

Spring 2023

Constructing Selfhood Through Fantasy: Mirror Women and Dreamscape Conversations in Olga Grushin's *Forty Rooms*

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CONSTRUCTING SELFHOOD THROUGH FANTASY: MIRROR WOMEN AND
DREAMSCAPE CONVERSATIONS IN OLGA GRUSHIN'S *FORTY ROOMS*

by

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Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2021

Bachelor of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2021

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts in

Comparative Literature

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2023

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ABSTRACT

By its very nature, fantasy seeks to estrange its protagonist and readers from reality, leading to the exploration of topics that would generally be left isolated or unchallenged. Fantasy allows a character to step outside of reality in order to examine the conditions of their existence, to question their own position in society, and to reflect upon the ideologies that determine their social positioning. Analyzing Olga Grushin's *Forty Rooms* (2016), this thesis examines the ways in which the female narrator turns to fantasy, more specifically, dreamed conversations and visions of multiplied selves, in an attempt to overcome the powerlessness of her position as a woman in society.

In this novel, a nameless narrator transitions from poet to jaded housewife, assuming the identity of Mrs. Caldwell. Following her life from childhood to death and beyond, Grushin outlines the life of a woman through the eponymous rooms that she inhabits throughout her life, creating a stifling atmosphere that mirrors her circumstances. Throughout this journey is a mix of the everyday—student life, motherhood, domesticity—and the fantastic—conversations with Apollo, mirrored selves acting independently of the narrator, and parallel realities. Drawing upon theorists such as Nancy Walker and Rosemary Jackson, I propose that the mixture of these elements allows the narrator, and, by proximity, the readers, to examine not only the question of artistry as it relates to a woman's connection to motherhood, but also the isolation and imprisonment created from an inability to escape gendered expectations.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The definition of fantasy as a genre is slippery and elusive. Fantasy has its origins in a multitude of different literary traditions, and as such, has far-reaching implications and purposes. The genre can be traced from ancient myth and folk or fairy tales, and continues to evolve as new epistemes and discourse challenge the ways in which we view the world around us. Fantasy as a genre has a tendency to construct its own tale selectively by drawing upon its predecessors, creating an ever-evolving blend of traits and purposes. As Maria Nikolajeva posits, “fantasy [is] an eclectic genre under evolution,” allowing its use to be appropriated for a multitude of groups, including feminist, indigenous, or religious writers (Nikolajeva 139). As authors choose the form that best suits their purposes, they can offer critique, instruction, or even just entertainment to their readers, blending forms from myth, mystery, religious texts, and gothic genres. In this blend, seemingly incompatible parts build a narrative that at once is familiar and foreign to readers.

In the broadest sense, fantasy must deal with the unreal, and in doing so, must identify exactly how that differs from reality. With such a sweeping classification, a large possibility of the fantastic is its ability to allow one to step outside of one’s circumstances to evaluate them. As a genre, fantasy allows the exploration of topics that would generally be left unvoiced or unexplored, leaving readers to assign their own interpretations to a text’s meaning. However, this act is one of political and cultural

awareness, especially in the face of racism or sexism; since the fantastic challenges perceptions of what is possible, it must do so through the examination of the factors which perpetuate something's impossibility. For example, a woman who returns from a fantasy world where she is awarded more freedoms, such as financial independence or bodily autonomy, becomes aware of the cultural or political constraints that make such freedoms possible in a fantasy world, impossible in her reality. The fantastic genre works to defamiliarize and explicitly reveal systems of oppression, to make visible the subconscious bindings of power structures, and to give language to emergent ideas of dissatisfaction with such sociopolitical chains.

In fact, this idea of evaluation is what makes the fantasy genre appealing to many: David Sandner affirms, "the idea that the fantastic, through estrangement, allows a rediscovery of the ordinary world is a long-standing claim of critics of the fantastic" (Sandner 295). Through the estrangement of the reader or protagonist from reality, an author inherently challenges the (re)construction of that reality by questioning the values that separate fantasy from reality. This questioning of reality can be met with horror or comfort, especially as the protagonist returns from a more liberating or more dominating world. This is much of the concern for contemporary feminist fantasy, wherein the construction of reality is directly situated within the ideologies that subjugate and suppress women. Here, there is a challenging of the social structures that make up reality, often positioning them as arbitrary or contradictory. As Anne Cranny-Francis highlights, the turn to fantastical elements in feminist fiction "scrutinizes the categories of the patriarchal real, revealing them to be arbitrary, shifting constructs: the subjugation of women is not a 'natural' characteristic, but an ideological process" (Cranny-Francis 77).

Through one's return to reality, the dominant ideologies and values are considered within the realm of both possibility and impossibility, causing fantasy itself to become an act of subversion.

Viewing fantasy as an act of subverting and circumventing societal expectations is an integral part of examining the extent to which fantasy elements reflect a larger concern with the stifling constraints of hegemonic forces. Rosemary Jackson posits in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, that "the modern fantastic...is a subversive literature. It exists alongside the 'real,' on either side of the dominant cultural axis, as a muted presence, a silenced imaginary other" (Jackson 180). For the female fantastic, this idea of muted or silenced Other is particularly emphasized; coming from a position typically outside of dominant discourse, authors of this genre are tasked with breaking this silence to reflect upon their positions. While doing so, any possibility for future change is expressed through fantasy, with its function becoming a critique not only of the facts of existing expectations, norms, and power structures, but also of the assumptions that underlie a woman's abilities (Walker 55). In many of these texts, the alienation of a heroine is caused by the sudden awareness of possibilities existing outside of her current circumstances, thus marking the forces that mandate modes of reality as sources of horror, frustration, and containment.

This subgenre of the fantastic, the female fantastic, quite literally makes the fantasy of escape tangible and material, whether this be through dreams, hallucinations, or visits to alternative realities. Conversations with apparitions or journeys through imaginary lands allow for the heroine to speak and act through her circumstances, and the return from these visions or realms forces her to reevaluate the impossibilities of her own

reality. In other words, while the journey allows for possibilities, it is the return to reality that highlights the (im)possibilities of her life in comparison, leading to the sense of estrangement outlined by Sandner. Thus, this genre of fantasy also deals in awareness, one that often is exemplified through feelings of imprisonment, isolation, and even madness as a heroine attempts to reconcile her knowledge of other possibilities with the constraints of her position. While these elements do not always lead to a sense of horror, they do underlie a history of concern with autonomy and identity that permeated writing of the Gothic genre, which is generally accepted as its own mode of the fantastic.

