

Heroin Chic Resurgence: The Unintentional Romanticization of Female Mental Illness as, Depicted in *Girl, Interrupted*, *Prozac Nation* and *An Unquiet Mind*

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ABSTRACT

A research article involving the literary analysis of novels *Girl, Interrupted*, *Prozac Nation* and *An Unquiet Mind* to better understand the unintentional romanticization of female mental illness within the text. Using this information, I connect the three novels to the resurgence in the romanticization of mental illness within current trends and social media.

Introduction

A crumpled frilly black dress on bathroom tiles. A single strand of cigarette smoke drifting from dark red lips. A perfectly manicured hand holding an orange bottle of pills. Slim silhouettes running around a parking lot after dark. Tangled hair, running mascara, broken heels. On the endless social media feeds of Tiktok and Tumblr, these images are nearly inescapable. As a teenage girl myself, I've seen firsthand how this niche of social media, rebranded multiple times over the years through hashtags such as #lanadelrey, #heroinchic, #sadgirl and #coquette, has been relevant in popular culture for ages. In fact, it seems that the romanticization of female mental illness has been engrained in the social zeitgeist since the beginning of time. As a teenage girl myself, heavily entangled in the worlds of literature and media, I've had multiple experiences where the romanticization of female mental illness has negatively affected the mental and physical health of people around me. Specifically, the #sadgirl movement gained traction on Tumblr throughout my middle school years; as a result, it became extremely popular to practice unhealthy behaviors such as being thin to the point of sickly, speaking in one word answers, isolating oneself and, of course, quoting #sadgirl literature.

It's through this specific niche of #sadgirl literature that I discovered the books that inspired those iconic movie quotes that were reposted and circulated around Tumblr for years. These novels include *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen, *Prozac Nation* by Elizabeth Wurtzel and *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Redfield Jamison. Quotes and screengrabs from the movie adaptations of these books are woven throughout the niches of social media, inseparable from the web of romanticization of female mental illness. These three novels also held interesting similarities: all three are autobiographies about various experiences with mental illness written by young women in the 1990s. These books also contain a timelessly popular quality about them, which have kept them trending on social media even at present day.

I approached these autobiographies with two research questions: How have depictions of mental illness in women been romanticized in contemporary literature? How are female autobiographical authors romanticizing depictions of mental illness and institutionalization in women in literature in the end of the 20th century in the United States? These questions are important and relevant to contemporary scholarship because they fill a gap in modern research surrounding romanticization and these specific novels. While multiple studies have

been published about the cyclical nature of romanticization of female mental illness on social media and many papers have been written about *Girl*, *Interrupted*, *Prozac Nation* and *An Unquiet Mind*, often in relation to each other and about their depictions of female mental illness, no published study or paper has connected the two topics. There is a noticeable gap in research between the two topics, and through this article, I plan bridge this gap and connect the two related and disconnected topics of research. This is particularly necessary because I have found that, within these three books, female autobiographical authors are romanticizing female mental illness through specific imagery and figurative language that hold connotations in popular media, even though they are blatantly critical of aspects of romanticization at points throughout the book.

Context

The 1990s issued in a period of great cultural change for the United States with drug use and an increasingly popular aesthetic labeled “heroin chic” on the rise, as well as a newfound national consciousness surrounding mental health. “Heroin chic” was a highly popular high fashion trend in the early 90s that was pioneered by a group of photographers, notably Davide Sorrenti (The Guardian). These photographs depicted emaciated, white young women looking disheveled, dirty and distressed, typically with a cigarette in hand. These photographs inspired a number of high fashion runways starring high profile models known for their thinness, such as Gia Carangi, Kate Moss and Jaime King, and Calvin Klein grunge campaigns depicting more stereotypical heroin chic photography (The Guardian). During this period, Hollywood was also experiencing a parallel affect with popular films such as “Pulp Fiction” and “Trainspotting,” which depicted scenes of violence, hedonism and drug culture from glorified and romanticized perspectives (Hull). Alongside that style of films, the novels *Girl*, *Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation* were adapted into films of their own; they grew to become cult classics for their poetic, quotable and overly-romanticized screenwriting, as well as the star power of celebrities such as Winona Ryder, Angelina Jolie and Christina Ricci. Unsurprisingly, drug use across the country skyrocketed parallel to increased glamorous coverage of drug use in media. Heroin, in particular, became more accessible, high end, and popular with the middle and upper class (Hull). In 1994, six million people in the United States had taken the anti-depressant Prozac, and the drug itself had a culture and aesthetic all of its own (Wurtzel 309).

However, contrary to the rise of these aesthetics in pop culture, scientific and government awareness of mental health began to grow and call for major policy shifts in spreading awareness for mental illness to reduce the harmful stereotypes and stigmas that had made it difficult to find help in the past. Throughout the mid-80s, the government escalated the war on drugs and increased access to anti-drug education (Robinson). The Mental Health Amendments of 1990 allotted funding for mental health services, youth suicide prevention and recognition of depressive disorders (“1990 Policy Shifts”). Government acknowledgement of mental illness only cemented mental health and drug use in the center of social consciousness in the United States during the 90s, furthering the media and culture depicting its romanticization, leading to more legislation, continuing the cycle. The three books I’ll be discussing in this essay were written within this cycle of condemning and romanticizing mental illness, adding fuel to the already blazing fire.

The environment in which these autobiographies were published are exemplified by the early reviews of all three novels. *Girl, Interrupted* by Susanna Kaysen was published in 1993 and one of the first novels that sparked conversations about female mental illness and the stereotyping and romanticization associated with it. Initial reviews praised Kaysen’s satirical depiction of male medical professionals’ treatment of female mental illness and her raw, unromanticized perspective of institutionalization. Words such as “funny,” “insightful,” “witty,” “meaningful,” “honest” and “thoughtful” were sprinkled throughout early reviews of the novel. Kaysen’s autobiography of her journey with mental illness and institutionalization was the first of its kind; however, it was followed a year later in 1994 by Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation*.

