed by the violent depictions of women that she has to leave. When writing her short story “Werewolf Smile,” she writes Eva’s character as a roadie for Perrault’s work, describing how Eva’s fascination with Perrault, and their relationship, causes Eva’s suicide. Imp says that “*Fecunda ratis* struck me as some sick game Perrault was playing with her mind, giving her this awful picture and telling her it was *relevant* to the installation. Expecting her to study it. To fixate and obsess over. I’ve always felt a certain variety of manipulation is required of artists (painters, sculptors, writers, filmmakers, etc.) but only a few become (or start off as) sadists” (248). Because texts have the ability to infect, to pass on their hauntings, Imp writes of male artists who exploit, and reproduce, violence against women in their works, who are responsible for the impact that their art has on its viewers. Perrault, then, becomes an antagonist to Imp’s worldview, poisoning her mind from beyond the grave through his art.

One of the ways that Imp responds directly, as a woman, to the masculine tradition of writing is through a literal struggle with, attempt to conform to, and ultimately resistance of one of the most well-known literary conventions: the Aristotelian plot structure. Imp writes, “I didn’t set out to appease the Tyranny of Plot. Lives do not unfold in tidy plots, and it’s the worst sort of artifice to insist that the tales we tell--to ourselves and to one another--must be forced to conform to the plot, A-to-Z linear narratives, three acts, the dictates of Aristotle, rising action and climax and falling action and most especially the artifice of resolution” (Kiernan 171). Just after saying this, she begins to conform to these “dictates of Aristotle” though what she follows is Freytag’s Pyramid, a narrative structure composed by Gustav Freytag depicting the tenets of plot as laid out in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. Imp attempts to adhere to this structure, for the next section of the

book is titled “Chapter 6 (A Play in Five Acts),” split into these five parts: “RISING ACTION (1) *Act One: Hairshirt*” (177) “RISING ACTION (2) *Act Two: Find the River*” (182) “CLIMAX *Act Three: 7 Chinese Brothers*” (189) “FALLING ACTION *Act Four: Try Not To Breathe*” (195) “DENOUEMENT *Act Five: The Wake-Up Bomb*” (196). These sections, with the correct labels and order according to Freytag, shows how diligently Imp tries to mimic this masculine method of crafting a story. However, she rejects this stringent writing style in favor of her more fluid, flexible, and chaotic text - her narrative does not have to follow this plot structure to convey her message or to accomplish her goals as an author. To cleanse herself of her anxieties about authorship, which have been demonstrated to be rooted in gender, Imp attempts to use the literary devices that have been laid out as essential to a work of fiction; further exploring the gender politics of Aristotle will shed light on the relevancy of his mention.

By singling out Aristotle, performing his style of writing, and ultimately rejecting it in favor of her own, Imp rebukes a foundation of male structures of narratives, as well as resists misogynistic beliefs about women, stemming from these literary foundations. Aristotle writes in his *Politics*, “The man is by nature superior, and the female inferior, one rules and the other is ruled; this principle of necessity extends to all mankind” (*Politics* 1254 b 13-15, qtd Femenias 166). Through his writings, Aristotle shows his belief “that the male is always in a relation of superiority to the female. These assertions leave no doubt that a *natural* superiority must be followed by a functional (sociopolitical) superiority” (Femenias 166). He also believes that certain virtues “are feminine by nature: incapacity for command, hence submission and passivity, bodily weakness, *arete* fitting homemaking tasks, subordinate courage, moderation, and modesty” (Femenias 168). Therefore, Imp’s rejection of “the dictates of Aristotle” become

rebellions of her gender against patriarchal structures, against these naturalized traits that are untrue and destructive. When she realizes that she is not able to, or does not feel fulfilled in adhering to, the Aristotelian plot structure, she rids herself of her medication in order to find the story that she needs to tell.

By grounding Imp's narrative within a tradition of women writing to resist their oppression by men, Kiernan reconstructs earlier feminist criticism's views about the relationship between madness, womanness, and authorship. The connections between gender, mental health, and writing as demonstrated through analyzing *The Drowning Girl*'s connections with Charlotte Perkins-Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" show how Kiernan responds to this tradition of women writers who have struggled to find the strength to produce art, in response to systems that aim to restrict women's liberation. By responding to this tradition, and through her connecting these themes to trans women's identity, Kiernan links trans women's experiences with cisgender women's. However, her work is guilty of essentializing the experiences of women, and reproducing the erasure of minority groups from obtaining the status of "woman."