In fact, Jackson points out that fantasy's "more immediate roots" lie in the Gothic, particularly in the construction of a dialogue between subversive desires and political cultures (Jackson 95). As Coral Ann Howells explains, the Gothic genre is concerned with the "first experimental attempts to write a new kind of fiction which dealt primarily with emotional and imaginative awareness," which makes its relevance to a female fantastic almost undeniable (Howells 1). It is precisely this trend of making visible the dominant and oppressive forces within culture and society that persists into a contemporary model of the female fantastic genre. In fact, this continued concern with feelings of claustrophobia and imprisonment stems in part from the unchanged nature of a woman's status, while the lack of horror associated with a Gothic novel is explained by the lack of surprise that this awareness brings in a modern context. For example, in the case of emergent feminist fantasy of the mid-twentieth century, it seems as though authors shift from a focus on the horror of a woman's position or limitations, generally escaped through marriage or motherhood, to the irony of inescapability (Walker). Furthermore, while the Gothic heroine is saved from the horrors she experiences through

marriage, contemporary writers view the inescapability of marriage and motherhood as a socially upheld institution that necessitates the escape to imagined realities. Even with the many freedoms afforded to women in the current era, there are still oppressive expectations that limit a woman's choices and abilities to actually act out those freedoms.

Consequently, marriage and domestic duties become the invisible chains that bind women to their realities, and the fact that much of the heroine's fantasy centers around patriarchal power and the home is unsurprising. In actuality, it is exactly this challenging of women's limited rights and abilities that creates the exploration of sexuality, marriage, and in particular, motherhood. Within this exploration, the confrontation of the past, present, and future adds another layer of insurmountability to the inescapability of reality; as the heroine transitions from daughter to wife, not only does she lose her identity and autonomy to her husband, but she also joins a legacy of patriarchal oppression. Or, as Carol Margaret Davison would summarize this anachronistic generational fear, "it incorporates the idea of the mother's legacy to the daughter in terms of certain culturally defined roles and behaviours. Thus may the past, in the form of a legacy, be carried forth into the future" (Davison 95). Though Davison is writing about the Gothic tradition, in this instance, the commodification of women and the loss of autonomy and identity through marriage and motherhood remain relevant to the contemporary continuation of female fantastical writing.

In fact, it is this very chain of generational loss that perpetuates the need for female writers and their characters to turn to fantasy; for many, the power granted by social forces is so insurmountable and unyielding that it is only through fantasy that one can imagine a different life. Here, alternative realms are the only places where heroines can

exist without these pressures, conversations with ghosts or gods are the only time when a heroine can speak to or about these structures, and doubled selves show existences or futures that are only possible when these expectations cease to matter. In addition to this cultural imprisonment, the female fantastic is concerned with the spatial imprisonment that a lack of mobility brings. Just as characters are unable to transcend the boundaries of societal expectations, they are unable to move freely between inside and outside. In this case, the inside is also associated with the domestic, and often maternal, duties that perpetuate a woman's presence in her house, while the outside is associated with an excess of promiscuity and otherness.

As Lindsey Tucker points out, there is even a dichotomy of fear created when a woman attempts to cross the border of her home; a woman at home is safe and protected, fulfilling her purpose, while a woman on the street is in danger and often void of virtue. Yet, it is this exact constraint of woman-in-domestic-space that allows for the tradition of a "pervasive sense of containment, even claustrophobia" to continue from the nineteenth-century to today's writers (Tucker 1). This trend of situating women in the domestic sphere is far from new and instead acts as its own literary tradition in male-conceived texts. Here, a heroine is kept in a domestic stasis by the male hero's own desire, often acting as a foil to his journey from her unchanging position (3). While the heroine is at the end of the hero's journey, either as the journey's damsel in need of saving or as the symbol of hope in the hero's return home, she is almost never given the agency to leave or save herself. This inability to cross the threshold, of perhaps existing *on* the threshold, is reflected in the fantastic genre. Here, a series of binaries is presented, and it is only through the movement between them that reality and its opposite are defined. Fantasy

itself is the crossing of the border between the real and the unreal, the possible and impossible, and the spoken and unspoken. Situating a character's story into this paradigm inherently deals with transgressing ideologies and constructions of what is acceptable, leading to a spiritual journey.

Yet, for a female protagonist in the female fantastic, a journey is contained within the bounds of culturally defined limits, often physically marked by a woman's existence at home. This journey creates a sense of otherness or alienation due to the awareness of cultural and spatial containment, especially as it relates to a woman reevaluating the patriarchal construction of reality. For example, as a woman manages to escape her imprisonment through fantasy, she must still return to her circumstances, and as a result, must exist knowing that there are other possible futures outside her reach. Even without any physical movement, a character's awareness of the other or alien likewise infects them with a sense of otherness or alienation. In fact, for the heroine of the female fantastic, this state of liminality or of existence outside of the prescribed real necessitates a continuation of fantastical encounters; especially as it pertains to existing on the threshold, the feeling of alienation from one's environment makes the alternative worlds of fantasy all the more desirable (Armitt 194). Here, the dissatisfaction with the realities of one's existence creates not only an exploration of possibilities, that is, of alternate existences, but also another degree of alienation: alienation of self. In fantasy, this self-alienation is the origin of many narratives of madness, particularly when a female protagonist encounters a dissonance with her externally created self, as defined through cultural and societal expectations, and her internal self, as defined through her newfound awareness and exploration.

Adrienne Rich remarks on the irony of women's identities, stating that the lack of exploration of their identities "says so much about how female culture is fragmented by the male cultures, boundaries, groupings in which women live" (1976; 17). For many female writers, this fragmentation is shown through a physical division of their characters into doubles, alternative selves, and imagined selves. These doubles often exist in opposition to the protagonist, enacting what Cranny-Francis calls the "fragmentation of the real" through their exploration of the "other" life (76). This idea is further explored in Nancy Walker's *Feminist Alternatives*, which examines the use of alternative selves not only to escape the dissatisfaction with one's limited world, but also to find a language to define oneself outside of patriarchal views of femininity and womanhood. For the female fantastic, this exploration sees a heroine's consciousness visibly and materially interacting with the world around her, allowing for her physical imprisonment to be overcome by imagined worlds.

