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The Hollywood Novel: Gender and Lacanian Tragedy in Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*

Play It As It Lays remains one of the most astute—and troubling—literary investigations of the causes and consequences of the Hollywood-led culture industry. The novel is unique within the subgenre of the Hollywood novel since it is one of the very few that focuses exclusively on the effects of the culture industry on women. Most of the best known Hollywood novels are concerned with the integrity and art of male protagonists, whose agency is construed in explicitly masculinist ways. Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*, Norman Mailer's *Deer Park*, and Raymond Chandler's *The Little Sister* are just a few of many Hollywood novels that exemplify the subgenre's over-reliance on the equation of artistic integrity and masculinity. This tendency is comparable to the en-gendering of mass culture that Andreas Huyssen (among others) has argued is a characteristic of modernism. Hollywood novelists, like modernists, encode mass culture as a "feminine" discourse that functions as a convenient other for the sanctified, but beleaguered aesthetic discourse—a discourse, moreover, that is based on patriarchal, subject-object epistemology. Just so, both Hollywood and modernist novels participate in the oedipal narrative theorized by Freud and Lacan in which it can be said that "Woman does not exist" and "Woman is the symptom of Man."[1]

Day of the Locust established the ideological project of the Hollywood novel, a project that casts the artist as flawed subject who cannot distance himself from the desire that is generated by Hollywood for an inaccessible, impenetrable object (figured by a beautiful, bad actress). The tragedy of Tod Hackett is that he cannot escape the fate of all those alienated workers who have "come to California to die" (*Locust* 23). The artist is caught up in the angry crowd that feels cheated by the false promise of Hollywood to compensate them for years of routinized labor. In Tod's painting, "The Burning of Los Angeles," the angry mob is chasing after a mindlessly smiling Faye Greener, whose smile indicates the extent to which she is indifferent to the desire she activates. Like *Day of the Locust*, *Little Sister* is concerned with midwesterners whose desires bring them to Hollywood. And like *Locust*, *Little Sister* seeks to demystify this desire by demystifying its object. Chandler's Hollywood is as shabby as West's Hollywood. But even though this knowledge comes as early and easily to Marlowe as it did to Tod Hackett, it doesn't diminish the desire. Mavis Weld, the deceitful actress whose cause Marlowe takes up, might be

a more successful actress than Faye, but she is just as mannered and antimimetic.

Play It As It Lays takes one of these objects of desire for its progatonist. The novel eschews all such embedded ideologies as it tells the story of a disaffected actress without recourse to any culturally available counternarratives. In its overt revision of Hemingway's existential modernism, *Play It As It Lays* suggests how little this pair (patriarchy and modernism) speaks to the current historical conjuncture. The novel's bleak tone and minimalist style testify to the dilemmas confronting the subject in general (but especially the female subject) when no alternative ideologies seem capable of saving us from the reification that comes with participation in a commodity culture. Consequently, the novel belongs to what James M. Mellard has recently called the postpatriarchal, postoedipal universe theorized by the "New Lacanians" within which the "lack in the other" is in fact a constitutive lack in the subject herself. Herein, I would argue, lies the novel's distinctiveness within the canon of the Hollywood novel: unlike earlier, male-penned Hollywood novels whose tragedy is a consummately modernist tragedy, *Play It As It lays* is best read as a "postmodern tragedy" according to which the empty subject is infatuated with death in actual or symbolic forms. While the problem of *Locust* and *Little Sister* was too much desire, the problem of *Play It As It Lays* is too little. While the male protagonist of the Hollywood novel seeks an ego compromise that reconciles the competing demands of the pleasure and reality principles, the protagonist of *Play It As It Lays* seeks no ego compromise.

Play It As It Lays gives us a difficult reconstruction of events in the life of Maria Wyeth, an institutionalized actress who has "run out of motives"—except those that are tied to her daughter (also institutionalized) and to her parents (both dead). As one reads the brief, anecdotal chapters that mix first and third-person narration, a main character doesn't emerge—and that is exactly the point. "Maria Wyeth" is an absence. But while there isn't any continuous subjectivity (hence the narrative structure) or any "meaning" to be assigned to her life, there are psychosocial forces to which this absence can be traced. As she introduces herself writing a journal at the behest of the hospital counselor, Maria professes no faith in the theories that lie behind the treatment. Her therapy is based on a search for origins, for unconscious motivations that explain individual behavior:

> There are only certain facts, I say, trying again to be an agreeable player of the game. Certain facts, certain things that happened. [. . .] They will misread the facts, invent connections, will extrapolate reasons where none exist, but I told you that is their business here. (2)

Thus a consummate postmodern subject is able to see through belief systems and to see one's social existence as a "game" that has arbitrary rules that still lay claim to some foundation. This sensibility makes her believe that human motives are unfathomable and have no cause to be discerned. Her troubles have no cause, no reason behind them: "It is one more version of why does a coral snake have two glands of neurotoxic poison" (2-3).