Prozac Nation had jarringly contrasting reviews from *Girl, Interrupted*. An early review of *Prozac Nation* that gained traction was by Erica Werner for the Harvard Crimson, titled “Elizabeth Wurtzel’s Unofficial

Guide to Whining.” The article details how Wurtzel depicted depression as hip and artsy, how she took advantage of her privilege and how she came off as an “irritating, solipsistic brat.” Vulture’s book review expressed similar views, calling the book a “work of singular self-absorption.” Many other reviews were unsympathetic and also criticized Wurtzel’s privilege, tone and overall depiction of her mental illness and her time at Harvard. In 1995, a third autobiography about female mental illness was published: *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Redfield Jamison. This novel differed from *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation*: Jamison was much older than Kaysen and Wurtzel, both during the events of the novel and whilst writing the novel. Jamison is also a psychiatrist and medical professional who specializes in her own mental illness, manic-depressive personality disorder, and her profession plays a major role in her experience with mental illness. Reviews were generally positive, praising Jamison’s prose, which conveyed the romantic allure of mania, the painful low of depression, and her scientific view of her personal experience. The New York Times specifically notes that the *An Unquiet Mind* doesn’t propose any cure for manic-depressive, nor does it show a linear or complete healing journey; rather, it praises how Jamison consistently copes and struggles while living with her mental illness. The Los Angeles Times further commends Jamison for being careful not to generalize or extend outside of her personal experience. In general, *An Unquiet Mind* was considered as a more mature and objective perspective of female mental illness by critics and readers.

Existing Literature

Girl, Interrupted, *Prozac Nation* and *An Unquiet Mind* have all been well-known and controversial texts that have generated plenty of discussion and analysis from academic scholars, specifically about their depictions of female mental illness. These three works have been analyzed and interpreted from multiple different angles, such as through the lens of disability studies, comparisons to other novels and analyses of public reception. And while the concept of romanticization is always lingering at the peripherals of the research, and often pops into each article briefly, no research has solely focused on the romanticization in the diction and language of the texts. More specifically, no text connects the three texts to how romanticization can have a larger impact through social media in the modern world.

An article which briefly touches on romanticization is “Broke Promise: Depression as Ex-Gifted Girl Identity in Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation*” by Nora Augustine. In this article, Augustine analyzes *Prozac Nation* through the lens of the “Mad Genius,” a trope that links mental illness with intellectual gifts, and focuses on how Wurtzel’s depiction of her depression falls into “the cliché that formerly “gifted” children grow into depressed, burned-out adults” (Augustine 2). Before analyzing the text of the novel, Augustine addresses Wurtzel’s personal life history and the academic achievements she had accumulated in her lifetime, thus helping her to find connections in the text between Wurtzel’s depression and her giftedness. Augustine’s article critiques the reviews that attack Wurtzel’s choice to include her accomplishments alongside her depression in the novel, writing that “these reviews alluded to a paradox quite familiar to gifted women: either neglect one’s talents and suffer personal distress, or embrace one’s talents and be rejected by one’s environment” (Augustine 5). She then spends the majority of the article focusing on the “Gifted Girl” stereotype and the push and pull between Wurtzel’s want to either abandon or celebrate her intellectual gift alongside her mental illness. The one time Augustine mentions romanticization in the article is when detailing that reviews which “romanticize [Wurtzel’s] gifts and ponder the sociological symbolism of her suicide” (Augustine 9) are not any better than reviews which attack her intellectual gifts. The sole mention of romanticization in this article surrounds the controversial reviews of the novel and their impact on the way the novel was received, more than the actual work. By pointing out that the reviewers romanticized the way Wurtzel presented her intelligence in the novel and connected it to her motives for suicide, Augustine sets up context for a discussion of romanticization, but completely skirts the issue at the same time, using it only to further her argument about the “Mad Genius” trope in *Prozac Nation*.

Another research article which hints at and brushes past the concept of romanticization is “Women, Madness & Literature” by Nicole Lighthart, a comparative analysis of *The Bell Jar* and *Girl, Interrupted*. In this text, Lighthart touches on several topics surrounding the novel, including the assumption that people with mental illness should advocate for their own struggles, patriarchal society’s effect on mental illness, Kaysen’s use of the words “mad” and “crazy,” and the use of prison and glass imagery to represent entrapment and isolation. Notably, Lighthart does not mention any romanticization of either text in her research article; however, she does once mention the consequences and pitfalls of mainstreaming mental illness while discussing *Writing and Madness* by Shoshana Felman. Lighthart writes that “Felman explains that having madness become a more mainstream or common topic is not always positive, as it becomes easier for stereotypes and misconceptions to establish their place in society, and thus it becomes harder to then get rid of these misconceptions” (Lighthart 19). While the analysis about madness being stereotyped in society is reminiscent of the romanticization of mental illness, it’s not quite the same thing, as stereotyping invokes more negative imagery compared to romanticization. Lighthart also writes, in relation to Felman’s book, “By becoming more common and more mainstream, madness has a new place in the culture of society as well” (Lighthart 19-20). Again, while not quite touching on romanticization, Lighthart draws nearer to the concept. Lighthart’s article is useful in that it broadens the discussion from the romanticization of female mental illness to the mainstreaming of madness through her analysis of Felman’s writing; in doing so, she provides context for romanticization and also acknowledges its growing presence in popular culture. However, by touching on this aspect of Felman’s work so briefly and generally, it doesn’t directly connect with the circumstances of romanticization in *Girl, Interrupted* and doesn’t focus on specific situations in the text. Thus, the clear gap in Lighthart’s work is the lack of connection between the diction and specific imagery in the text and her recognition of mental illness being stereotyped in mainstream culture.