In this thesis, I use Olga Grushin's *Forty Rooms* (2016) to examine this idea of fragmentation, imprisonment, and alienated self that permeates much of modern fantastical writing. Grushin considers the theme of alienation not only by examining the inescapable conditions of womanhood, but also by questioning how being an immigrant adds an additional layer to these conditions. Born into the Moscow intelligentsia, Grushin's narrator upholds the Russian tradition of viewing an artist or writer as what she defines as a "figure of immense power, a warrior, [and] a savior" (Greer). Grushin herself comes from a family of nonfiction writers, journalists, and scholars, thus making the tie between the narrator's sense of alienation, selfhood, and fragmentation all the more relevant to questions of language and identity that are explored fantastically in *Forty*

Rooms. While writing in English and perhaps even drawing upon her own experiences of marrying into an American family, Grushin ties into her novel the perspective of a Russian-American writer, one whose circumstances are not unlike the narrator's.

Although much of her novel is separated from her own biography, certain aspects, such as the childhood memories of her Moscow apartment, an intelligentsia family, and perhaps most importantly, the knowledge and influence of Russian literature, bleed through the pages of *Forty Rooms*. There is even a character whose life seems to mimic what the author's could have been had she not chosen to become both a mother and author; just as Grushin herself, a character named Olga becomes the first Soviet student to study in the United States and later becomes a widely acclaimed writer, yet unlike Grushin, she never marries or has children (Welsh 76). The narrator of the novel also seems to mirror the author's émigré experience, as she chooses to write in her adopted English language over her native Russian. Yet, this assimilation into American culture does not allow her to overcome what soon seems to be indicative of a larger inescapability of expectations imposed upon women across communities, émigré or otherwise.

With this in mind, I offer a reading of Grushin's *Forty Rooms* in order to examine the ways in which the female narrator turns to fantasy, more specifically dreamed conversations and multiplied selves, in an attempt to overcome the powerlessness of her position as a woman in society. In this novel, the narrator envisions the world around her through the lens of artistic vision and strives to become a poet who can build her own world. Yet, as the narrator ages she realizes that the ability to follow a path outside of the one expected of her is nigh impossible and consists of a life in isolation and alienation

from her peers. Whether it be through a parent's illness or a husband's disinterest or her own desire to simply make something of herself, the narrator turns from solely existing for her poetry to solely existing as a mother and wife. Following her transition from poet to domestic figure, *Forty Rooms* examines her life through the eponymous rooms that define her life. Coming to represent her imprisonment in the societal expectations of womanhood, these rooms create a stifling and claustrophobic atmosphere that the narrator can only escape through the use of doubled selves and imaginary discussions with deceased relatives and godly figures. Here, a mixture of the everyday—studying, cleaning, organizing—and the fantastic—mirrored selves, visits from Apollo, imagined friends—cuts through the narration to point to a larger critique of the institutions that entrap women in a cycle of repression.

Chapter 2 of this thesis examines the use of dreamscape conversations as a method for overcoming speechlessness and a lack of possibilities. Here, fantasy serves as a way to speak through silence and to work through the parts of society that seem insurmountable. This chapter considers the ways in which societal constructions of womanhood, especially the expectations of a woman to marry, have children, and support her family, lead to a sense of alienation from one's environment. This alienation is exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness that overtakes the narrator's ability to speak about her dissatisfaction with life and her limited abilities to escape the pressures placed upon her. Her inability to speak is mirrored in her inability to write any poetry, and as her time to write is diminished through childcare and domestic tasks, her only way to ever confront her position is while she is asleep. Here, she encounters her grandmother, mother, and Apollo, who act as one side of her conflicted consciousness. It is through

these conversations that she regains the power of speech, and they ultimately serve as ways for her competing views of the world to enter into a dialogue.

Finally, Chapter 3 of this thesis examines the fractured sense of selfhood that the narrator's conflicting ideologies exhibit. Here, instead of a lack of ability to speak, the narrator's visions of mirrored or separate selves exemplify an inability to change her circumstances and future. This chapter considers the ways in which a lack of potential futures is materialized into parallel narrators carrying out the actions that are just outside of her reach. I also explore the use of mirrors as objects of distance, which in a fantastical context is articulated as the narrator's distance between her present, material self and her fleeting, spiritual self. As the sense of imprisonment in her house escalates, this distance between herself and her desires allows for mirror women to act independently of her body, ultimately constructing distinct recognitions of the narrator's circumstances and identity. Within this paradigm, I also explore how the distance between the narrator's material and spiritual self is further expressed through her lost memories of not only her idolized Russian poets, but also her Russian traditions and language as well. These autonomous and fictional selves become the only places in which her previous self, who retains her Russian identity, remains, giving the narrator any sense of agency over her life and actions. Lastly, it is in the final unity of her material and spiritual self, possible after her death, that the narrator once again begins to see the possibilities of a future outside of her marriage and motherhood.

CHAPTER 2

DREAMS AS OVERCOMING SPEECHLESSNESS

The role of dreams in the fantasy genre is long apparent, and in the context of female narratives of fantasy dreams are an essential part of the narration's self-construction. It is through dreamscapes that a heroine is able to envision possibilities that are outside of the realm of reality, especially as they relate to her circumstantial limitations. As Lucie Armitt writes, within dream narratives, characters "are made aware of the existence of a world beyond our own," generally reflecting the unreachable desires of the characters (Armitt 42). As a character travels from reality to a dreamscape, they not only evaluate the possibilities created by another world, but also evaluate the limitations of their own upon their return. In other words, the escape to a dream world brings about the evaluation of reality through its insufficiencies. Through a discovery of alternate possibilities, there is an inherent evaluation of the material world's limitations, or what David Sandner would describe as the estrangement from and consequential re-evaluation of reality (294-5). Yet, for the heroine rediscovering her circumstances, this evaluation is not quite positive, and instead creates a continued sense of awareness of not only the oppression she faces, but also of the ideologies which construct such a reality.