But to say that Maria believes in nothing would not be accurate. Her love of Kate remains her one powerful motive, one that requires no defense and knows no boundaries. Her feelings for Kate stand in contradistinction to the conventionality of her feelings for everyone else in her life. In *Play It As It Lays*, conventional human relations come first from a loyalty to the system first that then regulates how subjects relate one to another. Didion's novel is most critical of those characters whose attachments never exceed such conventionality—subjects for whom others never become singular. Her relationship with Kate is different since Kate is viewed by Maria as singular. "Kate has soft down on her spine and an aberrant chemical in her brain," she writes. "Kate is Kate" (3). This remark is reminiscent of Hemingway's famous claim that "abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates" (*A Farewell to Arms* 185). Like Hemingway, whom she admires, Didion eschews figural language for literal language because the former does violence to the singularity of the realities that come under its signification. Maria's claim that "Kate is Kate" opens onto the entire, aesthetic sensibility of this novel about how mass culture emotionally numbs and morally corrupts all those who come into its purview. On the one hand, the novel spells out a theory of history that is very much in line with how poststructuralism views the arbitrariness of the signifier. This dimension of the novel demystifies belief systems that claim a "motivated" relation to an extralinguistic foundation. On the other hand, *Play It As It Lays* is deeply concerned with the frameworks for intimacy that lose their efficacy with the "end of ideology." This latter concern takes the form of a theory of language according to which one can still write a true sentence as long as it uses language that describes without assigning general meaning.

Didion's debt to Hemingway and American modernism extends beyond the theory of language that can be found in *Play It As It Lays*. Maria's passive response to her world is very much in line with Hemingway's taciturn protagonists like Jake Barnes and Frederic Henry. Like Jake and Frederic, Maria's passivity is a form of resistance as much as it is a sign of her psychic scars. Her sparing use of words is meant to show how empty and "unmotivated" the words employed by others are. While the resistance of Jake and Frederic fits comfortably within the oedipal universe of modernism, however, Maria's resistance has nothing to fall back on—no tradition of a coherent subjectivity in whose name one resists. As a woman, she is nothing but a symptom of the symbolic order to which she belongs—her father, her various lovers, her husband and, finally, the film industry that intermittently employs her. While Hemingway's protagonists imagine their disempowerment as castration, Didion's heroine cannot posit any such presocial figuration of power. She has always been castrated, of course, but she envies no phallus. Maria seeks no male agency along the lines of her husband, Carter, whose success is consistently figured phallically. Her tragedy cannot be the existential tragedy of Hemingway in particular and modernism in general.

On the broadest level, *Play It As It Lays* is about its own version of Hemingway's "nada." At the very end of the novel (which is the beginning of the journal that frames the novel's plot) after BZ has committed suicide and her own unpredictable and self-destructive behavior has landed her in a mental hospital, Maria writes:

> One thing in my defense, not that it matters: I know something Carter never knew, or Helene, or maybe you. I know what "nothing" means, and keep on playing. (213)

What is this "nothing"? Why is it an act of heroism to "keep on playing" after one knows what it means? Coming as it does near the end of the novel, this claim is the closest thing to an affirmation Maria makes. In her other confessional moments, Maria refuses to defend herself by offering alternative answers to the psychological and philosophical questions posed and answered by others. On the simplest level, this statement echoes existential philosophy in its eschewals of *belief* in ideology but not *participation* in ideologically-cemented communities.

If, however, we consider the novel's characterization of Maria (her originary community, family background, her "fall" into her career and marriage), then the "nothing" might well be something new entirely—something *subjective* and not *objective*. The "nothing" might be the utter emptiness or absence that rests at the very center of the human subject. This is a properly postexistential insight since it robs existentialism of its one fixed point, the ontologically coherent subject who inhabits an epistemologically incoherent world. This reading of the "nothing" is authorized by Didion because Maria has presented herself as a would-be modernist whose "experience" is patently postmodern. Maria grew up in a Silver Wells, Nevada: "Maybe I never should have left, but that line of thinking leads nowhere because as I told Benny there is no Silver Wells." While there is no Silver Wells in a literal sense because it has become a missile range, figuratively, there never was a "community" that carried the connotation of the word, a social formation to which one could feel bound. It is not that she hates where she comes from, such hatred the standard motivation of the *bildungsroman* protagonist who leaves a stifling small town for the big city. Rather, she cannot have any strong feelings about Silver Wells because it has no human community and no standards and regulations against which to rebel.

