

## Present Women/Absent Men in Siri Hustvedt's *The Summer without Men* (2011)

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**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes how Siri Hustvedt's protagonist Mia Fredricksen in the novel *The Summer without Men* (2011) falls ill from the absence of her husband and men in general and how the presence of women helps her to cope with her illness. Mia's illness is seen as a postmodern crisis that must be dealt with by means of narrative expression.

**KEYWORDS:** Illness; Gender; Postmodernism; Narrative Medicine; Identity; Crisis

Siri Hustvedt's latest novel, *The Summer without Men*, bears a telling title, for it is indeed very man-less times that narrator Mia Fredrickson relates, as men never appear in person. Her husband Boris is the man whose absence Mia cannot bear, which she painfully realizes when he leaves her for a "pause" of their marriage with a much younger colleague (Hustvedt 1). In response to this, Mia has a mental breakdown. Her world is shattered to pieces, along with her identity, which, as she understands in the course of the novel, has been bound to her roles of daughter, wife, and mother, all three of which are now questioned: her dead father looms over her as a paternal ghost, her loved mother is facing her end in a home "for the old and very old" (5), her husband has abandoned her after thirty years of marriage, and her grown-up daughter is a relict of menopausal Mia's passed fertility, which she bemoans repeatedly.<sup>1</sup> Although she is released from the psychiatry after two weeks, she stays in ambulant treatment with her psychiatrist Dr. S. for most of the summer. Mia spends these months trying to recover in her hometown in rural Minnesota.

It is not only a summer without Boris, but a 'summer without men': while female characters of all ages ranging from three to one hundred twenty play important parts in the novel, men never appear 'on stage' (Mia calls them "*offstage*" [105]). As the title suggests, their absence is crucial to the story. This emphasis on absence lets the text resonate with postmodern theory, in which this condition is a prolific phenomenon (also called a void or gap), which literary characters desperately try to fill with meaning, mostly through artistic means. In this

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, reflecting on her situation, Mia writes: "Now, menopausal, abandoned, bereft, and forgotten, I had nothing left" (Hustvedt 66).

paper, I will analyze what kind of absence it is that makes Mia ill. I will examine how the presence of women and the contrasting absence of men influence Mia's illness and the coping strategies she develops, which I argue are particularly connected to the act of writing.

The immediate and most obvious cause of Mia's mental breakdown is the absence of her husband of thirty years. Even though he only announces a temporary interruption of their marriage, for Mia, the word "*pause* was enough to turn me into a lunatic. [...] In the end, Dr. P. diagnosed me with Brief Psychotic Disorder" (1). With her husband gone, Mia turns into a "madwoman," referred to in the third person (2). Her world and self as she knew them have gone missing. Her life seems to have lost all meaning. If Mia loses meaning through the departure of her husband, then Boris seems to be the one who has been providing meaning for her. His role as ultimate meaning-giver becomes clear early in the book, when, in a fit of rage, she calls her absent husband a "[g]oddamned master of the universe [and a] Phallic Übermensch" (8). For Mia, Boris has a God-like power to give meaning, which is expressed in her reference to the phallus.

In Jacques Lacan's theoretical framework, the psychoanalytic idea of the phallus is that of an ultimate signifier that plays an important role in identity development. Extending Sigmund Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex, Lacan states that in the pre-Oedipal phase, in which the infant perceives itself as a unity with the mother, the mother is the first object of desire for the infant: when there is hunger or dissatisfaction, the mother's body is there to still the infant's needs. This mother-child relation is however "constituted [...] not by his [the child's] vital dependence on her [the mother], but by his dependence on her love, that is to say, by the desire for her desire" ("Question" 198). To understand this, one must pay attention to the difference in meaning between demand and desire. In his essay "The Signification of the Phallus," Lacan explains that while a demand always includes the wish for satisfaction, desire is "*beyond* demand" in that it is the wish for something that ultimately cannot be possessed (286-87). This Lacanian definition of desire means unconscious desire, and it first emerges during the so-called mirror stage.

During the mirror stage, as Lacan elaborates in his essay of the same title, the child, at the age of six to eighteen months, recognizes itself in a mirror for the first time and realizes that it is not part of the mother's body, but a separate entity. At first, the effect of this

observation is the impression of wholeness, grounded on the illusion of being identical to one's mirror image ("Mirror" 2). Soon, however, the child realizes its mistake, finding that the reflection is an 'other,' not the self, for it does not really look at 'me,' but is only a reflection, a representation (3; Paccaud-Huguet 281). The child thus learns that there is a difference between the initially perceived wholeness of the "specular I" in the mirror and the "social I" that is determined by an 'other' (Lacan, "Mirror" 6).