The displacement and estrangement that Sandner describes is only perpetuated by feelings of internalized alienation during a heroine's return from a dreamscape. For example, upon her return, a heroine realizes, oftentimes eerily, not only the factors of her limitations, but also the fact that her newfound awareness positions her outside of the

dominant ideologies that necessitate her conformity. In terms of feminine fantastic tales, Anne Cranny-Francis posits that,

Feminist fantasy explores the problems of being for women in a society which denies them not only visibility but also subjectivity. It scrutinizes the categories of the patriarchal real, revealing them to be arbitrary, shifting constructs: the subjugation of women is not a 'natural' characteristic, but an ideological process. Feminist fantasy explores the contradictions elided by the (patriarchal) real; for example, that women are both inside patriarchal ideology, as the essential Woman, and outside it, as the (repressed and denied) experiential subjects. (77)

Here, there is a clear delineation between the paradox of a woman's position in society, as both necessary and excluded, and the exploration of an existence outside of such an ideology. Yet, for a woman contained, both psychically within the domestic sphere, and metaphorically through societal expectations and pressures, fantasy may be the only escape. Furthermore, the use of fantastic conventions allows for an evaluation of the construction of real. Ideologies, expectations, and norms are challenged through this exploration, especially as it pertains to the conception of what is considered to be the normal reality. Assumptions of what defines human nature become fragmented through fantastic negotiations of conflicting ideologies and discourses, leading to a distance between a character and her peers.

This sense of self estranged from both reality and society leads to questions of agency, power, and identity. For many women, identity is constructed externally; a woman is defined as a daughter, a wife, or a mother, but rarely is she able to step outside of those classifications to define herself. Even in cases when a woman does not marry or become a mother, she is defined as those classifications in negation, as child-less or spinster. Even separate from the depiction of woman-as-object (wife, daughter, bride), the fact that women are defined by their relation to father or husbands is especially

criticized in female fantasy. In addition to the exploration of defining conceptions of 'real,' the exploration of selfhood underscores much of these narratives. For example, in order to evaluate society as a whole, as a heroine does upon her return, she must also consider her own position and self. The fact that a woman's position is generally outside of dominant discourse only furthers the necessity of using fantastic elements in order to breach the silence (especially stemming from exclusion) and challenge external constructions of identity. This theme is central to Nancy Walker's *Feminist Alternatives*, wherein she states that, "What characterizes the contemporary novel by women, however, is not merely a fluidity of identity, but a consciousness of the ironic distance between the self as formulated externally, by cultural heritage, and the self as an internal process of redefinition and discovery" (78).

As a protagonist examines the conditions and boundaries prescribed to her, the awareness of space between one's selfhood and one's externally-created self perpetuates fantastic encounters and escapes. For example, Walker introduces her research with the assertion that "dissatisfaction with the self as constructed by others leads women to imagine alternative selves, a conceptualization that extends into fantasy in the form of dreams, memory, and even madness," situating the escape into a dream world, often perceived as madness, into a larger context of constructing identity and selfhood (8). Here, the speaking to imagined characters or hallucinations becomes a subversive attempt to overcome the exclusion and silence that permeate their condition. These journeys into a dream realm allow a heroine not only to have the space to speak and act uninhibited by norms and ideologies; they also provide someone to listen as she works through her struggles. If the woman must overcome her speechlessness, the man must overcome his

deafness, yet the majority of this task occurs not in reality, but in a dream or hallucination.

Grappling with selfhood, consciousness, and speech is at the core of Olga Grushin's *Forty Rooms*, which follows a woman from childhood to death as she transitions from a nameless, though autonomous, character to the silent and regretful Mrs. Caldwell. Much of the doubt and conflict that Grushin's narrator experiences is explored through repeated and frequent conversations with the Greek god Apollo in her dreams. His dreamscape visits act as guides to how the narrator can become a great poet, though they do turn more philosophical as the narrator matures. From her first introduction to poetry, to her grandmotherly musings on the role of motherhood in one's legacy, these conversations are integral in shaping the narrator's outlook on identity, immortality, and especially the role of societal expectations in the creation of art and womanhood. It is through these conversations that the narrator is able to work through her inability to overcome what is expected of her, especially as they seek to discuss the cause of much of her fractured consciousness: the split between the creation of art and the creation of a family. They not only awaken the narrator's desire to be a poet, but also cause her to live her life in a form of self-alienation, one where the awareness of possible futures is made impossible by the circumstances of her gender. In fact, much of her conflict with her circumstances is reflected within these conversations, which seem to be the only time that she speaks genuinely and is listened to in return. Furthermore, it is in these conversations that she discovers the dichotomy between mother and artist, especially as it relates to the use of suffering for artistic creation. Yet, while she seeks to deny herself that which is

deemed inconsequential to a poet, it is the inevitability of maternal life that ultimately creates her sorrow and inability to ever create meaningful poetry.

While it seems as though her speechlessness stems from a place of incapability, of the inescapability of both her future and societal pressures, it is through these dreamscape conversations that she is given back a voice, even if it is only to speak to herself. For the narrator of *Forty Rooms*, speech is directly tied to poetry and the possibility of expression found within, and there are several times in which the narration is intercepted with plans for how she will depict the world around her through poetry. Yet, her discovery of poetry and the perceived cost thereof occurs as a result of her first meeting with Apollo. Here, she has fallen asleep in the kitchen of her childhood home, while the people around her recite and discuss *samizdat* poetry. It is this conversation, occurring when the narrator is nearly fourteen years old, that impresses upon her both the limitations of man and the power of language. At the same time, Apollo imparts the idea of legacy, or as he calls it, immortality, through the written text, all the while connecting this ability to create and to become immortal with suffering. After reading a stanza of Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem*, her divine guide explains to her, "this weightiness, it has to be earned, and the price is high. Not everyone, you know, is willing to pay the price of immortality" (Grushin 29). Although the narrator does not yet recognize the circumstances in which the poem was originally created, Apollo elaborates on the abilities of poetry by stating that it is powerful "when you combine the limitations of language with the repressions of history" (30). *Requiem*, written as a reconstruction of the horror, despair, and grief experienced due to Akhmatova's son's imprisonment and exile during the height of Stalinist Terror certainly meets this requirement (Bailey). However, this idea of the limitations of

language in conjunction to the repressions of history is also applicable to the continued suppression of women and their powerlessness to avoid this, as the narrator discovers later in life.