Imp's own name says much about the depictions of women that *The Drowning Girl* critiques and subverts, as well as the intertextuality at play in the novel. While her birth name is India, her nickname, and the personality that throughout the narrative seems to act separately from her, is Imp. She refers to herself as "Madwoman demonic disbelieving Imp" (Kiernan 204), and talks of battling "against the imp who I am" (208), showing that she has internalized her own inadequacy, believing the demons that torment her lie within herself, rather than outside forces. This combination of madness, devilish associations, and womanhood represents an anxiety that has been reclaimed by feminist writers. Imp becomes connected with Lilith, the first wife of

Adam in Jewish folklore who refused to submit to his or God's authority. While this aspect of her name implies subversive gender roles, and a lineage within subversive literature, analyzing the other parts of her name reveal the problematic assumptions that underlay her narrative about womanhood.

The level of class and race bias which influences Imp's thoughts about womanhood are ingrained within her identity. Her name, India Morgan Phelps, "my mother got it from *Gone with the Wind*...there's a woman in it named India Wilkes" (Kiernan 236). By naming her after that specific character, Kiernan connects Imp to this story of the "trauma of lost sovereignty" in a South still clinging to the Antebellum days (Sheley 3), and in which "Mitchell repeatedly associates black 'freedom'--as it was associated throughout the Jim Crow era--with a threat to white feminine virtue" (Sheley 10). India Wilkes is placed among the status of a "lady," and "to be a lady is to have a public presence, to accept a public responsibility. But the essence of that presence and that responsibility consists in recognizing and maintaining a sexual division of labor that relegates any proper woman to the private sphere" (Fox-Genovese 399). Unlike *Scarlette*, whose narrative is "laced with veiled challenges to the prevailing gender system," India Wilkes takes comfort in not only the "rationalization of middle-class American values, especially white middle-class social domination" but aligns herself with the belief about "gender system as the cornerstone of social order" (Fox-Genovese 394). Imp's character, then, is placed directly within a feminist framework that ignores race when analyzing implications of gender roles, in a narrative that, when mentioning race, seems to only have white characters: the woman in Abalyn's dream had skin "as pale as milk" (154) and Eva "looked like any thin, pale woman" (299). The implicit canonization of white literature further exemplifies this connection.

Finding a page in *The Drowning Girl* without a reference to some literary, historical, artistic, or popular cultural phenomenon would be difficult. However, all of the authors most explicitly referred to have common traits. Dante Alighieri, Virginia Woolf, Shirley Jackson, Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Perrault, Matthew Arnold, Lewis Carroll, Virgil, William Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Joseph Conrad, Hemingway, Robert Frost, Jane Austen, Emily Dickinson, and T.S. Eliot are the most explicitly referenced literary works in the novel, which are predominantly male. She writes of her narrative, “The monster is neither shackled nor is she conquered, and I gaze on her monstrous and free. And this, too, as my head races with Matthew Arnold, Yeats, Conrad, races and tangles, all wanting out at once” (262), showing how her own monstrous narrative breaks free despite her mind being pressed by the influences of male literary giants. While Imp does reinvent some of the patriarchal texts, her work still centers solely around canons which are white and Western. Women’s literature, then, in her context, becomes *white* women’s literature - her attempts at expanding the reach for women authors, then, overlook many of the struggles that others face when trying to make their own art known.

Kiernan’s novel reflects many manifestations of womanhood that are not only binary in gender, but mimic how 1970s and early 1980s “feminist literary criticism still tends to proceed as if women writers meant white women from England, France, and America” (Lanser 14). Writing about *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Lanser notes how it is “painfully ironic that the book’s title evokes Bertha Mason, the West Indian Other who becomes only a figure for an Englishwoman’s rage” (Lanser 7). This history of either borrowing from or excluding the unique experiences of women of color and of working or lower class status has caused feminists who felt invisible to ask academics to address how “women writers and critics are also positioned in ideology, to

understand feminist literary histories and theories as complicitous, and to question what may be passing for ‘universal’ women’s values and experience” (Lanser 9). Through Imp’s connection with narratives of madness as a means of rebellion, while being connected to an Antebellum Southern “lady,” and referencing only white people’s literature, Imp’s narrative continues this perpetuation of a unified women’s experience at the risk of misrepresenting and erasing the distinctness of different oppressed identities.

Gender in the novel, then, operates within these limited depictions: men are violent suppressors of women’s creativity, women are moral victims who fight to overcome odds against them, and these constructions result purely from their gender roles because they are not explicitly identified according to their race. Imp’s identity and embracing of herself as a “madwoman,” her linking this lineage to her own family and a literary tradition, and her blatant rejection of men, lines up well within the tropes that establish the tradition of women’s writers - to the point of becoming a harmful stereotype. Her placement within rhetorical strategies that have been praised by feminist literary scholars reveals much about her characterization, and assumptions that the novel makes about womanhood. Abalyn, as a transsexual character, challenges some of the biological connections assigned at birth to gender, but her membership within this narrow form of femininity falls within this same binary construction of gender.