A necessary step in identity development, the mirror stage causes a "splitting" of the self that can never be reversed ("Signification" 285). In other words, a subject (being aware of its subject-ness only after and through the mirror stage) is constituted by a lack of a wholeness that he or she has 'imagined' to have during the perceived oneness with the mother in the pre-Oedipal stage. This lack and, respectively, the desire to overcome it, is symbolized by the phallus, representing the primordial desire for the mother and a re-established unity with her ("Mirror" 2). The phallic symbol is one of lack because the subject's desire to be whole can never be fulfilled, which leads to the (primary) repression of that initial desire to the unconscious ("Signification" 286-87). The demand for love in a child's relation to the mother, or also in a sexual relationship (in which this demand is projected from the mother to 'another Other'), is an effect of the repression of the ultimate desire to be whole (288). Since this ultimate desire only emerges (and is repressed) when the child is separated from the mother during the mirror stage, this step in identity formation can be regarded as replacing the mother with the father, who, indeed, plays a crucial role in this process. Even though Lacan does not mean the "real father" ("Question" 199), the phallus can be called a "paternal metaphor" (198), thus a position traditionally taken by a male figure. Lacan describes the phallic law that forbids the desire to possess the mother as "a recognition [...] of what religion has taught us to refer to as the Name-of-the-Father" (199), which draws a connection between the phallus and a transcendental God-like figure that is established in their power of ultimate signification (cf. Derrida's critique of Lacan in Evans 143)—and that Mia refers to in her fit of rage.

Lacan's famous comparison of the unconscious to have "the structure of language" ("Signification" 284) draws attention to the general importance that language has in identity formation. It seems to be no coincidence that during the mirror stage, the child also acquires

language. With the ability to name things, to replace them with a representation, the child enters the symbolic order (cf. Paccaud-Huguet 282), which is necessary to develop a sense of identity, but which also stands for the insurmountable distance to the imagined wholeness of the self. Learning to speak runs parallel to being separated from the mother, replacing the maternal imaginary with the paternal law that is represented by the phallus (cf. Lacan, “Signification” 284).

As Toril Moi formulates in her account on Julia Kristeva’s critique of Lacan’s theory, the presumed necessity of repressing the mother and adhering to the father’s laws can be criticized as “patriarchy defin[ing] women and oppress[ing] them accordingly” (Moi 163). Following the traditional role of male dominance in the making of rules, the Law of the Father is said to place women outside of (male) language, and since language is what constitutes identity, women are unrepresentable, or rather, representable only through a ‘male’ mode of expression (163). To Mia, the absence of her husband thus appears like the absence of meaning, which causes her to feel excluded (from their marriage, but also from being identified by Boris as his wife) and meaningless, as she deems male power necessary in order to define herself.

This becomes clear when she talks to her psychiatrist Dr. S. about a thunderstorm she has witnessed: “It was like listening to my own rage, but rage with real power, big, masculine, godlike, magisterial, paternal bangs in the heavens” (Hustvedt 60). Dr. S., a woman herself, interprets this thought for her:

You think if your anger had power, paternal power, you could shape things in your life more to your liking. Is that what you mean? [...] Is it perhaps that you felt your father’s emotions had power in the family, power over your mother, your sister, and you, and you were always stepping around his feelings, trying not to upset him. And you’ve felt the same thing in your marriage, perhaps reproduced the same story, and all the while you’ve gotten angrier and angrier? (61)

This dialogue demonstrates how, in Mia’s words, ‘real, masculine power,’ seems necessary to construct meaning, or as Dr. S. puts it, to ‘shape things more to your liking.’ Mia feels that if she wants this kind of power, she must deny her femaleness and adapt to male rules—the Law of the Father. Boris’s absence can thus be understood as an absence of meaning, leaving behind only the presence of Mia, the woman who is rendered meaningless without his

presence. Indeed, Mia well remembers her doubts and self-blame that tortured her during her breakdown after Boris had left her: “You’re nothing. No wonder he left you” (66).

Such a feeling of meaninglessness is a common feature of the postmodern condition, which is likely to cause a ‘loss of the subject.’ In his “Report on Knowledge,”<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard calls the postmodern condition a “‘crisis’ of [...] knowledge” (139) caused by the fact that “[t]he grand narrative has lost its credibility” (138). This disillusionment with universal discourse providing truth for the members of a society (or of Western societies in general) to live on, opens up the path towards heterogeneity. The subject is no longer the universal hero of a grand narrative, but a conglomeration of truths from different discourses of a more individual kind (139-41). Lacking its humanist essence, the subject cannot be defined clearly, but has to be constantly negotiated in different discourses, which causes the notion of the loss of the (humanist) subject, a major identity crisis.