Thus, repression and language are linked in the narrator's mind, and the idea of overcoming limitations through the written word fills her with a sense of longing, strangeness, and intoxicating freedom. As she sees it, the ability to put into words that which is unspeakable is an act of freedom, one which kickstarts her spiritual journey and sense of alienation. As Sandner explains of this phenomenon, the tradition of fantasy "finds in fantasy's encounter with the impossible a spiritual longing," allowing Apollo to take the place of mystic guide during her spiritual journey (282). Yet, it is clear from this conversation, perhaps even taking place before any conception of gendered or sexual expectations, that the narrator does not fully grasp the concept of language's power, nor does she fully understand the limitations of womanhood. Despite this, the narrator uses poetry and the possibilities it creates as a form of escapism, seeing them as "windows opening into other places, other moods, other realities, which [she] struggle[s] to translate into words," directly placing poetry into the displacement of reality in favor of the exploration of others (Grushin 50). In this scene, the narrator is uncomfortable, anxiously aware of the expectations placed upon her to marry and have children. Alone with a boy named Vasily, she reflects upon the power of Innokenty Annensky's poetry, which allows her to slip into another world completely. Poetry and language allow for an escape from reality, one that is immediate through its recitation. As the silence between the two stretches, she slips into another reality created by Annensky's poetry and the contemplation of herself in a world where she is free from expectations or politics.

However, it is during this scene that the narrator also begins to see her potential future as a site of horror and imprisonment. Her escape is broken by Vasily's unwanted kiss and subsequent proposal, and she has a moment of clarity wherein her future is simplified into a "succession of increasingly suffocating rooms" (53). Not only does this contrast with the openness of endless windows of opportunities and realities, but it also likens a married life to one of confinement and claustrophobia. Even outside of the fantasy genre, this idea of enclosed, confined spaces set in opposition to the open and breathable space of a window is not only common within feminine narratives, but is also somewhat of a trope itself. The domestic space, that is the home and its many rooms, is a typical setting for female characters within literary tradition. Even further, the lack of mobility outside of these spaces seems to echo into a larger textualized critique of patriarchal containment, one that finds itself fighting against the "pervasive sense of containment, even claustrophobia" present in much of the fiction written by women from nineteenth-century until today (Tucker 1). This claustrophobia, especially as Grushin's narrator experiences it, is borne from the paralyzing realization that societal expectations—to get married, to have children, to give up any future possibilities to become a wife or mother—are inescapable and harrowing in pressure.

In her first attempt of avoidance, the narrator escapes to a university in the American South, where she continues her exploration of alternative realities through poetry. It is here that Apollo visits her once more, this time explicitly allowing her to create a dialogue centered around the dual modes of creation afforded to women. In the United States, the narrator is free from the constraints of Russian expectations, even viewing the access to new experiences and feelings as an entry point to a new dimension

(Grushin 62). Yet, these experiences and feelings also deal with love and sex, which are historically one of the classic entrapments of women. However, what is particularly interesting about this insight from Apollo is that he is not warning the narrator from men simply to spare her any emotional turmoil, but to spare her from the consequences of exploring her sexuality, of being careless of her newfound freedoms. Here, he elucidates the difficulty of a woman in following an alternative path than the one arranged for her, situating the expectations of womanhood into the polarity of creation for self (art) and the creation for others (family). As he states,

For every human being, no matter how brilliant, has only a predetermined capacity for creation, and a child, you see, is no less a creation than a book, albeit of an entirely different order and often less lasting . . . There are different kinds of immortality, after all. Choosing the spirit or choosing the flesh is ever a private matter. (66)

For women, the traditional form of creation and immortality is through offspring, who will keep their mothers and grandmothers alive through their lineage and legacy. As the narrator now grasps, there is a path to immortality other than through her poetry: childbirth. Until this point in the novel, the narrator has focused solely on the spiritual side of her consciousness: self-alienation from her peers, separating herself from her homeland, and refusing romantic relationships have allowed the narrator to feel isolation and sadness, thus connecting with her spirit. At the same time, the narrator is presented with the idea of fulfillment in a family legacy, in succumbing to the life that she has been avoiding through studies and poetry.

However, this path cannot coexist productively with poetic creation in both the eyes of the narrator and Apollo. In fact, Apollo even explains that while the narrator *could* become a wife and mother, she would not be a devoted one so long as she remained

loyal to her art. He states that the Muses were “never devoted wives and never committed mothers, and all their time, all their passion, was dedicated solely to their art,” thus creating a paradigm of impossibility between a woman’s duality (67). As he further points out, women who do attempt to follow both paths are seen as “a gathering of perversions and monstrosities, of recluses and harlots” (68). Women who do create, especially those who do so while being mothers or wives, are not regarded the same as their male counterparts. This is also placed into the context of Russian literature, which the narrator is undoubtedly familiar with. Interesting here is Marina Tsvetaeva’s doubled mention as both a woman of sexual desire (specifically bisexual desire) and of “unnatural” motherhood (69). Within the larger conversation of poetic and maternal selves in opposition, the reference to Tsvetaeva, who grapples with this in her own poetry, reminds the narrator (and thus the readers) that her origin of self lies very much in Russian poetry. As Antonia Filonov Gove proves in her article, “The Feminine Stereotype and Beyond: Role Conflict and Resolution in the Poetics of Marina Tsvetaeva” (1977), Tsvetaeva “took as one of her themes the limiting aspects of the woman’s social role and questioned this role as applied to the poet’s self (Gove 254). Through this example, not only is the dichotomy of woman-as-poet and woman-as-mother or -as-other exemplified in the tradition of female Russian writing, but it is also assumed and carried out by Grushin’s narrator.

Here, a woman can either be an artist or a mother, but she cannot be both simultaneously. Or, as shown by the example of Tsvetaeva, there is an “axiomatic disjunction between the two essences – feminine and poetic” that seems to color the experience of any female writer examining herself in conjunction to possibilities, societal

positioning, and capacity for creation of both a family or art (Dinega 4). Once again, the idea of selfhood becomes expressly opposed to sexuality or any relationships created as a result, falling into the idea of ideology, autonomy, and identity explained by Joanne Frye as the “interpretive lens for understanding women’s lives” (Frye 2). As she explains, while male is signified as human or independently capable, woman is signified “only in terms set out by specifically sexual expectations, [which] preclude them from agency and autonomy,” leading women to be defined not in terms of their qualities, but instead by their “attendant roles” as mother, wife, or sexual partner (2). It is exactly this lens that Grushin’s narrator is coming to discover through her dreamed conversation, and the use of examples of women with the same background and desires as her only focuses this perspective.