“Prozac Nation — The Study of Reception of a Book” by Linda Krajčovičová spends a much larger chunk of the writing on romanticization and takes a different angle with a focus on the novel’s mental health narrative and negative media attention upon initial publication, as well as contextualizing the growing societal awareness of mental illness in the late 1990s. Krajčovičová points out the critiques of Wurtzel’s narcissistic, egocentric tone in the novel, the fraught perception of mental health during the time period, government action for mental health in the 1970s, and reflecting on the stigma against mental health which generated many of the negative reviews. There is a specific section in the article titled “Romanticizing of Depression,” explaining the critical views about Wurtzel’s “romanticized depiction of depression” (Krajčovičová 12). Krajčovičová writes about Ken Turner’s New York Times review of *Prozac Nation*, where he wrote about how Wurtzel constantly reminded the reader that despite her crippling depression, she was still going to college parties and getting top grades and securing journalistic internships, making it difficult for the reader to sympathize with her. She also writes that reviewers agree about how Wurtzel’s life with depression was “different, interesting, exciting, and full of opportunities, which overall creates a false notion about the reality of what it is like to suffer from depression” (Krajčovičová 13). Krajčovičová touches more heavily on romanticization than any previous article and also analyzes the way it comes about in *Prozac Nation*, detailing specific imagery and situations within the text that depict such romanticization; rather than skirting around the concept. The primary issue with this article is that Krajčovičová herself does not argue that Wurtzel is romanticizing her depression; rather, she is describing and interpreting the reviews of the novel and reflecting on the reviewer’s opinions that Wurtzel romanticized her depression. Through the lack of Krajčovičová’s own insight or opinion on the novel and the romanticization makes it clear that there is a huge gap between her article detailing the reviews of *Prozac Nation* and the argument of the existence of romanticization within *Prozac Nation*. Krajčovičová’s article provides useful context about early reviewers’ recognition of the romanticization in the autobiography, and I plan to use that context to assist my argument and analysis about the romanticized language and imagery in the text.

Another research article that comes even closer to addressing romanticization of female mental illness in literature is “‘I Saw It In A Movie’: Film Representations of the Mentally Ill Community & its GIF Transmediation onto Tumblr” by Isabella McCloskey; however, this article also moves further from the literature and text itself. This research article reviews film representations of mental illness, rather than literary representations, with a section dedicated to the film adaptation of *Girl, Interrupted*. McCloskey points out the casting choices for *Girl, Interrupted*: Winona Ryder portrays Susanna Kaysen and Angelina Jolie portrays Lisa. Ryder and Jolie are both extremely well-known and attractive movie stars. McCloskey writes that “mental illness doesn’t always look beautiful or handsome, and portraying it as so gives off the perception that it does” (McCloskey 22). She also mentions several other plot points from the movie that aren’t included in the novel, such as spontaneous adventures and Kaysen’s illicit relationship with a male nurse. McCloskey calls these situations “glamorized” rather than romanticized, but she is clearly critiquing the romanticization of female mental illness in the film and bringing the topic into her article. Her analysis of the film adaptations bring interesting new perspectives to a consumer’s understanding of the novels and touch on how romanticization has not only translated but also been amplified onto the big screen. Unfortunately, she does not reference the text at all, rather focusing only on the adaptation. The lack of focus on the text and the changes between the novel and the screenplay create distance between the acknowledgment of romanticization and the actual text, since McCloskey often critiques details of the film such as casting and framing of a scene, which are inapplicable to the novel.

“Echo: the Romanticization of Mental Illness on Tumblr” by Anima Shrestha has no focus nor mention of the three autobiographies in the paper; rather, the sole focus is the history of research about the romanticization of mental illness on social media. In this research article, Shrestha heavily focuses on the media and societal side of romanticization, listing out several examples of powerful imagery on Tumblr such as “black-and-white, aesthetically pleasing photos of razor blades and bottles of pills with self-deprecating, suicide-promoting captions” (Shrestha 1). In her article, Shrestha explains how social media has vastly and swiftly shifted the perception of mental illness from “mad murderer” to glamorized by the general public, specifically in “echo chambers” — online communities that reinforce each others ideas and consistently reinforce certain ideals in a “closed community,” such as Tumblr. Shrestha also employs film in her article, analysing the Netflix television show *13 Reasons Why*, a show about a teenage girl’s suicide, as an example to her reader of the impact and mainstreaming of the romanticization of female mental illness. Shrestha also gives examples of the black and white images she mentioned, and digs into the impact this romanticization can have on social media users and their perception and understanding of mental illness, as well as of themselves. She writes that “the issue of romanticization needs to be brought into the light and taken seriously, both by members of the mental illness community and society as a whole” (Shrestha 9). Shrestha heavily emphasizes the seriousness and urgency of taking action to recognize the romanticization of mental illness on social media as a society in her article, and presents an acute understanding of how the romanticization spreads and permeates social media and reaches younger audiences. Her article offers important information about the romanticization of mental illness in the present moment, and paints a picture of the trending images and quotes that brought mental illness into mainstream culture. However, Shrestha never touches on the literature where some of these quotes may originate from, nor does she emphasize the film adaptations that contain some of these famous images. Her article functions under the assumption that the romanticization of female mental illness originated solely in echo chambers in Tumblr and such social media applications, without connecting it to forms of entertainment such as literature and film that a substantial audience consume.

My research attempts to bridge the gap between the research focused on the three texts of *Girl, Interrupted*, *Prozac Nation* and *An Unquiet Mind* and the research focused on the romanticization of mental illness through quotes and imagery on social media. I believe that many research articles and texts have danced around the topic for a while now, never really connecting the two topics. While Lighthart touches on the romanticization

of female mental illness in literature becoming more mainstream and Shrestha emphasizes the idea that romanticization has become a serious issue on social media, there is a clear hole between the two research articles and no connection between two articles that tackle the exact same issue. My research article will tackle the concept of romanticization within these three autobiographies head-on and make it the focal point of my argument, thus filling the gap that these previous articles surround. I will also connect my literary analysis of romanticization within these three novels with the current and prevalent romanticization of female mental illness on social media.