Rather than seeing this postmodern notion as a reason for disillusionment and loss of orientation, the concept of poststructuralist feminism, which Chris Weedon elaborates in her work *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, shows how it can be used to create a new concept of identity. Weedon argues that if the subject is constructed in different discourses and thus constituted by manifold versions of its subjectivity, it should be viewed as a being in constant process. Since humanist beliefs in an inborn essence of human character no longer hold in postmodern theory, changing discourses in society can lead to changing the subject. This, Weedon points out, is particularly useful for feminist practice, as women are no longer determined according to assumed gender differences created by a male dominated society. With the poststructuralist model of identity as a process of constant meaning-making in different discourses, power relations can be questioned, building a path toward gender equality (Weedon).

On a more general level, Weedon’s descriptions imply that a crisis can function as a trigger of change that can potentially end a conflict positively. In fact, the original meaning of the term crisis is that of a “decision ending a conflict” (Ritter 1235, my translation). Analyzing the

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<sup>2</sup> The report with the main title “The Postmodern Condition” (1979) coined the now familiar and common usage of the expression.

crisis of Mia furthermore calls attention to the medical meaning of crisis, which is closely related to the general one. Medically speaking, a crisis is “the crucial turn in the course of a life threatening illness or within a psychic process” (Tebben 458; my translation). Mia’s case combines the medical with the postmodern dimension of crisis, since it takes the form of a psychosis, caused by an absence (the postmodern void or gap) and expressed in medical symptoms.<sup>3</sup> While the threat of the loss of the subject looms over her, the poststructural concept of identity as a process bears the potential of helping Mia through her crisis. In psychoanalysis, the idea of identity as an ongoing process of solving conflicts is established in the theory of Erik H. Erikson. He orders life into several successive crises, each of which takes prominence in a certain period of life, yet, nevertheless remains influential throughout life. According to Erikson, each of these crises has to be solved positively in order to strengthen and promote identity development (Erikson 91-95). While Erikson lists concrete crises which are part of ‘normal’ identity development, his model is useful for generally viewing crisis in a more optimistic light: if crisis is a normal and necessary part of life, it should not be treated as a negative instance to get rid of, but rather taken as a trigger of change. This change is neutral in value, and only its outcome can be judged as positive or negative. If, in Erikson’s sense, Mia’s identity crisis should lead to a sense of identity she can live with better, the crisis will be less likely to carry a negative connotation in retrospect.

That this also works for medical crises becomes apparent when considering the normality of illness as something that affects everybody at some point in life. In his several works on coping with illness in and through (primary) literature, Dietrich von Engelhardt illustrates the normality of illness by presenting it as the opposition of the supposed norm of health.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that to Lacan, the failure to conform to the symbolic order causes psychosis. In his *Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evans explains that a psychosis comes about when the *function* of the phallus is replaced by the father-figure, which may even lead to hallucinatory symptoms (155). Both is the case for Mia, who seems to have taken the paternal metaphor literally, connecting it first to her real father (as Dr. S. observes) and then to her husband. Her hallucinations of “cartoon characters racing across pink hills and disappearing into blue forests” are described on the novel’s very first page (Hustvedt 1). Compared to a neurosis, a psychosis can generally be understood as a more clinical illness, because in praxis, any person can be considered neurotic, which derives from the non-reparable split of the self during the mirror stage. In this sense, a neurotic person is ‘normal’, as “‘mental health’ is an illusory ideal” represented by the imagined wholeness of the self (Evans 123). Although neurosis can also be treated psychoanalytically, a psychosis appears to have more severe features, which becomes apparent in the fact that Mia became an emergency case for the hospital.

Referring to the definition of health provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), which states that “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (100), Engelhardt points out that it is questionable whether this ‘complete well-being’ can be reached at all (*Krankheit* 21). Is feeling unwell always an illness? Are loneliness, desire, or grief illnesses? If the WHO-definition is taken literally, all of these are—after all, Mia can be said to suffer from an extreme form of *lovesickness*. Thus, crisis as well as illness is ever-present, normal, and even necessary for human life, which questions the normality of health crucially (cf. Engelhardt, “Gesundheit” 299). In this sense, Engelhardt proposes that in contrast to the WHO-definition, “health should not be defined as total freedom from illness, but could rather be understood as the ability to live with disability and impairment” (*Krankheit* 21, my translation).