Section II Pins and Needles: Trans Women in *The Drowning Girl*

“‘I haven’t said anything about Abalyn being a transsexual,’ Imp typed. ‘She wouldn’t have wanted me to make a big deal out of it, and it never mattered to me. That’s why I haven’t really brought it up before now. It’s just part of who she was,’ Imp typed” (Kiernan 41).

Because Imp's internal dialogue focuses so much around the problems that women face, and attempts to overcome her own misgivings due to her gender, her own perception of what womanhood *is* is shaped by Abalyn's presence in her story. Not only does Imp's story center around her antagonists regarding her gender, but her understanding of trans women fundamentally changes throughout the course of the novel. Imp's conception of Abalyn's identity, Abalyn's own definitions of herself and her relation to other women, are essential to understanding the novel's perspective about trans women, while also containing dangerous, implicit assumptions. On the surface, many of the aspects of Abalyn's character seems to challenge gender essentialism. However, if analyzed through a critique of binary gender roles, as well as continuing some of the critiques of Imp's own assumptions about gender, the novel's ultimate message about trans identity falls within a binary approach. Through language that very much operates only within binary constructions of gender and sex, the lack of any mention of nonbinary individuals, and Abalyn's ultimate desire to pass and be accepted by the tradition of women, *The Drowning Girl*, while presenting a needed addition to the literary criticism around gender identity, falls short of many trans activists and feminists goals for ultimate, lasting, gender justice.

Transgender studies has contemporarily been debating the "transgender subversive" and "transsex conservative" differences, arguing that transgender people, who focus their identity within gender and outside of sex, are more politically progressive than transsexual people, who associate a connection between gender and sex (Lane 139-143). The "transgender subversive" ideology believes that situating gender outside of any referents to biology, both mental and bodily, is necessary for undoing dangerous gender roles constituted through the gender binary.

They view transsexual people as holding onto conservative beliefs about gender, arguing for its innate status, and their right to fully transition into the linked sex and gender of their desire. Much contemporary theory, while advocating for the rights of trans people to socially and medically transition to their desired identity, “shies away from engagement with the biological, demonstrating the strong influence of lesbian, gay, and feminist theorizing on ‘subversivist’ transgender theory, as reflected in charges of essentialism about transsexual longing for authenticity through bodily change” (Lane 140). Abalyn’s identity as a transsexual woman, and the novel’s insistence on the embodied women’s experience, therefore has political implications within these ongoing debates in transgender studies.

Transgender people have very different conceptions of their identities, yet they tend to fall into 3 different categories of self perception. Abalyn embodies what Brubaker calls the status of “*trans of migration*,” a trans person conceiving of themselves as migratory is “exemplified most clearly by those who surgically and hormonally transform their bodies and formally change their legal identities,” and “involves unidirectional movement from one established sex/gender category to another” (Brubaker 72). When Imp tells Abalyn that she is brave for “making that choice” of “physical transformation,” Abalyn responds: “‘I’ve always been a woman, Imp. The hormones and surgery, they didn’t change me from one thing to another. That’s why I hate the phrase ‘sex change.’ It’s misleading. No one ever changed my sex. They just brought my flesh more in line with my mind. With my gender. Also, I’m not so sure there really was a choice. I don’t think I’d be alive if I hadn’t done it. If I *couldn’t* have done it... I don’t think it even means I’m brave’” (150-151). Abalyn can be said to occupy this space within trans identity. Her insistence that her gender was not a “choice,” and that altering her hormones and her physical

characteristics “brought my flesh more in line with my mind,” equates gender identity and sex. The analogy of “traveling” works in a very specific conception of gender which moves from point A to point B, implying that transition is a goal that has certain parameters that ought to be fulfilled in order to count as part of that gender. It aligns biology with sex, naturalizing gender differences through linking them to biological sex, rather than placing them on a spectrum of options and choices.