Definition of Romanticization

The word romanticization has similar yet slightly variable definitions across multiple sources. Oxford's English Dictionary defines romanticization as "dealing with or describing in an idealized or unrealistic fashion; making (something) seem better or more appealing than it really is." Merriam-Webster defines romanticization as "making romantic; treating as idealized or heroic." In "Echo: the Romanticization of Mental Illness on Tumblr" by Anima Shrestha, as mentioned earlier, Shrestha defines the romanticization of mental illness as "the depiction of mental illness as more glamorous, attractive, or alluring than it truly is." But most importantly, all definitions have the idea that romanticization is not based in realism or the idea of being realistic; anything that is romanticized is not entirely realistic, and rather something slightly more idealized than whatever is being romanticized.

The definition of romanticization I'll be using in this article is a glorification or idealization of a concept or a person; putting them on a pedestal and looking at it through rose-tinted glasses; making something aspirational and iconic in popular culture. In the three novels analyzed, romanticization manifests through certain specific images or choice of language by the authors throughout the novels. These specific romanticized images, as mentioned in the introduction, and quotes are usually the ones that gain the most traction on social media in the modern time.

Girl, Interrupted

Girl, Interrupted by Susanne Kaysen details Kaysen's stay at McLean Hospital, a mental health treatment center, and describes the people she met during her stay, her diagnosis and how her life changed because of her time at McLean. The story is largely told unchronologically in scattered snapshots, some focusing on certain characters, some a self-contained event, some tangential monologues. The novel begins with Kaysen being sent to McLean by a doctor, followed by chapters dedicated to specific girls she met at McLean, such as Lisa Rowe. Kaysen then returns to her thoughts, mulling over the doctor who sent her to McLean before detailing the two categories of mental illness: "viscous" and "velocity." The next section describes situations with the McLean medical staff: head nurse Valerie, useless therapists and psychiatrists, and nurses. Eventually, Kaysen impulsively accepts a marriage proposal and leaves the hospital. The last section of the novel is Kaysen looking at the painting of "Girl Interrupted at Her Music" by Johannes Vermeer and gaining a new understanding for what the painting represents, as well as a new realization of the time she had lost of her life.

Girl, Interrupted is heavily characterized through Kaysen's quick wit and sharp sense of humor, infusing each sentence of the book with dry sarcasm and cynicism. This tone creates the perfect playing field for Kaysen to express her thoughts and critiques on stigmas and stereotypes surrounding female mental illness, as well as the male perspective of female mental illness. However, this tone often dies down during her descriptions of McLean Hospital, the mental health institution she spends the majority of the novel in; here, her writing

voice flattens out to a neutral attitude, all the more jarring against the horrific living conditions described. Despite Kaysen's sharp, realistic and sometimes satirical depiction of her time in McLean, there are often times when her distinct voice catches a little, slipping into passages of unintentional romanticization of female mental illness: a name drop, an image, a stereotype. For an autobiography whose "great success" is for avoiding "romantic inflation" (Philadelphia Inquirer), those small moments call into question the impact and weight of the male perspective on female mental illness.

The bulk of the novel is an unromanticized, nimbly woven satire of men and their perspective on female mental illness, particularly men working in psychiatry. Kaysen regards her doctors and therapists with disdain and skepticism, depicting them as incapable, useless and often obtuse during their required sessions. However, there is a singular man portrayed most negatively in the novel: the man who sent Kaysen to McLean. This doctor is an extremely significant figure in *Girl, Interrupted*, as he is the catalyst for Kaysen's entire journey through McLean and thus, the plot of the entire novel. Described as "taut fat man, tight-bellied and dark" (7), the doctor asks Kaysen all the shallowest questions about pimples and boyfriends. Given that she'd popped a pimple and was having problem with her boyfriend, the doctor decided to send her to McLean in under 20 minutes. He did so with a sense of pride as well. "He strutted back into the room, busy, pleased with himself... he looked triumphant" (8). Kaysen's portrayal of this doctor satirizes the male perspective of female mental illness; the doctor represents a shallow-minded, skewed idea of how mental health issues manifest in women. Rather than asking about Kaysen's emotions or feelings regarding the issues in her life, or any behavioral patterns disrupting her day-to-day, he relegates her to her physical appearance and the men in her life. Just like any man would. Kaysen mentions him again, in the middle of the novel, bringing up how he marked the appointment as a three hour meeting while she was sure it was much less than that. "Twenty minutes between my walking in the door and his deciding to send me to McLean" (71). Through this section, she emphasizes the carelessness and shallowness of his extreme decision to send her away. Furthermore, the title of this section is aptly: "Do You Believe Him or Me?" (71). This raises the fact that male medical professionals will always be believed over women with mental illness. Kaysen is acutely aware of the way men view mentally troubled women, and her satirized depictions of these common situations is an antithesis to romanticization.

At points throughout the novel, Kaysen utilizes a wholly different approach to depict the rawness and unromanticized view of female mental illness through her descriptions of McLean and the living conditions of the institution. In a section of the novel entitled "Applied Topography," Kaysen describes in great detail the living situation in McLean, starting with the "two locked doors with a five-foot space between them... a long, long hallway, too long... lunatics to the left, staff to the right" (45). Through her choice of language, McLean comes to life as a creepily sterile, liminal space with none of the softness or gentleness stereotypically associated with... women. As Kaysen proceeds in her description of the ward, she proceeds through the "messy, noise, smoky" (46) TV room to reach the seclusion room. Kaysen's writing voice remains completely neutral as she goes through the descriptions and imagery, detailing how "its only window was the chicken-wire-enforced one in the door... bare mattress on the green linoleum floor... walls were chipped, as though somebody had been at them with fingernails or teeth" (46). Kaysen's use of animalistic imagery with her descriptions of "chicken-wire" and "fingernails or teeth," dehumanizes the patients of McLean to almost savages or feral figures, something worth less than human beings. The "bare mattress" on the "linoleum floor" only further solidifies that inhumane, sterile feeling of the ward. Kaysen drives the dehumanization home when describing how nurses would check on patients in solitary through the chicken wire window as though they were "looking at a cake through the glass of the oven door" (46). All the while, Kaysen continues to feed the reader these images in a neutral, objective tone, knowing that the horrific imagery speaks for itself and carries a weight of its own. The patients in solitary are not quite women anymore, rather mangled products of their environment. "Applied Topography" solidifies one of Kaysen's central ideas: there is absolutely nothing romantic about McLean.