In the context of this view on crisis in general and illness in particular, the question of Mia’s story is not how to get rid of her illness, but rather, how to deal with it in order to bring about a more positive self-definition. Thus, more than a hospital stay and medical treatment, Mia needs meaning. As Engelhardt contends, meaning is what all patients need in order to make sense of their illness and of themselves as ill individuals. How a patient deals with his or her illness evidently plays an important role in the course of a disease. Coping, the medical term for this, includes the subjective experience of illness, the individual interpretation of it, and the patient’s subsequent behavior. An illness can literally or metaphorically destroy a person, or it can foster his or her development (“Coping” 159-60). Therefore, illness is a highly individual phenomenon that forces the sick to cope with their ‘diseased’ personality in one way or the other. Even after an illness has been diagnosed, each patient still has to evaluate the new situation him- or herself. He or she has to give it meaning, which in turn contributes to the self-understanding of that person. According to U.S.-American professor of clinical medicine Rita Charon, situations of illness particularly call for a person’s self-definition, as in medical settings, patients

reveal [...] aspects of the self closest to the skin, having pared away the optional layers, if you will—occupation, habits, even history and culture—to get down to the core of who they are. [...] Doctors and nurses are the ones who hear what others tell of themselves in the destabilizing times of illness when questions of self and worth naturally emerge. (78)

Charon demands medical staff to be more open to the stories their patients tell in order to allow for a better treatment of their illness that acknowledges the patients' understanding of it. Her concept of narrative medicine offers an explanation why Mia's illness is a necessary element of her story of self-becoming. Mia's illness functions as an eye-opener, providing access to questions concerning her identity.

That Mia has to answer these questions by actively making meaning of her illness becomes clear when considering that the diagnosis that gives her madness a name provides clarity only at first glance. With the diagnosis, the doctors offer Mia external meaning of her illness, which gives her the impression of not being in a permanent condition, because "Brief Psychotic Disorder, also known as Brief Reactive Psychosis, [...] means that you are genuinely crazy but not for long" (Hustvedt 1). In this postmodern world, such a definition is naturally unstable. As Mia points out, "[i]f it goes on for more than one month, you need another label" (1). Apparently, nobody knows exactly what she is suffering from. The attempt to name her illness only illustrates how much she—and her doctor—longs for a chance to grasp the unknowable. It is easier to live with the illusion that a name can provide meaning in a postmodern world in which the 'real' cannot be accessed (if it exists at all) than to live with meaninglessness. Mia writes in a poem during her time of madness: "I need a name. / I need a word in this white world. / I need to call it something, not nothing" (212). She apparently needs the medical label to make her illness more graspable and, most of all, explainable. In this sense, the diagnosis is the first step in the coping process of making meaning. Yet, Mia must soon learn that the secure feeling such a label might bring along is not reliable because it derives from the mere illusion of knowing. Meeting the doctors' hopes, the "genuine[...] craz[iness]" does not stay "for long" (1), but nevertheless Mia stays ill, which is indicated by her need of a psychiatrist. Indeed, Mia never claims that she was released from the psychiatry as a healthy person. As she puts it, "they kept me locked up for a week and a half, and then they let me go" (2).

After having left the psychiatry, she decides to "return[...] to older, more reliable territory, to the Land of M" (13). The 'land of M' may stand for her home place in Minnesota, but more likely it represents the presence of her mother, who, as Mia states, "was a place for me as well as a person" (13). Mia needs her mother for getting better, because her treatment is

“more reliable” (13)—or in other words, more effective. This is expressed in Mia’s childhood memory: “I loved being unwell with Mama, not vomiting or truly miserable perhaps, but in a state of recovery by increments. I loved to lie on the special bed and feel Mama’s hand on my forehead, which she then moved up into my sweaty hair as she checked the fever” (14). Her mother’s ‘hand on Mia’s forehead’ implies that, in fever or mental illness, Mia’s head, the place of the mind, is secure when in the physical presence of her mother. Since her earlier self was *killed* metaphorically through her husband’s absence, Mia needs to begin her search of self with her mother, the woman who gave *life* to her. In this sense, the ‘land of M’ can also stand for Mia’s journey to herself, as she returns to the starting point of her life story. The secure feeling brought about by the initial diagnosis, then, was only an emergency aid. The name she longed for in her poem must come from somewhere else, as Mia expresses in verse: “I need to call it something” (212, my emphasis). *She* is the one who has to give meaning to her illness, and this cannot be achieved with the simple formulation of a diagnosis.