Her connection to her parents mimics this absence. She longs for *a* family, but her feelings for her parents are heavily mediated through what they emblematize—an uncritical faith in a gambling ethos that reduces all choices, all actions, to competition. As her father tells her when she leaves for New York, "[Y]ou hold all the aces" (7). The metaphor her father uses to reassure her implies an approach to history that privileges chance and thus militates against any notion of her identity and her place in the world that is based on any ordering principle. This view of the randomness of the world was masked under a belief-driven ideological matrix. But Maria's experiences have rendered this happy self-delusion impossible.

As the narrator, Maria occupies the space between two deaths that is exploited

by the New Lacanians.[2] Slavoj Žižek describes the narrative situation in which Maria finds herself: Maria's narrative "is characterized by a radical split, a kind of structural imbalance, as to the possibility of narrativization" (*Enjoy* 151). This imbalance comes about because the narrator can only tell her story from the end, from the position of death. Maria's story only makes sense if she is positioned as the narrator and the narration is taken for a field of events in relation to the other of the symbolic—if, the place of the narrative "is a place of sublime beauty as well as terrifying monsters, is the site of 'the thing,' of the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order" (*Enjoy* 135). In this regard, Didion's aesthetic has left Hemingway behind since the greatest goal of the classic Hemingway protagonists is based on oedipal desire that demands recognition from the other, a recognition that then brings the desiring subject into being. Maria, by contrast, is the subject who wishes her emptiness to become manifest. As Joan Copjec explains Lacan's theory of drives:

> This private beyond no longer remains hidden. What's involved in the drive, Lacan tells us, is a making oneself heard or making oneself seen; that is to say, the intimate core of our being, no longer sheltered by sense, ceases to be supposed and suddenly becomes exposed. (190)

From this perspective, the subject's fear of being unmasked that lies behind the notoriously unreliable modernist narrator isn't the fear of letting the reader know the "true" narrator; it is rather the fear of the reader's knowing that the narrator has no true self at all.

That *Play It As It Lays*'s narrative voice emanates from the space of death is most evident in Maria's complete lack of desire. Any subject who participates in ideology experiences *some* form of desire, but Maria evidently feels none. The drive she feels, by contrast, is single-minded, narcissistic, and self-destructive. Her fixation on Kate is thus anything but selfless, a claim that certainly runs counter to the narrator's own understanding of this fixation. But the claim is supported by the lack of a concrete history for Kate (aside from the spare details we are given in the first chapter that simulate a particularity) *and* by the fact that, at narration's end, both mother and daughter are institutionalized—absent from the community and subject to repressive power that is operative once ideological power proves unsuccessful. Within the narrative, Maria's devotion to Kate is always figured as something that cannot be articulated in a way that coexists with more practical concerns. But it is an empty space that represents only negation.

Maria's abortion needs to be read within this narrative context. The most harrowing episode in the novel, it is rendered all the more disturbing by the characterization of the man in the white duck pants who meets Maria and takes her to the suburban house where the abortion is performed. The abortion can be read as a metaphor for the death mentioned above. If this fetus is understood as a mirror image of Maria, then its abortion implies not only her death, but her refusal even to be born and enter the social collectivity. Her preoccupation with the abortion

is thus a manifestation of Freud's notorious death drive—or what the later Lacan called *jouissance*—since the child is the other within:

> By the end of the week she was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between Maria and other. She had the sense that if she could get that in her mind and hold it for even one micro-second she would have what she had come to get. (169-70)

The anguish felt over the abortion is the anguish expressed by the fragment of Maria's split subjectivity that continues to inhabit the social—therefore oedipal—universe. This anguish is thus an instance of desire, but a desire that doesn't achieve dominance in the overall composition of the subject.