“Passing,” the ability for a trans person to be unconsciously and uncritically accepted by cisgender people as their chosen gender identity, becomes central to understanding the novel. Similar to racial passing, “gender migrants can seek to pass as unmarked, cis men or women” (Brubaker 77). For the first few sections, even when Imp talks about their initial meeting, Abalyn’s trans identity is absent. However, Imp remarks later that when she first met Abalyn “I’d known right away” (Kiernan 42). Through this rhetorical strategy of not immediately introducing Abalyn as a trans character, Kiernan gives Abalyn an opportunity to “pass” in the reader’s mind - meaning that the reader would envision her character as a cisgender woman. Until Kiernan first speaks about her being transsexual nearly fifty pages into the novel, the audience can only interpret the cues about Abalyn’s gender through her character descriptions (“pretty...in an androgynous Tilda Swinton sort of way,” 6 feet tall (16)), and her pronouns “she, her, and hers.” This strategy also references the fact that gender is something that we *know* - though gender exists socially and outside any kind of objective criteria, some trans women have difficulties in portraying themselves as authentically their gender identity. However, passing requires adequate assimilation in the eyes of cisgender people, which Abalyn is not able to obtain. She says, “I’m a tranny, Imp. usually, I don’t try to pretend any different. If I do, when I

have, it just tends to make matters worse. This is me. I live with it” (150). Her gender identity, then, becomes necessitated through other people’s perceptions of herself, and leaves strangers, family members, and lovers able to disavow her gender identity, through physical and social violence.

Misgendering a person, the intentional or unintentional act of misrepresenting a trans person’s gender identity, can be deeply debilitating, as demonstrated through Abalyn’s experience: “I dislike remembering how self-conscious and awkward she’d get whenever we’d be out and some asshole would say something hateful or inconsiderate. Or called her *sir*. I don’t like remembering the way that hurt her” (Kiernan 43). Abalyn notes the problems with finding acceptance through her own encounters with lesbians - she mentions an incident with her girlfriend prior to Imp. When they first met, Josie did not know that Abalyn was trans until they got to her hotel room, at which point she got “pissed” and had no interest in dating her until a few days later (41). When Imp reflects upon how much she misses Abalyn, and their conversations about her being trans, Imp says that Abalyn “hated her voice” (152). These accounts of misgendering, and Abalyn’s consequent gender dysphoria, show how gender “is policed not only formally...but also informally, in everyday encounters. Just as legal status as an immigrant...does not guarantee social acceptance in the destination country, so legal change of sex or gender does not guarantee social recognition and acceptance of one’s new sex or gender” (Brubaker 77). Abalyn’s characterization can only be understood through knowing that “the self-understanding of many transgender people, who consider their sense of gendered self *not* to be subject to their instrumental will... Rather, they see their gendered sense of self as ontologically inescapable and inalienable--and to suggest otherwise to them is to risk a profound

misrecognition of their personhood” (Striker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 10). Kiernan’s representation of Abalyn, then, correlates with this understanding of trans identity - a person who says they are a woman, *is* a woman, regardless of their assigned at birth sex, and shows how harmful the policing of gender categories can be to transgender people.

Abalyn’s placement within a “trans migration” story of trans identity can be seen more clearly when analyzing a recurring dream that she had ““before I figured out I wasn’t a boy”” (Kiernan 153). This dream was almost always the same: Abalyn walks through a crowded city, climbing above to find a woman with the symbol for Mars tattooed or painted with blood on her forehead. The woman, who addresses Abalyn as ““Daughter”” (155), asks her a question, which Abalyn refuses to answer, and the woman turns Abalyn into a tree. After years go by, the woman returns, and the mark on her forehead changes to the symbol for Venus. She asks Abalyn the same question, and Abalyn’s answer transforms Abalyn from her assigned at birth sex of male into what Abalyn envisions to be a girl. This dream brings together key themes in the novel, as well as conveys the novel’s conceptions of Abalyn’s transsexual identity through the reinterpretation of “Little Red Riding Hood” and symbols of sex, and the ways that Kiernan’s narrative both challenges and accepts binary gender and sex.

While one of the novel’s main motifs centers around the fairy tale “Little Red Riding Hood,” the reference to the story in Abalyn’s dream has specific connotations about her trans identity. Much of the imagery in *The Drowning Girl* focuses around wolves, and these symbols can be interpreted as “reclaiming the traditionally masculine werewolf as a symbol of female power” (Weida 226-227). While this can be true, Kiernan reinterprets “Little Red Riding Hood” and claims it as a coming of age story for trans women. In her dream, the woman asked Abalyn,