Mia’s return to her mother is reminiscent of French feminist criticism of Lacan’s symbolic order as an alienating separation of mother and daughter (cf. Kristeva, “Revolution” 42). In her response to Lacan, Julia Kristeva pays attention to the pre-symbolic, so-called semiotic phase, which she describes as an instinctive phase of drives moving “through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such” (35). This phase is one of “rupture and articulations (rhythm)” without language. Yet, it is the precondition of language to emerge and bring about the necessary process towards subjectivity (35). This process is initiated by the mirror stage, in which the child begins to understand that it is a subject distinct from the mother, who then turns into an object. Kristeva sees this as a break with the semiotic, accompanied by the separation from the mother. This break only makes it possible to enter the symbolic order of language use, in which the phallus becomes the ultimate signifier (42-43). The mother is replaced by the phallus, which leads to a repression of the maternal. However, Kristeva insists that the semiotic is not eliminated, but can still be found within the symbolic order (45), as it appears in (mostly) artistic language in the form of “contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language” (Moi 161-62). The attention to the semiotic aspects of language thus enables women as a group repressed

by male-dominated society to express themselves without totally conforming to the Law of the Father in the sense of a repression of the (maternal) semiotic.

Mia's turn toward irony and wordplay can be seen as an embracing of such maternal language. However, it is important to note that Kristeva does not restrict the semiotic to women. Rather, she reads it as an expression of the marginalized, and only through the fact that women are marginalized in society they are more likely to use this kind of language (Moi 163). Thus, Kristeva's concept of the semiotic does not express a radically feminist move to dismiss men and simply turn around an oppressing system (164). Yet, the semiotic is no doubt "linked to the mother, whereas the symbolic, as we know, is dominated by the Law of the Father" (165). This also becomes apparent in Kristeva's essay "Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini," in which she states that a woman can turn to the semiotic particularly well when she herself becomes a mother: "By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother. [...] through [motherhood] a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently, more negatory of the social, symbolic bond" (Kristeva, "Motherhood" 239).

Mia, a mother herself, seems to feel this, too, which shows in her above described return to her mother. This return to the mother represents Mia's attempt to overcome the (lack of) male power that has made her ill. It is a representation because Mia not only returns to her own mother, but also to other mothers as well as to her own motherhood. All of the women, including herself, can be seen as a source of meaning outside of the male realm, away not only from Boris, but from all men—because for the whole summer, Mia will not have any physical encounter with a man. As in the poststructuralist tradition of feminism elaborated by Weedon, Mia thus focuses on finding out how to use language for her own means. She needs language to express meaning, and so she writes. The testing of different ways to deal with texts, both receptively and productively, is present throughout the story and plays a crucial part in Mia's search for identity. Mia's choice of ambiguous and self-ironic wording (which could be referred to as semiotic) is also part of her narrative process of coming to terms with her illness through text production.

As Engelhardt puts forward, "[l]iterary texts can support therapy, [...] and generally help the patients to cope with crises, suffering, illness, and death" (*Krankheit* 49; my translation).

Since the 1970s, *bibliotherapy*, the term for coping with illness through reading or writing literature, has gained increasing attention in the Western world, particularly with respect to text production (cf. Werder 2). Lutz von Werder connects this to the 1970's (economic and other) crises, for social and individual crises have been triggering therapeutic writing throughout history (4). Today, the world seems stuck in crisis again, considering, for instance, the financial and economic crises or the crisis of global warming. Confirming Werder's thesis, much of today's literature deals with private and public crises and possible attempts to cope with them—very frequently in the form of illness narratives.<sup>4</sup> In fact, literature relies on crisis, a conflict leading to a climax. Similar to an illness's crisis, the literary crisis traditionally leads to an either positive or negative ending, that is, comedy or tragedy, or in more medical terms, recovery or death (Tebben 460-61). Moreover, crisis in literature most often takes the form of the protagonist's identity crisis (461), as is also the case in *The Summer without Men*. Literature can function as a mirror of the critical situations it depicts. It can offer symbolic and exemplary ways of how to deal with crisis. It can transform abstract medical conditions into more graspable illness narratives. Someone else's experience can help to find coping strategies for one's own illness.

Mia reads a lot during the summer, and her reading has an impact on her life, inspiring her self-reflection. But she does not only read books. She reads other women's lives and creates her own story from them by writing about them and connecting them to her own life in her narration. Starting with her own mother as the initiator of her life story, Mia moves through the different steps of her life, inspired by the girls and women of ages from baby to grandmother that she meets during her 'summer without men.' She also directly writes about her own situation, but it seems as if her reflections on other women's lives are more revealing to her in terms of finding new meaning for herself.