Or is there? Kaysen certainly spends the vast majority of the novel critiquing the male perspective on mental illness and showing the painfully raw reality of McLean, but there are moments where she slips into almost another voice, a lilting, almost girlish voice. There are certain moments in *Girl, Interrupted* where Kaysen seems to let some romanticization seep into her carefully sharp writing voice. One such instance is when she describes what McLean seems like to outsiders in the section titled “The Prelude to Ice Cream.” Kaysen begins this section by describing the location of the hospital. “The hospital was on a hill outside of town, the way hospitals are in movies about the insane” (48). Immediately, this calls into mind a certain image, a specific stereotype derived from popular media and movies, as Kaysen specifies. By suggesting that McLean is similar to the romanticized, stereotypical depictions of mental institutions in popular media, Kaysen is, shockingly, romanticizing McLean. She goes on to add that the hospital “was famous and had housed many great poets and singers” (48). Just through the opening to the section, Kaysen sets McLean in the context of popular culture: movies and singers and writers. As she goes on, she develops a lilting, rhythmic tone: “Did the hospital specialize in poets and singers, or was it that poets and singers specialized in madness?” This question in itself has a poetic feel to it, a swaying, romantic quality that is exempt from the rest of the novel. Kaysen goes on to drop some names: Ray Charles, who they thought would “serenade” (48) them, the Taylor family, James, Kate and Livingston with their “North Carolina-twanged blues” (48), and poets such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. The mentions of these celebrities and poets does more than just elevate the hospital from sterile institution to little hospital on the hill; it brushes this illusion and gloss over all aspects of McLean. It makes sadness seem beautiful and mysterious, something that would cause people to “serenade” or sing the blues for. Kaysen adds that “when you’re sad you need to hear your sorrow structured into sound” (48). This adds this level of romanticization to the glossy chapter, as Kaysen writes about how sadness manifests into music, into art, into beauty. Kaysen then asks another question: “What is it about meter and cadence and rhythm that makes their makers mad?” (48). There it is again, that hypnotic, alluring, rhythmic voice, seemingly drawing the reader into this little fantasy, into this romantic bubble, appealing to the reader with this culture of sadness and these troubled artists. In other words: romanticizing McLean. In a novel almost wholly characterized by Kaysen’s raw, unfiltered description of McLean and sharp, witty commentary on the stereotypes and romanticization that comes with female mental illness, this chapter sticks out in its distinctly different tone and choice of imagery. Whether Kaysen meant for this chapter to have the purpose of showing the allure and pull of romanticization or whether she fell into this inescapable pattern herself, this chapter makes one question apparent: why is it that a book known for its unromanticized, authentic depiction of female mental illness still falls victim to such apparent unintentional romanticization?

Prozac Nation

Prozac Nation by Elizabeth Wurtzel describes Wurtzel’s experience with her atypical depression throughout her early adolescence, to her time at Harvard University and the years between and after. Unlike *Girl, Interrupted*, the story is told in chronological order and proceeds linearly through from childhood to her late 20s; however, there are portions of chapters printed in italics that become tangential and have a rambling quality similar to sections of Kaysen’s autobiography. The novel traces Wurtzel’s troubled childhood to her tumultuous time at Harvard to her young adulthood spent running from her mental illness, from Dallas to Minneapolis to London. Meanwhile, she cycles through drugs before reaching Prozac which, despite a taxing adjustment period, significantly better her mental health. The narrative ends with Wurtzel’s realization that she had become dependent on her depression as her central personality trait, and that she needs to readjust her reality to accept that she’ll always live with the depression and live for the small “in-betweens” of life. An epilogue then reflects on the events of the novel in relation to the societal events that had caught up to Wurtzel’s personal experience.

Prozac Nation touches on every section of Wurtzel’s life and battle with mental illness and spares no detail. Each event and character is described from with carefully crafted language: each party adorned with

name drops of music artists, drug brands and atmospheric description, each boyfriend crafted with family background, interests, and drug of choice, each mental breakdown paired with an outfit fitting for the situation. As the reader jumps from mental breakdown to mental breakdown, location to location, boyfriend to boyfriend, there is almost a thrilling, unpredictable feeling to the variety of experiences throughout the novel. A western journalistic party in Dallas with beer, a drive through the London countryside, a Harvard party with generational wealth playboys. Wurtzel's distinct writing voice floats through the book, flirty at times, dryly sarcastic at others, desperate at others. *Prozac Nation* is chock full of heavily romanticized imagery of mental health, some straight out of movie scene, and has a large focus on Wurtzel's dependence on men to play the hero and rescue her from her mental illness; yet, the epilogue has a jarringly different approach than the rest of the novel. The epilogue reads more like an essay than the rest of the novel, objectively stating statistics about Prozac and actively recognizing and calling out the romanticization of drug culture and mental illness in the United States. The interesting juxtaposition between the epilogue and the majority of the novel shows that Wurtzel's intention with *Prozac Nation* may not have been in tandem with its eventual cultural impact.