It is worth noting that Maria's decision to have the abortion is made in direct response to Carter's threat that he will sue for custody of Kate should Maria have the child, which may or may not belong to him. But the bland prejudices that exist alongside her motherly devotion render the cause of her attachment suspect. When she is at a party that BZ forces her to attend (and before her abortion), Maria sees everyone as a "foreigner, or a faggot, or a gangster" (124). Her inability to register anyone as anything other than one of these demonized "others" is foregrounded by Didion. At the dinner table, she is put off by the group, which includes "two lesbians [who] discussed the dehumanizing aspect of American technology" (125). Didion does not comment; her narrator is the consummate postmodern ironist who leaves everything unsaid. But just because the narrator does not openly chastise Maria and just because Maria is a generally sympathetic character does *not* mean, as some have charged, that Didion endorses Maria's equation of ethnic and sexual others with crime and hypocrisy. Rather, the third-person narrator of this chapter is contrasted with the first-person narrators of several of the previous chapters: the very presence of the third-person narrator invites the reader to think critically about the subject-based judgments Maria makes that speak to a narcissism that has already been established.

But Maria's narcissism cannot be understood in orthodox psychoanalytic terms. She is something that has yet to be theorized within orthodox psychoanalysis—a narcissist who doesn't exist. Lacan's claim that "woman does not exist" is usually understood to suggest that the sign *woman* is a construct of the male imaginary. Woman doesn't exist in herself, as a positive entity with full ontological consistency, but only as a "consequence, a result, a materialization of man's fall" (Žižek , *Enjoy* 154; see also Mellard 397). In practical terms, what this means is that concrete women tend to be victims of male narcissism—that their subjectivity is written up for them as a reflection of a narcissism that is gendered male. When Maria is objectified for her beauty, her "value" belongs entirely to her husband: "the look he gave Maria was dutifully charged with sexual appreciation, meant not for Maria herself but for Carter Lang's wife" (22).

The key to Maria's characterization lies less in her search for authenticity than in her simpler, pragmatic search for recognition and social power. Maria's

reaction to *Angel Beach*, the first major film in which she starred that was directed by Carter, is instructive:

> Maria had seen it twice, once at a studio preview and a second time by herself, at a drive-in in Culver City, and neither time did she have any sense that the girl on the screen was herself [. . .S]he liked watching the picture: the girl on the screen seemed to have a definite knack for controlling her own destiny. (19)

Maria is not terribly troubled by the discrepancy between her felt sense of self and the self reflected in the mirror image of the film. What she likes is that the simulation of herself has agency. In contrast, her response to the earlier, noncommercial release, *Maria*, finds the same discrepancy troubling only because the character she plays "had no knack for anything" (20).

Maria's contrasting responses to these two films suggest that the enactment of subjectivity found in *Play It As It Lays* is a literalization of Lacan's parable of the mirror stage. Maria prefers the image that is more of her Ideal I, a "truer" because more fantasy-based version of herself. Conversely, a mirror image that does not provide this particular form of the pleasure principle does not provide the psychological compensation that an identification with the mirror should provide. But for Lacan this process of identification was something that helped hide the "traumatic kernel," the fact of one's essential lack. The only evidence that the subject knows that this identification is in fact a "misrecognition" lies in the subject's ambivalence toward this Ideal I that includes anger over one's unconscious knowledge that this Ideal I is the Other. But in Maria's matter-of-fact responses, the knowledge that the mirror (and, by implication, the entire cinematic apparatus) is based upon misrecognition is not unconscious. Instead, it is *conscious* and the preference that is casually expressed in this passage lays bare the psychological function. Here again, we find evidence that we, like Maria, inhabit a postLacanian world in which the psychoanalytic model is still applicable but not the basic couplet of science and ideology upon which Freud insisted. There is no useful role played by knowledge in the social formation, nor is there any meaningful distinction between those who possess knowledge and those who don't. No longer believing in an ideology—possessing scientific knowledge—does nothing to alter one's relation to or position within the ideological field. Maria's problem is that she has lost this buffer of belief and is left with no delusion of a centered subjectivity against which to measure them. Simply put, the truth does not set her—or any of us—free.