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<sup>4</sup> Next to a large amount of autobiographical illness narratives, some examples of recent American fictional accounts of the new millennium on crisis and illness include Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002), a *Bildungsroman* about a hermaphrodite, Paul Auster's *The Brooklyn Follies* (2005) about a man recovering from cancer, Richard Powers's *The Echo Maker* (2007) about a brain-damaged man suffering from the rare Capgras syndrome, and Philip Roth's *Nemesis* (2010) on polio, to name only a few. This development goes in line with the literary reaction to the catastrophe of 9/11 that produced an enormous output immediately after the event (see Däwes 6). This example supports the impression of a contemporary urge in the western world to cope with crises and illness in literature.

One of these women is Abigail, an elderly friend of her mother's. Abigail and Mia have several things in common. Her husband is also absent; he mysteriously disappeared during the Second World War. What is more, Abigail is an artist, and Mia, a poet herself, understands well how art serves as an expression of what cannot be expressed otherwise. The old lady trustfully shows her greatest secrets to Mia, a collection of self-embroidered art works that at second glance reveal taboo scenes of masturbating or raging women. These "secret amusements" express Abigail's true opinions and her affliction about lacking the freedom of speaking her mind as a woman (Hustvedt 39). As it turns out later, her only true love had been a woman, but the traditional and heteronormative gender roles in rural America had forced her to suppress her pleasures and desires so that she found no other way to deal with them than in secret artistic expression (191). Like Mia, Abigail is ill in the sense of the WHO, yet not so much because of the absence of "physical well-being"—being old, deaf, and increasingly immobile—but because of the absence of "mental and social well-being" (WHO 100). Also like Mia, she needs to express herself in order to cope with this condition, which actually indicates that the two women are approaching a state of health as introduced by Engelhardt. As Abigail admits, unknowingly paralleling Mia's past psychosis in the double sense of the statement: "I was spitting mad at the time. Made me feel better" (Hustvedt 43). Encountering a woman's life story that is different in content but same in meaning to Mia's own experiences and is expressed in art helps Mia move from the state of 'spitting madness' to 'feeling better.' She states that "[s]ometime in early June, [...] I made a small turn without being aware of it, and I think it began with the secret amusements" (39).

After this first 'small turn,' which can be regarded as the positive solution of one of several conflicts in the Eriksonian sense of crisis, Mia will make a number of other turns, each of them triggered by a different female character who brings into focus one of Mia's roles as daughter, mother, friend, or teacher. The focus of Mia's self-search lies on the female characters around her, yet there is a male figure that has a 'virtual' influence on her.<sup>5</sup> Early in the novel, the mysterious Mr. Nobody starts writing anonymous e-mails to Mia, attacking

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<sup>5</sup> Although this character plays an influential role for Mia, he never appears in person, but only in the e-mail correspondence with Mia. Furthermore, it remains unclear whether he actually exists or whether he springs from Mia's imagination entirely. Thus, he is also nothing more than an 'absent man,' whose absence by no means negates any possible influence on Mia's life—which becomes even clearer in Boris's 'presence' in her thoughts.

her and her poetry with an ambiguous choice of words: “Your poetry’s cracked. [...] Nobody can understand it. Nobody wants twisted shit like that. Who do you think you are?!#\* Mr. Nobody” (64). It is hard to overlook the double meanings in this text. As Mia notes, “[t]he repetition of Nobody followed by a pseudonym, Nobody, made it sound as if he, Nobody, did understand *it* and did, in fact, want *twisted shit*. *Who do you think you are?* became a question entirely in that case” (65). The message expresses Mia’s fear of being ignored as a poet and reminds her of her earlier self-hate in the psychiatric ward. However, she realizes that “[n]ow the words on the screen, the words of Nobody, had taken the place of the accusing voices in my head” (66). This enables her to look at her self-destructive thoughts from a distance. She has overcome the extreme feeling of self-alienation at this point, but Mr. Nobody appears like a part of herself rather than an independent being.

If he is a child of Mia’s imagination rather than an actual person writing to her, Mr. Nobody becomes a symptom of the remnants of Mia’s madness. Even if he is a hallucination, it is a nurturing kind of madness as opposed to Mia’s psychosis from the story’s beginning. Accompanying Mia with his e-mails through her story of self-search, he is the personified male absence, or rather a presence of an unknowable power that helps Mia to formulate what she needs. He stands for her ‘phallic’ illness of an absent male signifier whose loss she feels almost physically. Although or perhaps because it remains unclear whether her virtual pen pal exists in reality, Mia befriends him, comes to enjoy his e-mails, and even worries about him once he doesn’t answer. Their intellectual exchange stimulates Mia’s self-reflection and provides material for her narration of her story, a tale that was justified by male absence to be told in the first place. The written dialogues with Mr. Nobody are a constant appeal not to forget the male voice that Mia struggles to push out of her consciousness, and at the same time they convey Mia’s need to put her thoughts into written form, which hints at her coping strategy of therapeutic writing. In a way, Mr. Nobody’s comments keep Mia from detaching herself from men completely, but they also help her stop seeing herself as a female victim of male power. Their relationship develops to a level of mutual respect that leaves room for disagreement and own thoughts.