“Daughter, which will you choose? The Road of Needles or the Road of Pins?” (Kiernan 155). Before Charles Perrault and the brothers Grimm wrote versions of “Little Red Riding Hood” that were “gentrified almost out of recognition” (Douglas 3), the story was a metaphor for young girls to prepare themselves for adult womanhood. In the folklore of the story’s origins of nineteenth century France, “the language of the pin and the needle was doubtless understood, and the pin would have been perceived as a symbol of the arrival at puberty, at maidenhood” (Verdier 106). Despite some differences in transmission of oral tradition, the symbolism would have been understood by the women in the culture: “The stages of a woman’s life were distinguished by the symbolism of pins and needles. Pins are easy to use but only make temporary fastenings; needles are employed with skill and perseverance, they make permanent ties. Pins have no opening; butting a thread through the eye of a needle has a simple sexual connotation. The pin can be a symbol of the virgin intacta; the needle is the adult woman” (Douglas 4). This specific reading is supported by the fact that Imp, who is familiar with these versions, says, “It’s easier to fasten things together with pins...it’s much more difficult to hold things together with needles” (Kiernan 155). When confronted with the question about the path for the first time, Abalyn “refused to choose” and in response the woman in her dream turned her into a tree (155). Later, when the woman came back, Abalyn says “I chose the Road of Needles, because I suspected she’d think I was a coward or lazy if I chose the easier of the two” (156). By saying that she choose the Road of Needles because it was not easy, she indicates that, for transwomen, the passage of coming to age is marked by struggle - for Abalyn, this understanding of her journey into adulthood becomes life saving - a guide for her through her years of withstanding abusive parents, homelessness, and medical transition. Understanding this struggle during coming of age

through a trans perspective show a difference in the growing up period of transwomen, because they were not assigned female at birth, but an insistence that their association with womanhood is just as valid.

Another clue into the relevance of this passage lies in Imp's evolving understanding of the story. In the beginning of the novel, she states that "Little Red Riding Hood" is her least favorite fairy tale (Kiernan 155). The version that Imp most often refers to is that written by Charles Perrault. Her familiarity with the story through Perrault is important, for "the choice between pins and needles is in all the versions before Perrault and the Grimms tidied them up. Any interpretation that omits that detail is suspect" (Douglas 4). Imp's aversion to the story, based on its contemporary heteronormative notoriety, begs the question: "Has society then become masculinized since the seventeenth century? Have the great powers and mysteries of the female body, celebrated in the old peasant societies, now come to be denied in the society that has taken their place?" (Verdier 118). Therefore, Imp's suspicion of the tale makes sense within her feminist framework, because of the way in which the traditional story has been sanitized by male authors. This understanding makes Abalyn's reclamation of the story more powerful, and perhaps inspires Imp's own reinterpretation which takes place later in the novel. She both embraces the language of the tradition, while rejecting the assigned at birth biological relevancy of the story: she makes it her own, or makes room for transwomen where there was none before. This passage grounds Abalyn's experience growing up in the tradition of white European women.

Abalyn's coming of age story then, rather than symbolized through traditional masculine narratives of conquest or feminine symbols of menstruation, comes through her sex transition.

When Imp asks Abalyn if, during the beginning of her dream, “‘You were a boy?’ She frowned and said she’d *looked* like a boy” (Kiernan 153). Saying that she looked like a boy implies that there is a specific way that a boy *looks*, which can only make sense through traditional gender and sex categorization. In her dream, the woman first appeared to her with “the astrological symbol for Mars drawn on her forehead in red” (154), saying that even at that age she knew that was the symbol for male. When the woman came back, the mark on her forehead was no longer of Mars, but of Venus (156). The switch of these symbols, from male to female, aligns with the “trans of migration” narrative. It implies a unidirectional transition from an undesired place of identity to the desired one, without admission of any space between the two, or beyond these options. Relating these symbols to the Roman gods from which they are modeled further connects sex to gender, for Mars, the symbol for male, was a god of war, in contrast to Venus, a god of fertility and beauty. The dichotomy of these masculine and feminine characteristics, linked to the symbols for sex, imbeds binary gender and sex differences. Abalyn seeing these symbols in her dream, and finding great comfort in them, show how deeply sex and gender are entwined in her narrative of transition.

Kiernan makes clear, then, that Abalyn’s journey to womanhood is just as relevant as the tales that have traditionally been told to daughters through anatomical language - Kieranan subverts the necessity of a female assigned at birth experience of these fairy tales to assert that trans women have their own narratives of finding womanhood. At the same time, she intertwines gender identity and sex, by insisting so clearly that her gender, which seems to be beyond her control, aligns so closely with binary sex characteristics. While using a narrative that removes the language of choice can soften the policing of gender identity, appealing to natural causes may

create more problems than are solved. According to Brubaker, “in a context of actual or anticipated policing of unconventional or controversial identity claims, objectivist accounts of identity serve as a response to, and as a preemptive defense against, such policing. To the claim that ‘you can't just choose to be a woman,’ the response, in effect, is that ‘we don't *choose* to be women; we simply *are* women.’...Yet recourse to objectivist language is not simply strategic; it also affects the deep appeal of essentialist understandings of identity outside the academy” (65). Abalyn's dream, and her understanding of her gender identity as linked to the biological construction of “female,” is aligned with explanation of transgenderism which places it squarely within biology - she was trapped in the wrong body, and her gender was not a choice. Using this language to talk about trans identity, in the short term, can help cisgender people, like Imp, feel like they understand and sympathize with their struggles, but in the long term, erases the existence of nonbinary trans people and defines gender and sex through problematic biological and naturalized explanations.