As a result, this battle between artist and mother is presented not as a new concept, but instead as an inevitable dilemma that must be experienced by any female artist. For instance, Adrienne Rich writes that the polar ends of identity, that of a mother and that of poet, lead to not only the search for identity, but also to the “refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society” (1972; 18). Frye additionally explains that for a woman to become a writer, she must “continually resist the cultural idea of womanhood,” making the act of choosing between selfhood and womanhood one of upholding or subverting expectations (4). For both theorists, the choice between mother and poet is presented as the choice between the self-denial of the artistic soul to the cultural ideal of femininity or the undertaking of autonomy at the cost of her perceived womanhood. For the narrator of *Forty Rooms*, this choice is presented by Apollo as following two paths; before the dream’s end, Apollo advises her, “whenever you come to

a fork in the road, always choose the harder path, otherwise the path of least resistance will be chosen for you” (67). Here, the path of least resistance is that of tradition, and in the narrator’s case, a clear reference to the expectation of marriage and motherhood.

Thus, the harder path is emphasized as transgression of tradition, or more specifically, the decision to subvert these expectations and instead live a life of solitude. This is especially exemplified when she decides to stay in the United States after graduating, not for graduate school, but for the pursuit of new experiences and freedoms not allowed under the expectations of Russian culture. For instance, when she falls asleep before her plan to tell her parents her decision to stay in the United States, she explains to Apollo that, “I will tell them that going home is a predictable thing to do, and someone taught me not to take the path of least resistance” (85). The narrator wants desperately to avoid her predetermined pathway, even if it means not returning home and remaining in her self-imposed isolation. It is clear from the difficulty of remaining abroad, rather than returning to her family, that the narrator would prefer a life of autonomy to a life of imprisonment within a marriage and domestic duties. The narrator’s newfound determination to subvert tradition is unsurprising when one recalls what caused her to attend university in the United States in the first place: fear of an empty future married to Vasily, never doing anything to prove her artistic ability or to live outside of the expectations imposed upon her (53-5).

Despite the narrator’s dramatic assertion of following the harder path, she soon explains to Apollo the real reason for her decision to stay abroad: the fear of not fully living thus far, yet being expected to return home to a pre-planned and inescapable life. As she explains,

I'll be twenty-two in just a few months, but I have yet to start living . . . and my future is all mapped out for me as well: my old Moscow routine waiting to close in upon me, a short interlude of graduate school followed by a desk job in some dusty institute, a marriage to someone like Vasily, then children, then middle age, then death. It's like one giant board of tic-tac-toe, spanning years and years, and as my life crosses off one square, I'm expected to obediently put my O down in the next logical place, knowing all the while that the game can't be won. (85-6)

The narrator is determined to travel, to experience new things, never to settle down or become entrapped within a life of childrearing and domesticity. As such, the decision to stay in the United States after graduation serves as a way to avoid the future planned for her, though her conviction in doing so is challenged by the end of her conversation with Apollo. For example, in attempt to uphold her decision to not bend to cultural constraints of womanhood, the narrator instead asserts that “[art] can't be born of a small, predictable life,” acknowledging the dilemma described by Rich and Frye (86). However, from his position as an eternal foil to her ideas, Apollo imposes the idea of space and introspection, not mobility to the ability to create. For him, an artist should stretch their limitations by going inward, not outward, especially as pain is an inevitable part of life. Ironically, it is exactly this stretching of limits by going inward that creates the narrator's conversation with Apollo in the first place; as a figment of her dream, this version of the Greek god exists as a materialization of her split awareness and conflicted understanding of the world around her.

Not only does her conversation with Apollo underlie the narratives surrounding the mother-artist dichotomy, but it also does so with the expectation of overcoming a power structure that silently places women into this narrative. For example, the narrator is using these conversations themselves to evaluate the world upon her return to wakefulness, and in doing so, she forces herself to evaluate why she cannot hold these

conversations in reality. In her subsequent disgust with her poetry, the narrator makes an explicit connection between the power of expression and the ability to use language precisely. In parts, this echoes the ideas of Walker, who stipulates that “the search for a language is particularly apparent in the work of writers for whom language as well as gender creates initial barriers. Language represents power, and for the essentially powerless person, acquiring and using language is a step toward understanding both self and power” (10). Earlier chapters underscore the narrator’s difficulty in wielding English instead of her native Russian, but the problem of expression persists regardless of any technical proficiency. Furthermore, it is through this pursuit of poetry that the narrator defines her life; only through her ability to write, and write well, does she consider herself successful in living a life worth noting. For the narrator, after attaining the realization that her “solitary quest of capturing the formlessness of living in a net of language” has failed to produce any poetry that is substantial or weighty, she is filled with a sense of horror and a violent need to destroy everything in order to start anew (Grushin 89). For the narrator, poetry that is lacking, both in its introspection and in its use, is worse than staying silent and relying on others’ use of language.

After her act of poetry burning, the narrator seems to put this idea of silence over broken speech to the test, though surprisingly through the exploration of love that she was previously cautious of. After burning her poetry, the narration resumes two years in the future. Now in a studio apartment with her boyfriend of the time, Adam, the narrator states “happiness this deep is wordless” as the entirety of Chapter 10 (97). Then, the very next chapter explains why this is not as alluring as it sounds: how can a poet create, *live*, without words? Here Apollo’s earlier statement that great poets rarely wrote profound

pieces about happiness holds true; earlier, the narrator could not even find the words to describe her happiness, and as she reveals, her so-called happy relationship has actually caused her not to create at all. During these two years, the narrator has been too busy working to support Adam's dreams of becoming a musician and has not had any time of her own to simply sit down and write anything. Even the simple act of speaking aloud becomes a Sisyphean task, with words either going unspoken or unacknowledged.