Investigating the identity of Mr. Nobody, she assumes him to be Leonard, a patient in the ward who called himself the “Prophet of Nothing” (48). She remembers understanding

Leonard's appeal to face the "truth that Nothing is the primal ground of this world," yet resisting full agreement (49). Instead, Mia remembers that she had been fighting against meaninglessness by thinking of her daughter Daisy. Understanding her own meaningfulness through motherhood lets Mia conclude that instead of nothing "*something* was all that mattered" (48-49, my emphasis). Real or imaginary Mr. Nobody has triggered her move a step toward self-definition by focusing on her own motherhood, away from male modes of thought in the way described by Kristeva, but without excluding the male voice from her life. In the following conversations with Mr. Nobody, Mia gradually learns to listen to the male voice without allowing it to silence her female one.

During the summer in which these conversations occur, Mia begins a friendship with her neighbor, a young mother of two. Lola is also more or less without her husband, who is usually absent or, when not, yells at her and scares his family. Helping Lola with the children, Mia dwells in memories of her own days as a young mother in both a physical and a spiritual way. When holding the little baby, Mia feels "the shadow of a familiar sensation in my breasts, a bodily memory" (84), which also makes her recall (in thought): "How I had loved that stage in my own Daisy's path of becoming" (54). Mia's backslips into the nurturing mother role cause her to dream of a scenery full of blood and a screaming child she can neither see nor find (94).<sup>6</sup> With the help of Dr. S., Mia will later interpret this dream as expressing her "wistful sadness when fertility ends, a longing, not to return to the days of bleeding, but a longing for the repetition itself, for the steady monthly rhythms, for the invisible tug of the Moon herself, to whom you once belonged: [...] waxing and waning—maiden, mother, crone" (97). This interpretative statement makes clear that the story is a journey through the stages of female life for Mia.

The symbol of blood has already been used only a few pages before, in the form of a "bloody Kleenex" in the poetry class Mia teaches (90). As it turns out later, the tissue resulted from one of the girl's sudden beginning of menstruation. The Kleenex also functions as one element in a story of ostracism, in which six of the girls get together to bully the seventh,

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<sup>6</sup> The dream is another way for the semiotic to find expression, as Kristeva states that "fantasies articulate [the] irruption of drives within the realm of the signifier, they disrupt the signifier" (Kristeva, "Revolution" 44).

Alice, who is the owner of the bloody tissue. Mia witnesses the story unfold and remembers how she, as a girl, had been a victim of ostracism herself. In an attempt to solve the conflict, Mia gives a writing task to the girls in class: For each day of one week, each of the girls is to write down the story from the point of view of one of the other girls. This way, Mia hopes to “make sense of a true story [...] [by producing] a story authored by the entire class” (183-84). In the course of the week, astounding news is discovered, the victim turns herself into a heroine, and the leader of the tormentors loses her power. Mia concludes: “The story they all took home on Friday was not true; it was a version they could all live with” (201).

This story within the story mirrors how Mia develops with the help of her own story, which she has to narrate in order to make sense of it. For the story to be given meaning, it does not have to be true, though. Toward the end of the novel, Mia points out to the reader that, as narrator, she has the power over truth, and even the right to lie. Mia finds increasing pleasure in her narrative agency, which is expressed in her witty remarks on the side, often directly addressed to the reader. In a very striking one she says,

the pen, [...] Dear Reader [sic], is now in my hand, and I am claiming the advantage, taking it for myself, for you will notice that the written word hides the body of the one who writes. For all you know, I might be a MAN in disguise. Unlikely, you say, with all this feminist prattle flying out here and there and everywhere, but can you be sure? [...] I, your own personal narrator, might be wearing a pseudonymous mask. (178-79)

This quote indicates that Mia has learned to create her own meaning through writing, and the apparent pleasure she takes in it is a step toward more well-being. Meaning through narration does not have to adhere to what is generally assumed to be true, particularly not in a purely symbolic sense that tries to repress the semiotic, which is a process represented by Boris as the ultimate meaning-giver. While this man has deprived Mia of meaning, her ‘summer *with* women’ has allowed her to create meaning. Her postmodern condition in the sense of a crisis of the phallic master narrative has caused Mia’s identity crisis of medical form. In other words, the absence of a male signifier has made her lose her subjectivity, putting her in a hospital as a ‘madwoman.’ This extreme alienation with herself triggered her self-search, which she could only accomplish in the presence of other women. ‘Reading’ their lives, Mia has learned to see herself in more ‘female’ terms, but most of all in textual terms. Her written self is a result of the absence of her husband and men in general *and* of the presence of women in all stages of life, mirroring her own experiences as a woman.