Abalyn's account of her transition is especially pertinent to understanding the novel's implications about cisgender women's roles in the ostracisation of trans women. Abalyn's own family rejected completely her gender identity, pointing to a scar on her face from her father's class ring, and a mother that consented through association with her dismissal from the family. Abalyn's story shows how coming out as a transwoman brings with it “risks of violence from men, which transsexual women learn to judge, and of rejection from women” (Connell 870). Imp, appalled at the idea that a mother would “just stop loving her child” (Kiernan 149), says that her own family would have been very understanding of Abalyn's identity. Imp writes, “I silently wished Abalyn could have had a mother like Rosemary Anne, a grandmother like

Caroline” (226). Imp says that if she had come out as trans, then she believes that her grandmother would “have been mostly fascinated. Maybe concerned, too, because of the way that the world treats transgender people, but mostly fascinated. She probably would have gone so far as to insist it was marvelous” (227). Imp implies, through her familial and literary lineage, that it would only make sense that her own family would embrace Abalyn’s identity. Connell notes that “Recognition as a woman need not involve passing. Recognition can equally be a matter of pragmatic acceptance by those with whom one lives and works” (871). Therefore, through this exchange, Imp legitimizes Abalyn’s experiences as being authentically womanly, and appreciates many trans women's desires to have their experience as a woman recognized as legitimate.

Imp connects Abalyn’s experience of being transgender to her own struggles with mental illness. She writes, “Truthfully, though, I didn’t understand, but I would. In the weeks and months to come...I’d learn a lot more--too much--about being one sort of being on the inside and another on the outside. About being held prisoner by flesh, and wanting to be free so badly that death finally becomes an option, the way it became in option for my mother and grandmother. Trapped in a body, trapped in a mind. I don’t think the one’s so different from the other. No, I am absolutely *not* implying that Abalyn's being transgender was the same as Caroline and Rosemary and me being crazy” (151). In this passage, Imp does not suggest that being transgender is a mental illness, but empathizes through her own experience of not being accepted within masculine, medical discourses. Just as Imp has to get away from her medicine in order to achieve her artistic breakthrough, which ultimately brings about her sanity, Abalyn fights against a medicalized context which names her body as being illegitimate, and pathologized. The

transmisogyny of earlier understandings about trans people is seen because “Academic attention to transgender issues has shifted...from the field of abnormal psychology, which imagined transgender phenomena as expressions of mental illness, and from the field of literary criticism, which was fascinated with representations of cross-dressing that it fancied to be merely symbolic, into fields that concern themselves with the day-to-day workings of the material world” (Striker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 2). In order to legitimize their identity and gain access to lifesaving medical treatment, “trans people had to ‘pass’ the ‘examinations’ of the psycho-‘experts,’ who acted as the gatekeepers to the medical professionals who would provide the hormones and surgery that I knew were essential to not only enhance my life, but in order to keep me alive” (Whittle 197). Abalyn mentions her own battle within this medical institution designed to prevent her from accessing her health care, for she says that, regarding her recurring dream in which she changes her sex: ““My shrink was of the opinion I’d never had the dream, that it was only a sort of reassuring story I’d made up to give myself hope or some shit. But I did have that dream, I don’t know how many times. I still have it” (157). Imp and Abalyn become connected through this medicalized context of controlling the narratives of women, whether through Imp’s struggle to write despite the influence of her “messieurs” or Abalyn’s anger at having to prove to her psychiatrist that she really is a woman, emphasizing that transsexual women and cisgender women share similar oppressions through their gender identity.