The book opens with a party in Wurtzel's apartment that she shares with high school roommate Jason, and an image of her in a party dress, in a puddle on her bathroom floor. "I am curled up in the fetal position on my bathroom floor. The black chiffon of my dress against the stark white tiles must make me look like a dirty puddle. I can't stop crying" (xix). This imagery is one of the most well-recognized and stereotypical images of female mental illness: the helpless girl, in her party dress, mascara running down her face, curled on the hard floor of her bathroom. This is an immediate and stunningly apparent romanticization of female mental illness, just in some of the opening lines of the prologue, which is also titled "I Hate Myself and I Want to Die." This title immediately sets the tone of Wurtzel's novel and introduces her dry, cynical tone which perpetrates the rest of the book. Past the description of Wurtzel in her party dress is a description of the party itself, at her apartment, noting that the people at her party either don't notice or don't care about her troubling situation. This is due to their drug and alcohol consumption at the party, as Wurtzel writes about "sips of red wine and hits on a joint someone rolled earlier and chugs on Becks or Rolling Rock" (xix). This specific description and clear imagery creates another scene that is immediately recognizable: hip, stoned 20-somethings in an apartment, cool people having a cool gathering. The representation of this party is another clear example of romanticization in this novel, as it immediately signals that Wurtzel, despite being in a desperately depressed situation, is still a "cool girl," in her apartment and at a cool party. Or, rather, that she is a "cool girl" *because* of her depression and troubled situation. The paragraph caps off with Wurtzel mentioning, in her drying humorous tone that they're still the "nerds we were in high school who get enough of a kick out of the possibility of being popular" (xix). This again contextualizes the party, the drugs, the depression as popular activities and trends and a way for Wurtzel and Jason to redeem themselves from being high school nerds. This is a particularly dangerous sentiment for high school or teenage readers that may fall into a trap of thinking that drugs and depression are a way for them to gain popularity and become interesting, a notion that the author herself fell into. Purely through the early paragraphs of the novel, this precedence of romanticization is set into place: Wurtzel, suffering from life-threatening depression, is a cool party girl.

This romanticization extends, unaddressed throughout the vast majority of the novel, through Wurtzel's various troubling romantic exploits, adventures gallivanting across and outside of the country, and college parties. However, as Wurtzel begins to grow and heal after her final suicide attempt paired with the positive affects of Prozac, she comes to a newfound consciousness of this romanticization, and reveals that all along, she had really been romanticizing her atypical depression to herself. Wurtzel admits that she had "fallen in love with her depression" (302). She had come to build her personality and self-worth around the fact that she had depression, and was afraid of who she was without this aspect that made her interesting and romantic. "I thought depression was the part of my character that made me worthwhile" (302). In a way, Wurtzel had unintentionally romanticized depression to herself in her own mind, convinced herself that it was all she had, that it was the only interesting and valuable aspect of her. "[Depression] gave me humor, it gave me a certain what-a-fuckup-

I-am schtick to play with... I had developed a persona that could be extremely melodramatic and entertaining” (302-303). Somehow, without even realizing it, Wurtzel had crafted herself into the stereotypical figure of female mental illness, the dramatic, codependent, dramatic girl who had troubling, yet humorous stories to tell, “the ideal cocktail party monologue” (303), that romanticized version of female mental illness that often comes from a man’s perspective. However, this perspective had become to rooted in Wurtzel’s mind that she had attached herself to this vision of that girl and based her character and self-worth off of it. She adds that she is afraid of having to craft a personality that doesn’t revolve around her depression, that doesn’t “contain misery as its leitmotif” (303). Wurtzel mentions all of this with a surprisingly reflective nature and honest fear that many young adolescent girls have experienced over the years as they tried to mold themselves into someone others would like. Throughout this section of the novel, Wurtzel drops her cynical tone in exchange for a more earnest and even hopeful writing voice. This realization of her own unintentional romanticization of her atypical depression brings her a clarity, and allows for the central story of *Prozac Nation* to draw to a close.

However, the novel doesn’t end there, instead extending into a self-contained epilogue that is jarringly separate from the rest of the novel. Not only does it read like a wholly separate essay and uses a completely different tone, touching on mental illness springing to the front of the social consciousness and bringing in statistics and research on Prozac and drug culture in the United States, it also has a clear awareness of the romanticization of mental illness, the stereotypes associated with it, and the harmful affects of it. Wurtzel touches on popular trends associated with mental illness and rug culture, such as the “moody, macabre British new wave bands like the Cure, the Smiths, and Depeche Mode” (324), rock band Jane’s Addiction gaining popularity whilst advocating for heroin abuse, misery-chic dominating the high fashion runways and magazines, including Marc Jacobs and Vogue. Wurtzel details how models had a specific look to them, especially looking “bone-thin,” “gloomy,” “anorexic,” and “clinically depressed.” Throughout the epilogue, Wurtzel is highly aware of the power specific images and cultural phenomena have on influencing trends throughout the country and equally critical of the carelessness these popular figures display surrounding drug use and mental illness. She also touches on Kurt Cobains suicide in 1994 and how there was a cultural phenomenon surrounding his suicide, trivializing his troubling experience with depression and transforming it into a culture and a trend. Wurtzel adds that depression seems to be “in the air” (326) and has transformed from deeply personal, serious experiences to an aesthetic exploited by the popular culture and the American adolescence. Wurtzel’s carefully crafted commentary on the state of mental illness in the the United States recontextualizes the highly romanticized tone and view of the novel, calling into question her intentions with the imagery she employed, and whether or not she understood the power of her imagery and the affect of her language.

An Unquiet Mind

An Unquiet Mind by Kay Redfield Jamison follows Jamison as she navigates her psychiatric work and personal life within the context of her manic-depressive personality disorder. The novel proceeds chronologically with the odd italic tangential paragraph, much like *Prozac Nation*; however, the italic paragraphs disappear halfway through the novel, signaling a possible stabilizing halfway through Jamison’s turbulent journey with mental illness. The novel begins with Jamison detailing her experiences growing up in the environment of a military family and the development of heavy mood swings, which grew stronger through high school to college. As she continues through undergraduate and graduate school, Jamison experiences bouts of manic productivity and low depressive periods. Meanwhile, her doses of lithium make it extremely difficult to function and work, causing her to cycle through taking and not taking medication. Jamison spends the end of the novel detailing her relationships that bettered her as much as medication, as well as the conflict between her profession and her mental illness. She eventually says that she would choose to relive her life with manic-depressive because she believes she’s felt more and lived harder because of it.