In this respect, Grushin's narrator experiences once more the powerlessness of speech, especially as it relates to being acknowledged and listened to by those from a dominant position of society, in this case, Adam. The loss of speech, that is, the ability to define her experiences in her own terms, is exactly the powerlessness that Michelle Cliff describes in her "Notes on Speechlessness" (1978). Here Cliff argues that "It is important to realize the alliance of speechlessness and powerlessness . . . Speechlessness begins with the inability to speak; this soon develops into the inability to act. The inability to act is part of the implosion." (Cliff 5). This theory of power within speech, and consequently action, is the basis of the narrator's frustration and sorrow during this chapter. For example, she compares her attempts at explaining herself as a helpless endeavor, describing that "I made another effort to speak, though my words felt like ghostly wisps of real words, passing right through him, helpless to change anything" (Grushin 98). As the narrator attempts to keep Adam from leaving, words seem unreal and unable to take shape, stuck in the formlessness of existence that she never seems to overcome. In her state of panic and desperation, she finds herself powerless to stop Adam's departure from her life, her speech reflecting the wordlessness that was previously described as an all-consuming happiness. Just as explained by Cliff, this inability to execute a complete

sentence leads to her frozen state of inaction while Adam leaves. However, the cause of this implosion is not her inaction, but rather, a combination of Adam's selective deafness and her decision to silently renew her lease and reject following him to Paris.

After his departure, the narrator's inability to speak up causes a fantastic imagining of her circumstances, one that is based upon his attention when she speaks. In this imagined version of events, the narrator finally is able to explain why she chose not to follow him, though even this fantasized reality includes interjections into her explanation. Despite this, her reasoning is clear; after giving so much of herself to their relationship, there is nothing left for her poetry. Here she states that "being so exhausted from all the odd job I've taken to help pay your bills, I barely have the energy for my poetry anymore—but for you, for you it still is all about your music" (101). Though not confined to the tradition of marriage, the narrator is trapped nonetheless; her labor is less appreciated than it is expected, her pleas for explaining herself fall upon unlistening ears, and the exhaustion of existing between the two culminates in a wordless existence. When examined in conjunction to her previous assertion that her poetry, and thus her ability to even compose it, is the entire measurement of her existence, it is unsurprising that the narrator chooses not to follow her lover to Paris. Like immortality, happiness comes at a cost, one which the narrator did not find worth the sacrifice. Her entire life is saturated with her identity as a poet, and wasting away in her relationship, while making her immensely happy, was akin to losing that part of herself.

Thus, the ability to create is directly linked to the narrator's solitude, forming a bond between alienation and the ability to create. This is exemplified through the poem that the narrator immediately composes after Adam leaves her:

*It was so cold that all my words felt frozen
and flew away, a brilliant blue cloud.
One fancy adjective sped toward a close-by chimney,
attracted—all that warmth, and noise, and smoke—
a real life, it seemed. (105)*

Here, the narrator presents her fruitless years through the imagery of words physically leaving, dying, and being frozen, a reflection upon her own stagnancy during her relationship. It is not until Adam's departure that they become unfrozen, indicating a much larger journey of ultimately choosing her creative potential, and thus her ability to express herself, over her happiness. For the first time in the novel, the narrator feels genuine loss in that she must give up her first love (and indeed, this is one regret that is prominent any time the narrator ponders what could have been) in order to regain the power of speech and action.

Her poem continues after telling Adam that she will not follow him to his new job in France (“*I do not think I'll come with you to Paris.*” / “*Oh no? A pity.*” —*And he sipped his coffee*”), explaining:

*My night grew warmer then, and my best words
bounced back to me, my loyal, joyous pets.
They flocked into my lap, and lapped their milk,
and were at home at last—
alive and needed. (106)*

Not only does the narrator *need* to write poetry, but a life without poetry is frozen and incomplete. From her account, it appears as though the connection between selfhood and creation lies with isolation and alienation from one's peers. In fact, this choice seems to mirror her decision to emigrate to the United States in the first place, especially as her sense of self is built through a series of alienations, or exiles, from not only Russia, but the United States as well. In fact, it is exactly this construction of identity through

language, language power, alienation that Daphna Erdinast-Vulcan describes as “the exilic mode of being, a living on boundary-lines” that in turn “produces a constant relativization of one’s home, one’s culture, one’s language, and one’s self, through the acknowledgement of otherness” (Erdinast-Vulcan 411). For Grushin’s narrator, this reawakening of self-awareness and desire through the reacquisition of language has a twofold importance. First, having already given up the use of her native Russian and regained self-expression through her acquired English, the narrator’s ability to compare gendered circumstances between the two cultures is made possible through her position of otherness in both societies. Second, the exploration of her position and selfhood through the use of language highlights the power of both speech and writing in conjunction to overcoming patriarchal expectations.

Here, the act of writing is one that is aware of the cultural experience surrounding a woman, at once emphasizing the isolation of choosing to not submit to a commodified life while simultaneously needing this isolation in order to conceptualize the conditions that make up reality. Furthermore, this isolation is necessary not only for the construction of selfhood, but also for the retrieval of speech and speech use. For example, Rich considers the role of language in both trapping and liberating women writers, relating these discoveries to a sleepwalker waking to reevaluate reality (1972; 18). Within this metaphor, Grushin’s narrator likewise awakens with a new consciousness of the numerous possibilities that are snuffed out simply due to a woman’s designation at birth, is horrified by it, and decides to undertake a life in solitude, at least internally, rather than lose her ability for self-identification. In a later collection of essays, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1979), Rich further evaluates this idea of language’s power in connection to

identity, stating that “the entire history of women’s struggle for self-determination has been muffled in silence over and over” (1979; 2). The narrator’s struggle in *Forty Rooms* seems to parallel this unyielding tendency of being muffled or silent while in the pursuit of identity, perhaps leading to the joy found from her solitude and rediscovered ability to put words onto paper.

After her last conversation with Apollo, leading to her burning of poetry, subsequent meeting with Adam, and discovery of the power of speech, the narrator is not visited by him for nearly another forty years. However, as her identity shifts from poet to housewife, from a nameless narrator to an equally nameless Mrs. Caldwell, from a first-person to a third-person narration, Grushin’s character encounters two maternal visitors in her dreams. First, her grandmother, the one who introduced her to the stories and fantasies told in the bathroom of her childhood home, followed by her mother, who returns to tend to Mrs. Caldwell’s garden. Here, both apparitions are dead, and unlike her visits with Apollo, these dreamscape conversations reflect the narrator’s doubts about her life and its failings. The first maternal visit comes near the end of Mrs. Caldwell’s life, during a time where she is disappointed in her marriage, in her appearance, and in her husband’s absence from their home. Much of the narrator’s inability to avoid the pressures leveled against her is spoken here, and it is perhaps in this instant that the narrator allows herself to acknowledge the fact that she did not want to become a mother. Here, her existence is likened to purgatory, apt in its placement as a space existing in-between and on the threshold. Even near the end of her life, the narrator is neither a fully committed wife and mother nor is she a poet, published or otherwise. Instead, she exists

in a state of non-being and inaction, perhaps in a parallel to the speechless-powerless dichotomy described by Cliff and proven by the narrator's earlier experience with Adam.