Imp and Abalyn’s narratives are further connected through the imagery most prominent in the novel: drowning. During Imp’s climactic embrace of her insanity, in which she flushes her masculine pills and brings Eva into her home for a week, Eva tells her: ““You’re not the girl who drowns. Not in this story you’re writing. You’re the girl who learns to swim”” (297). While

Weida connects this imagery with Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, this passage also seems to be directly referencing a spoken word piece performed by transsexual activist Susan Stryker. In "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," though *Frankenstein* itself is not referenced in Kiernan's novel, the same imagery of monstrosity, drowning, and transformation link these two texts. Stryker utilizes literary allusions to demonstrate embracing her own otherness. She writes,

"I enter the realm of my dreams. I am underwater, swimming upwards It is dark. I see a shimmering light above me. I break through the plane of the water's surface with my lungs bursting. I suck for air--and find only more water. My lungs are full of water. Inside and out i am surrounded by it. Why am I not dead if there is no difference between me and what I am in? There is another surface above me and I swim frantically towards it. I see a shimmering light. I break the plane of the water's surface over and over and over again. This water annihilates me. I cannot be, and yet--and excruciating possibility--I am I will do anything not to be here.

I will swim forever.

I will die for eternity.

I will learn to breathe water.

If I cannot change my situation I will change myself.

In this act of magical transformation
I recognize myself again." (Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein" 251, italics hers)

While Imp is a cisgender character, one of the final scenes of the novel alludes to Stryker's text, which connects many of Kiernan's themes: "'Duality. The mutability of the flesh. Transition. Having to hide one's true self away. Masks. Secrecy. Mermaids, werewolves, gender. The reactions we may have to the truth of things. To someone's most honest face, to facts that run counter to our expectations and preconceptions. Confessions. Metaphors. Transformation.'" (Kiernan 43). In *The Drowning Girl*, Eva is Imp's anxieties about her mental state made flesh; she represents the monstrosity of Imp's mind, and the terrible beauty Imp finds through embracing her madness. Just as Stryker finds "a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual

woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" (Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein" 245), Eva, "the *thing*, monstrous and free" (284), molds Imp into a more full version of herself, and aids her journey away from anxiety about her memories and experiences.

The novel's title, *The Drowning Girl*, contains multitudes: Imp's obsession with stories and historical accounts of women drowning by mysterious circumstance, her attempted suicide in her bathroom, Eva's suicide, and, finally, Imp's transformation. The last time she tried to confront her demons, she ended up attempting to drown herself in her bathtub. This time, as Eva forces her to enter the dangerous places in her thoughts, Eva's "tongue enters my mouth, probing, and there's brief panic, because it's not so different from the day I tried to breathe underwater, the day I tried to inhale a tub filled with ice water...Only, this time, my body doesn't fight back. She is pouring down my throat, and I'm breathing her into me. But my lungs make no effort to resist the invasion" (283). In this place without air, without the comfort of Imp's ordinary surroundings, where she normally would find fear, she finds courage. She learns to breathe water, and through her struggle, "I began to sing. It was *my* song, and my song alone, never voiced since the dawn of time. It was everything I was, had been, might be. I swelled with song, and I sang" (297). Through her embrace with Eva, Imp transcends her entrapment by her internalized inadequacies.

Thus, physical and emotional transition becomes imperative to Imp's fuller understanding and contentment with her own mind. In this same passage, Eva becomes a creature that pushes beyond human - her own flesh transfuses with gills, scales and a tail, changing shape before Imp's eyes the longer they stay together. Through this encounter, beyond sex, beyond human, Imp writes that Eva "made of me a book" (288). The scene reflects the

theories that in “the transsexual as a text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries” (Stone 231). Eva’s transhuman form allows Imp to embrace the quirks and postmodern reality of her own experience, for she realizes that though her understanding of the truth may not be considered factual, her experience and perception is equally, if not more, valid than that granted by the artificial sanity of her medication. Just like the women that have come before them, Imp and Abalyn’s literal transformations allow them to more fully come into themselves.

Analogous to the way Imp’s characterization has underlying problematic assumptions of race and class privilege, Abalyn’s does as well. Abalyn’s transition, though paid for by her partner at the time, took place in Bangkok. Seeking surgery in impoverished places is not uncommon for Western transsexual people, for “Middle-class transsexual women from the United States and Europe flew in, and reassignment became an export commodity in a poor postcolonial country” (Connell 869). The ability for Abalyn to gain access to surgery, through her ability to traverse national borders with ease due to her American passport, exemplifies how “transsexual medicine became part of the global bioeconomy... Class and global inequality, rather than patriarchal gatekeeping, has become the crucial filter” (Connell 869). Such realities show how Abalyn’s concerns about transgender issues are situated within her specific understanding of identity, without regards to intersections of race and nationality.

Abalyn’s “full” transition, signified by her acceptance among other women, is a goal for many trans women. However, when placed within the larger narrative, the same problematic

assumptions about femininity and womanhood seem to mirror to the rest of the novel's limited accounts of gender. Oftentimes, "Textual renditions of gender, where gender is itself at issue...reinscribe gender in traditional binary terms after seeming to disrupt it" (Roof 59).