An Unquiet Mind is heavily characterized by Jamison's professional career, causing it to strike differently from *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation*. Jamison's scientific and academic knowledge of her manic-depressive disorder allows her to experience it and acknowledge it with a different sense of consciousness than that of Kaysen and Wurtzel. In this way, Jamison is also aware of the romanticization of her own mental illness, specifically the manic side of her personality disorder. While Jamison frequently details the seductively euphoric, freeing and romantic aspects of her mania, she is also unafraid to shy away from the raw, difficult lows of her depressive episodes as well. These jarring descriptions are recognized by Jamison, who says near the end of the novel that she understood how she had romanticized her own mania to herself, despite knowing that it was harmful to her mental health and that it would be followed by a devastating depressive period. And yet, Jamison's complex understanding of her own mental illness does not preclude her from unintentionally romanticizing aspects of her mania.

Jamison describes her manic episodes throughout the novel with a selection of adjectives and imagery that creates a sense of romanticism and allure to her mania, such as her college experiences with her mania. Jamison describes her mania as periods of "great fun, passion, high enthusiasms, and long runs of very hard but enjoyable work" (42). Jamison paints her manic episodes as productive and emotional in all the right ways, adding that "this pattern of shifting moods and energies had a very seductive side to it... fitful reinfusions of the intoxicating moods that I had enjoyed in high school" (42). Through mysterious and alluring diction such as "shifting," "seductive," "fitful," and "intoxicating," Jamison once again paints a romanticized view of her mania, showcasing it as an aspirational high and feeling that readers are immediately drawn into. The paragraph continues with the productive and intellectual nature of Jamison's manias, as they were able to feed Jamison with more creativity and academic curiosity, thus sustaining her academic career as well. She writes that her manic episodes filled "my brain with a cataract of ideas and more than enough energy to give me at least the illusion of carrying them out" (42). Jamison emphasizes that the ideas will never be truly carried out into fruition because of her depressive episodes that will follow; despite that, the notion that her manic episodes feed her with ideas and intellectual motivation fits into the "mad genius" stereotype in mental illness, the romanticized notion that being mentally ill will produce more creativity and knowledge for people. Jamison then goes on to add that she dresses more provocatively and is able to relish in her youth during her manic episodes, emphasizing the feeling of freedom and exhilaration that she experiences during mania. "My hemlines would go up, my neckline down, and I would enjoy the sensuality of my youth," (42). Once again, Jamison uses diction like "sensuality," which heavily expresses that alluring and mysterious quality to her bouts of mania, and is another device for romanticizing her experience during those episodes. The imagery itself is similarly romanticized; similar to *Prozac Nation*, her clothing is a focal point and representation of her mental state, and the image of hemlines and necklines add to the seductivity of her mania. Jamison's portrayal of her manic periods are heavily romanticized and dripping in that seductive diction that draws the reader in.

Despite the heavily romanticized depictions of her manic episodes, Jamison does not shy away from the raw, realistic depictions of her depressive episodes as well, which also occurred during her college years. During these episodes, Jamison writes about how her mood would entirely shift and she would feel so depressed it was difficult for her to do anything. She writes that she "lost interest in my schoolwork, friends, reading, wandering, or daydreaming" (44). This is a shocking turn from the effervescent and dramatic descriptions of her manic episodes, rather a drab and simply described phrase of her depression that even precludes her from "wandering, or daydreaming," actions that have stereotypically been grouped with mental illness, as well as actions that take place in both *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation*: the "parallel universe" (Kaysen) in the mind and Wurtzel wandering the halls of Harvard and streets of Dallas. Furthermore, Jamison's previously seductive and personable tone has faded into a drab and objectively descriptive one, matching the state of her personality. Jamison goes on to write that she "had no idea of what was happening to me, and I would wake up in the morning with a profound sense of dread that I was going to have to somehow make it through another entire

day” (44). Jamison uses simple language and states plainly her circumstances, showing clearly and in an unobscured and unromanticized manner the state of her mental health. Since Jamison emphasized the productivity and intellectual stimulation her manic episodes offered her, she also emphasized the lack of it that her depressive episodes provided. She writes that class was “pointless. Pointless and painful” (44). She finds no joy in her academics and has no interest in her learning or educational pursuits, despite the spurt of motivation she had just felt during a manic episode. She adds that she felt surrounded by “the overwhelming sense of inadequacy and blackness” (44). Jamison objectively and neutrally states her emotions through her depressive episodes, purposefully not romanticizing any aspect of her despair and bleakness throughout those times. It would have been simple for Jamison to slip into the romanticized view of her depression, as Kaysen and Wurtzel inevitably did, but Jamison firmly presents her depression as bleak and static and realistic, providing not a single romanticized notion or word attached to her experience.

As Jamison reaches the end of her novel, she begins to become more reflective about her manic-depressive illness and the ways that she had described them throughout the novel. As she speaks about her mania, and then her depression, the recognizable diction that had been attached to each throughout the book follow. In the final section of the novel, “A Life in Moods,” Jamison writes about her she lives in the present moment and copes with her mental illness, adding that “although I continue to have emergences of my old summer manias, they have been gutted... of most of their earlier indescribable beauty and glorious rush” (214). That familiarly exciting, exhilarating and seductive diction that she has attached to her multiple episodes of mania throughout the novel reemerges in their full glory in this section of the novel, but for an entirely different purpose. While her diction of “summer,” “beauty,” and “glorious rush” convey that feeling of mania, the jarring word “gutted” makes all the difference in this section. That word cuts into the illusion of romanticization that had been so familiarized with the episodes of mania and changes the way it has been presented in the novel. Furthermore, Jamison writes that the episodes have been “sludged by time, tempered by a long string of jading experiences, and brought to their knees by medication” (214). With words such as “sludged,” “tempered” and “jading,” Jamison shows the exhaustion that came with having to deal with these bouts of mania and the horrific depressions that followed with them. The paragraph continues with a strong sentence that is reminiscent of the previous descriptions of mania: “they now coalesce, each July, into brief, occasionally dangerous cracklings together of black moods and high passions” (214). With that hot, exciting summertime imagery, Jamison does paint a picture of her freeing, exhilarating moments of mania. However, she follows with a short and simple sentence. “And then they, too, pass” (214). With this simplistic description, she robs her imagery of her mania of its force and power, and brings the reader down to reality, just as she struggled with finding her foothold on reality throughout the novel. She also tears down the romanticized vision of mania that she had painted previously in the novel, showing that she did perhaps better understand her mania and its romanticization than she had expressed.