Maria's fondness for driving the highways illustrates this last insight. The function of driving the highways plays out this very psychosocial drama wonderfully. She simulates agency without believing in it:

> Maria drove the freeway. [. . .] She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour. Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic. On the afternoon she finally did it without once braking or once losing the beat of the radio she

> was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly. (14)

Returning for a moment to our modernist touchstone, this passage can be compared to Hemingway's treatment of bullfighting.[3] Both are cultural activities that serve aesthetic and psychological functions—as figures for agency, a capacity successfully to negotiate a disordered, heterogeneous social field. But the differences between the two are striking. The successful bullfighter does more than just survive. He is always in control of the situation —genuinely in control, as Hemingway's insistence that the true bullfighter must include no unnecessary flourishes just to please the crowd makes clear. He is the orchestrator of the entire drama and, of course, the decider of the outcome. Just so, the subject retains agency in Hemingway's worldview and can find ways of expressing this agency through the imposition of an order on a disordered world. The objective world might well be disordered, but the subject-as-artist is not. Successful freeway driving for Maria, by contrast, has its own integrity, but it does not change the world around it. Rather, it rests content only in the *simulation* that one can participate in the objective world without making any compromises, without altering one's subjective vision (since, as we'll see, such compromises lead to disquieting dreams). I say simulation because this modified agency is exactly what Maria cannot do in the rest of her life and because the ritual repetition of freeway driving has no purpose. She participates in this activity because she desperately needs to. But the fact of its being an obvious simulation and dependency does not change its psychological value. It is thus an illusion *and* it is material.

For Lacan, the subject's recognition *of* desire is also the desire *for* recognition.[4] It is striking how much *Play It As It Lays* is about how Lacanian recognition functions. Maria's tragedy is the tragedy of the entire process of recognition, for much of the novel is about how consistently she is simply misrecognized, how often she is taken for someone she is not. In each case, she has an identity bestowed upon her through recognition over which she has no control. Moreover, in conjunction with the most basic, bestowed identity (as Carter's wife and possession), this recurrence suggests how much her silence is her only way of resisting. When she leaves a party with an actor named Johnny Waters, he calls her Myra and she doesn't object. But the wrong name is also, significantly, tied to the horrible way he treats her before, during, and after sex. When she takes his car and eventually gets arrested for car theft, the closest Waters comes to apologizing is to complain to her that he didn't know "who you were" (156). There is no realization that subjects in general shouldn't be treated this way, only that she is someone socially important enough to have Waters blackballed if he presses theft charges.

If this moment of misrecognition is directly in line with Maria's gender, other moments are more arbitrary. When she is at the supermarket, a mentally ill woman who at first seeks her understanding calls her a "whore" when Maria tries to express compassion. When she is in Las Vegas and trying to find Benny Austin, the

woman whose postal mailbox she mistakes for Benny's is sure that she is a foster mother of someone who is about to receive an injury settlement and is trying to get a cut. Both times she stays at Las Vegas hotels, she is mistaken for a prostitute by just about everyone—the bellhop, the desk clerk, and by entertainers she meets at parties. Moreover, when she goes to the hot springs in the Nevada town in which Carter is filming his next picture, the teenager working there is certain that she is the wife of the star of the film. These disparate moments form a pattern that is given a general expression by Maria near the end of the novel when she writes that she began receiving mail from "mad people" after she became famous. "I am not much engaged by the problems of what you might call our day but I am burdened by the particular, the mad person who writes me a letter. It is no longer necessary for them even to write me. I know when someone is thinking of me. I learn to deal with this" (182). Maria has internalized the experience of misrecognition that is endemic to her life.

And, yet, her greatest fear is that certain *recognizers* "have her number"—a phrase meaning that how they recognize her, who they recognize her as, is in fact true. These people are all Hollywood types and the "Maria" they recognize is one who doesn't have a knack for anything *because* the world is devoid of foundational values—or, as Maria puts it, "the still center of the world is never a house by the sea but the corner of Sunset and La Brea" (114). These two houses figure Romantic and Pragmatic theories of the subject and the objective world respectively. The idea that she is finally like all those in Hollywood who eschew Romanticism—who possess this kind of knowledge—is a wonderful acknowledgement of how much "nothing" is only about the outside world figuratively. Ultimately, what one "knows" is about who one "is." And this too is a product of what Lacan calls the subject's "desire for recognition" since the fear Maria professes of being recognized in this manner is in fact an unacknowledged desire to confront her traumatic kernel.

Didion's rendering of Maria's dreams suggests how much the novel occupies the postLacanian theoretical space carved out by Žižek and others. In the first dream, while she conflates the men in her life, the child she aborted and Kate remain singular:

> In the dream from which she woke when the telephone rang again that night she had the baby, and she and the baby and Kate were living on West Twelfth St. with Ivan Costello. In the dream she did not yet know Carter, but somehow had Carter's daughter and Carter's blessing. In the dream it was all right. She supposed that she had dreamed of Ivan Costello because the telephone was ringing, and he used to call her in the middle of the night. (70)

The last line of the passage reminds us again of how difficult it is to employ Freudian theory from the *outside* when this same theory actually informs the content of the *inside* narrated by the subject. Maria's supposition is psychoanalytically sound. Ivan Costello's presence in the dream is a clear instance of the "day's residue," an arbitrary sign with which unconscious wishes cathect in order to find some form

of expression. The dream also suggests how much one's romantic partners inhabit the same semiotic space in the subject's fantasy, a space of substitution that also explains the ambivalence the subject feels for each substitute.