Kiernan is certainly not alone in this portrayal, for during "the later 1970s...transsexual women figured not as hostile outsiders but as striking examples of processes that affected all women's lives. Ironically--given transsexual women's own narratives at the time, which usually spoke of unchanging femininity--feminist sociologists read their lives as proving the plasticity of gender, giving credibility to agendas of social change" (Connell 861). At a time when feminists were emphasizing how social structures impose gender upon people instead of the common belief of being derived from natural forces, many transsexual women asserted that their identity came from within - that their knowledge of being a woman was internal and inescapable. The importance placed on transition, passing, and acceptance by cisgender women is problematic for many theorists, for "successful transition hinges upon full participation in the normative, sexist, narrowly defined performance of 'woman'" (Spade 27). Though trans identities can be believed in and of themselves to subvert gender roles, aligning sex and gender in such an interconnected way can reinforce those dichotomies. A transgender narrative which equates sex and gender, and places them within a narrative of fully transitioning, "disturbs existing categorical frameworks [of gender] least, and may even be said to reinforce them" (Brubaker 73). Therefore, Kiernan's presentation of the linkage between sex, gender, and transformation can commit the same fallacies that Imp's understanding of binary gender commits, for "'gender,' as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity"

(Striker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges” 3). The limited scope of genders conceived in the novel is better understood through the existence of only two genders.

The absence of mention of any nonbinary characters furthers this essentialist account of gender. Nonbinary individuals are people who do not identify as men or women, because they either feel that the two most common genders do not describe who they are, or they have political objections to contemporary gender roles. In *The Drowning Girl*, all of the characters fit into a “noncritical binarized sex system in which that body can only make sense as either a male or female body” (Noble 50). Abalyn’s trans identity does nothing to disrupt notions of binary gender roles, through insisting that her transition “brought my flesh more in line with my mind. With my gender” (Kiernan 151). The successful alignment of gender and sex shows how gender becomes naturalized, and therefore asserted to be morally acceptable. Additionally, her desire to pass as cisgender dispels any desire for gender ambiguity, for “Passing means to live successfully in the gender of choice, to be accepted as a ‘natural’ member of that gender. Passing means the denial of mixture” (Stone 231). While Kiernan’s narrative examines ways that gender roles are produced and policed by cisgender individuals within a patriarchal framework, “Looking at the production of gender does not displace or alter what is ultimately insidiously insistent about gender: the binary quality that enables and/or grounds the constant reinscription--and even opportunistic transformation--of dialectical categories that subtend oppressive institutions” (Roof 57); knowing that gender is not determined by the sex assigned to someone at birth, but failing to challenge the gender system itself, leads to the reproduction of binary gender categories, which are limiting and essentializing. As seen through Kiernan’s own conceptions of gender, which fall along stereotypical depictions of femininity and masculinity

without any slippage, Abalyn's embrace of this world does not disrupt these shaky grounds for binary gender.

While Lane suggests that gender exists on a continuum (150) of multiple gender constructions that are valid, Kiernan's project delinates from an acceptable discursive claim - her narrative imposes binary gender onto *all* of the agents in the novel, for every character is made sense of through binary representations of gender, thereby placing an expectation not for gender diversity, but gender assimilation. Categorizing gender roles by juxtaposing a violent and harmful masculinity with a limited depiction of white middle-class femininity does not allow for a more nuanced and accurate understanding of gender differences. Kiernan's characters know their gender as innate, and a focus on how bodies and minds act together to adhere to gender norms, rather than recognizing that gender can be viewed as "a *genre*--a set of embodied texts whose potential for *productive* disruption of structured sexualities and spectra of desire has yet to be explored" (Stone 231), has problematic implications about the nature of the oppression of women and trans people.

The visibility of transgender writing is essential within literary criticism, so long as the texts are analyzed with the same attention to socio-political narratives constructed through their implicit and explicit imagery, character development, and diction. To say that a novel was written from a purely transsexual perspective would be reconstituting the universalizing problems found in earlier feminist discourse, for "Transsexual women...are neither enemies of change nor heralds of a new world. But they can act in either direction, and which direction they take is a question of political alliances and strategies" (Connell 872). Through the novel's production of gender roles, Kiernan's narrative demonstrates the ways that transsexual identity

can challenge certain assumptions about biology and gender identity, while still perpetuating many of the larger social structures at play in gender discrimination and transgender issues, such as race, class, nationality, and nonbinary gender identities.

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