Conclusion

Throughout the three autobiographies, each female author paradoxically romanticize female illness, seemingly unintentionally, while still criticizing and showing awareness of such romanticization. The endings of each novel exemplify the fragile balance between this unintentional romanticization and the hyperaware criticism of that romanticization. The ending of *An Unquiet Mind*, as described and analyzed above, shows a degree of awareness about the romanticization Jamison has applied to her manic episodes throughout the novel, and shows her understanding of them. *Girl, Interrupted* ends with the author’s reflection on her mental health journey and current position in life, such as Kaysen mulling over the time she lost. The ending of *Girl, Interrupted* shows a larger degree of awareness of the romanticization than *An Unquiet Mind*, since the last chapter is where Kaysen really shows how horrifying it is to realize the life and time mental illness can steal away. No matter how much the mental illness is romanticized within the institution of McLean, once Kaysen begins to recover and step out

of that bubble, the layers are peeled away and all she can see is her lost, interrupted girlhood. Wurtzel shows the strongest degree of awareness and even openly criticizes the romanticization of female mental illness in *Prozac Nation*. With the tone shift in the epilogue, the novel swivels from personality-filled autobiography to more of an critical essay, reflecting on the state of Prozac and depression culture in the United States at the time. Ironically, Wurtzel includes the most overly romanticized imagery and language in her novel, yet she also expresses the most awareness and critique of the romanticization of female mental illness in her novel, all contained within the final epilogue.

While *An Unquiet Mind* ends by showing awareness of previous romanticization in the novel, and *Girl, Interrupted* concludes with an unromanticized, horrifying realization of how much time mental illness stole from Kaysen, *Prozac Nation* is closed with an epilogue that emphasizes the impact of romanticization on popular culture in the United States. Ironically, Wurtzel includes the most overly romanticized imagery and language in her novel, yet she also expresses the most awareness and critique of the romanticization of female mental illness in her novel. All three women show a certain degree of awareness of the romanticization that stigmatizes female mental illness and permeates the genre of their writing, yet there is barely any indication that they recognize romanticization's influence in the specific and purposeful imagery and prose of their own autobiographies. Wurtzel is also the only who purposefully includes the cultural significance of her work and the genre as a whole in her epilogue; this reflection of the culture of mental illness at the time is strikingly predictive of the current culture surrounding mental illness in the present moment.

Trends in popular culture move in a cyclical nature, whether through fashion fads, celebrities in the limelight, or certain aesthetics and images on social media. Similarly, as I mentioned in the context portion, the popular culture surrounding mental illness has a cyclical nature as well, going from heavily disapproving and aware to overly romanticized and idolized from year to year. And now, in the 2020s, mental health has become a hugely popular topic of conversation in the forefront of popular culture in the United States, not to mention once again brought to the attention of the government. On October 5, 2020, Donald Trump signed Executive

Order (EO) 13594, Saving Lives Through Increased Support for Mental and Behavioral Health Needs, with the purpose of lowering suicide rates, which had spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic (SAMHSA 1). The Biden-Harris administration also promised to increase mental health parity and offer extensive support to those suffering (White House). And again, as I said in the context, the pattern of government action on mental illness and the romanticization of mental illness in media is also cyclical, since one often leads to the other.

Mental illness has once again sprung to the forefront of culture, with The New York Post, Cosmopolitan and The New York Times all writing about the "return" of the heroin chic aesthetic (some believe it never left.) Tumblr recently had a revival on Tiktok, with several influencers and people on Tiktok expressing their nostalgia for Tumblr and reposting old posts and images from the late 1990s and early 2000s, when heroin chic was still a highly popular trend. With the resurgence of these trends and apps, the media that comes with it also experiences a surge in popularity. The film adaptations of *Girl, Interrupted* and *Prozac Nation* were both extremely iconic in many of the groups on Tumblr that romanticized mental illness, and both screengrabs from the films and quotes from the novels are being recycled through all forms social media once again. Images of Winona Ryder and Angelina Jolie crying softly with perfectly smudged mascara and quotes like "Crazy isn't being broken or swallowing a dark secret. It's you or me amplified. If you ever told a lie and enjoyed it. If you ever wished you could be a child forever." gaining traction online are spreading the content from these films and novels to a new generation of young girls, who are likely going to pick up one of these books for the first time because of their interest in these quotes and aesthetics.

When they do pick up these novels, I believe that it is deeply important for them to not read them with the preconceived notions that they are amplified versions of the content they consume on social media; rather, they should be able to approach them with a critical lens and understand how deeply female mental illness has been romanticized throughout social culture over the past decade and even further back. That the way mental illness was portrayed throughout these three popular autobiographies, with the drinking and music and beautiful

imagery they employ should not be seen as the way mental illness is expressed by the average person, and rather that it's a glamorized and romanticized version of it. It is extremely tricky to notice and understand the line between falling into the trap of romanticization and viewing the romanticization through an analytical and critical lens. My hope is that my research provides a critical lens through which the new generation of young girls can use to view female mental illness, the culture of romanticization, these three autobiographies and the potentially harmful social media content derived from the content of these autobiographies from a different, healthier perspective than past generations of girls and women.

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