Yet, it is not the emphasis on her femininity in a world without men that makes her feel better in the end. True, Mia rages against her husband, wonders about men's behavior, and laughs about their peculiarities. Although she admits that there are indeed differences between men and women, Mia stresses that "it is how much difference that difference makes, and how we choose to frame it" (152). With this statement she acknowledges the constructedness of truth and meaning. But by turning to a feminist model of identity as a multiplicity of selves, a collection of different meanings and even contradictions within the same self, Mia sees the chance of agency that the idea of postmodernism provides. In a move against the "death of the author" (cf. Barthes), she speaks up for the writer behind the text who, by deciding on what to tell and how to tell it, plays a part in the reader's process of meaning-making. As Mia shows her poetry class, the truth is what you decide it to be. In this very same manner, Mia writes her own truth, creates her version of herself, a self different from the one before being abandoned by her husband.

Mia's writing allows her to give meaning to her illness as an identity crisis which was necessary for her personal development. Her illness is only one of many crises in her life that fostered her self-becoming. Other crises of this kind are, for instance, her crisis of ostracism as a girl or that of suffering from not being taken seriously as a poet, particularly in comparison to her neuroscientist husband. In the end, Mia has overcome her crisis of abandonment, the turning point of her literary story that mirrors the development of a medical crisis in that it marks the decision between recovering and staying ill, or, in literary terms, a bad or happy ending.

In her story, Mia finds a more stable sense of self as a woman whose identity becomes visible among women, but also as the wife of a husband with whom she has felt to have so much in common that they might one day "become the same person" (Hustvedt 118). She has needed the presence of women to realize this, but also the absence of her husband and of men in general. The nihilistic Mr. Nobody functions as a textual reminder of male existence in Mia's life despite men's physical absence. Mia's brainteasing exchange with her virtual friend helps her to find pleasure in ambiguity, as she begins to employ wordplay and irony in her narration. In an e-mail conversation with Boris in which he informs her that he has recently broken up with his affair and that he now wishes to have Mia back, she

comments on his change of mind: “Seeing the error of his ways, Spouse penetrates his Folly (ha, ha, ha) and has revelation: Worn Old Wife looks better from Uptown” (170). When Boris asks her to please “dispense with the bitter irony,” Mia responds: “How on earth do you think I would have made it through this without it? I would have stayed mad” (170). As the conversation goes on, Mia moves from irony to wordplay:

“B.I.: She broke it off. But the thing was already broken.  
M.F.: I was broken, and you came to the hospital once.” (170)

By taking Boris’s use of the word “broken” from him and giving it her own meaning, the patriarchal symbolic order gains a new dimension, a semiotic play with words. Mia’s way out of crisis affords her to accept ambiguity. There is no final truth, she realizes, but different versions of it that have to be brought into narrative form, to make her the creator of her identity in a poststructuralist sense.

As the end of the novel approaches, she says good-bye to the women of the summer, getting ready to welcome Boris, who has come all the way from New York to “woo” her (171). Yet, she does not allow him to enter the stage of her narration, ending the novel with him ringing the bell. She has learned to let her personal truth take effect at the right time, before it is replaced by another discourse. After all, she states on her last pages, “[t]here are tragedies and there are comedies, aren’t there? And they are often more the same than different, rather like men and women, if you ask me. A comedy depends on stopping the story at exactly the right moment” (214). Already halfway through the story, Mia has provided a similar statement: “Comedies end in marriage, tragedies in death. Otherwise they aren’t so different” (99). The reader cannot be sure how Mia’s life will go on, but the story’s ending suggests a happy one after these observations of hers. For Mia, there is satisfaction in telling her daughter to open the door for her father: “Let him come to me,” she says, and then the story “FADE[s] TO BLACK,” like a theater play (216). This clearly marks the end of the story, which Mia has chosen on purpose. By not allowing her husband to enter the stage, she acknowledges how crucial the presence of women has been for her recovery. Similar to her poetry class, Mia has collected as many versions of female life as she has needed to form her truth of the story of her abandonment. It is her “right moment” (214), and since it does not end “in death,” it is more likely to “end in marriage,” with her husband on the steps (99). Mia’s story is a comedy, which not only pays credit to her witty style of narration, but also to

the belief in the possibility of a wife living with her husband in an alliance that allows for both parties to make meaning.

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