The wish fulfilled here is calculated to convey the basic point that the only relationships that are unsullied are those between a mother and her child. But the dream that disturbs Maria the most concerning the abortion (as evidenced by its repetition) suggests how much the abortion also expressed a murderous impulse in Maria's unconscious—an impulse that is simultaneously an expression of the death drive. In the dream, Maria knowingly lets her house be used as an abortion clinic:

> A few days later the dreams began. She was in touch with a member of a shadowy Syndicate. Sometimes the contact was Freddy Chaikin, sometimes an F.B.I. man she had met once in New York and not thought of since. Certain phrases remained constant. Always he explained that he was "part of that operation." Always he wanted to discuss "a business proposition." Always he mentioned a plan to use the house in Beverly Hills for "purposes which would in no way concern" her. She need only supply certain information: the condition of the plumbing, the precise width of the pipes, the location and size of all the clean-puts. Workmen appeared, rooms were prepared. The man in the white duck pants materialized and then the doctor, in his rubber apron. At that point she would fight to consciousness but she was never able to wake herself before the dream revealed its inexorable intention, before the plumbing stopped up, before they all fled and left her there, gray water bubbling up in every sink. Of course she could not call a plumber, because she had known all along what would be found in the pipes, what hacked pieces of human flesh. (95-96)

This dream is the strongest piece of evidence of Maria's full participation in the decisions that, taken together, have constituted her life and her symptoms. Despite her entirely conscious wish to exercise some control over her life (following the reality principle), Maria's unconscious drives have sought and found this very different form of agency through the annihilating and narcissistic abortion (following the pleasure principle). That this is not a simple wish to be rid of an unwanted child is made clear in the way that Maria's self-torment in the wake of the abortion leads to her final institutionalization. This institutionalization is her figurative death, an escape from the social matrix that is presented as something not likely to be reversed.

This latter dream, which is the center of the novel, explains the novel's status as the one true "tragedy" of the subgenre of the Hollywood novel. But it is the tragedy of a subject who follows a set of psychological drives that are single-minded, narcissistic, and self-destructive. The fact that Maria does not end up literally dead only underscores how much this form of tragedy breaks with traditional literary forms of tragedy that yoke heroic selflessness with one's inevitable death. The tragedy of Maria Wyeth does indeed involve death, but it is someone else's death (in this case, that of an aborted fetus) that is the sacrifice for the subject who acts on unconscious drives defying conventional morality. Kate's institutionalization is likewise the expression of an unconscious wish since she can continue to function as a part of Maria's fantasy because she has fulfilled a destiny that Maria herself seeks.

Gender figures in this tragedy in a manner that troubles the ways of construing

"woman" that Lacan allows. For while Lacan allows for two sorts of women—the anaclitic mother and the femme fatale—Maria is a female character who is part anaclitic mother and part primordial *father*. She combines, that is, the immersion of self in the other that the anaclitic mother emblematizes with the destructive narcissism of the primordial father. In the process, *Play It As It Lays* suggests that women are at once participants in the drive-based *jouissance* theorized by the late Lacan that seems the province of men *and* the most likely to get there because, as women, they "do not exist." While *Play It As It Lays* is not a feminist novel by any conventional measure, its rendering of a postLacanian subjectivity that just happens to be female reminds us of how much the ideological project of Lacanian psychoanalysis and the Hollywood novel are gendered through and through.

Notes

[1] The two phrases come from Lacan, but have been most persuasively elaborated by Slavoj Žižek in his several studies of Lacan, Hegel and Hollywood film. See Žižek , *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* and *Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*.

[2] The space between two deaths was theorized by the late Freud, but given its fullest articulation by Lacan in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 281.

[3] Although Hemingway wrote often in his nonfiction about bullfighting, his clearest articulation of its aesthetic and allegorical qualities is in *The Sun Also Rises*.

[4] This elementary Lacanian concept is dealt with in many places. See "The

agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud" in *Ecrits*, 146-79.

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