Even while married, Mrs. Caldwell still intends to reject the happiness she could have in her marriage, shown by her thought that "I will not sink into the plush swamp of a comfortable marriage. I will always walk the harder path" when asked about her plans for children (134). Here, the narrator seems to have found a new path for her attempted subversion of expectations; while the decision to become married is ultimately due to pressure from her family and not her own desire, she still does not fully conform to this role and instead hides her poetry and self from her husband. At first, it seems as though she planned to take this path all along, and indeed she admits that "sometimes the harder path is the opposite of what it seems" (138). However, a nighttime conversation with her husband explains otherwise. Here, the narrator admits, "I knew what was expected of me in Russia, and I thought that here I would be able to escape it, escape having a predictable life," which signifies how the narrator, while trying to avoid the trappings of womanhood, ultimately fell victim to the expected path (141).

This version of Grushin's narrator is aged and imprisoned to her own circumstances. Yet, as her grandmother notes critically, these circumstances are of her own choosing, even if they are against her ultimate desires. For instance, after asking the question of whether the narrator even wanted her children, the grandmother answers herself:

Indeed you did not. You had the first one to console a sick parent, the second to provide a playfellow for the first, the next two by accident, or maybe out of some self-destructive impulse—let a council of psychiatrists puzzle over that one—and the last, the last out of guilt. . . Next you'll be having one to fix your failing marriage. (Grushin 239)

This outright appraisal of the circumstances surrounding the narrator's descent into motherhood, the loss of identity, and the self-destructiveness of it all is at the core of the narrator's original rejection of motherhood. Here, the grandmother's examination of the circumstances surrounding the narrator's loss of selfhood acts as a truth so horrible in its nature that it has gone unspoken until this moment. Even the premonition of her sixth child holds true: the arrival of the Caldwell's final daughter ends her husband's affair with another woman, which presumably would have ended in divorce. It is with this conversation that the narrator finally acknowledges the sinking feeling of confinement and isolation that, while freeing during her solitary years, has now led to a sense of self-alienation and fractured consciousness. Unlike previous instances of post-dream awareness, which led to the estrangement of the narrator from the socio-political power structure, the return from this dream creates a sense of horrific awareness against the narrator's own consciousness. In this moment of the dream, she seems to step outside of the narrative, or perhaps when considering the shift between first- and third-person narration, to step back inside the narrative.

In reflecting upon her life thus far, the narrator meets her failings with a sense of horror, especially when considering the loss of her artistic drive, around which her entire identity is built. The grief, panic, and despair allow for the narrator's own voice to surmount the omniscient narration, questioning "Gods, my gods, how did I come to be in this desolate place, where did my sunlit garden go, did I take a wrong turn somewhere along the way—" (240). Yet, just as quickly as the autonomous narrator arrives, her voice is hidden behind the outside perspective of Mrs. Caldwell. While this encounter elucidates much of Mrs. Caldwell's feelings of confinement and imprisonment, her return

to wakefulness does not create the same sense of awareness and knowledge that was present in her conversations with Apollo. In fact, it is as though she is so practiced at shoving these pieces of herself deep inside her consciousness, never to be spoken or acknowledged, that her ability to act upon her self-reflection is paralyzed. After she has spent years reveling in her silence and inaction, not even a dream intervention is impactful enough to bring any unity to her consciousness.

The second of her maternal visits comes from her mother, visiting after forty days of postmortem loitering are over. This conversation with her mother is pivotal for more than just its role in connecting the narrator to her past self; it additionally returns to the philosophy present in the narrator's conversations with Apollo, thus rekindling her previous concern with the idea of language, creation, and possible futures. Here again the dilemma of womanhood as an antithesis to artistry is present, though this time the conversation's concern with the power of language and words seems to rekindle the narrator's ability for speech that was absent during her grandmother's visit. However, this spiritual conversation is markedly different for one important reason: her mother introduces a view of immortality that is undeniably feminine, wrought from a satisfaction with motherhood and a joy of watching seeds grow to fruition. Here, she links the narrator's disconnect from reality to her needing to view the world through poetic conventions in order to classify and examine it:

Making things grow is a kind of immortality too. But that's the trouble with people who prize words above all else—you don't know anything practical, anything useful. . . The world becomes obscure and remote when you look at it through a mesh of words, you know. Like those semi-transparent sheets of paper they used to put over illustrations in old books, to protect them—it just ended up turning the picture all hazy so you could barely make out what it was supposed to be in the first place. (301)

For her entire life, the narrator has viewed the outside world from a lens of creation: every action has a possible poem attached, every emotion can be drawn upon to create, and even reality blends seamlessly with her dreams, only distinguishable upon her awakening. As a result, the real world, not the fabricated and artificial one that the narrator imagines, is obscure and unfamiliar. Especially in the case of the narrator's inability to find peace either as a mother or as a poet, the drive to complicate and classify every little action has hindered her ability to embrace either role, perpetuating her existence in the purgatory that her grandmother transverses. However, after this conversation with her mother's spirit, the narrator reflects that "maybe, just maybe, the world is really like that. . . the way we imagine it as children, before we stop *seeing*" (304). After decades of speechlessness and inaction due to her pure misery ("unhappiness this impenetrable is likewise silent, but the silence lasts longer"), the narrator finally makes sense of the world again in the moments following her mother's visit (249). In comparison to her sense of horror, followed by avoidance, after her grandmother's visit, Mrs. Caldwell feels comforted and relieved at the conclusion of her mother's speech. In this moment, she feels as though the world is placed back upon its axis, an idea upheld by the fact that she has somehow overcome her decades-long muteness, even if only in the span of the time between a dream's end and awakening.

In fact, her mother's conversation about the shortcomings of words leads to a reawakening of her own idolization of acquiring and using language. For her, the power of language is in its ability to clarify, to make visible the big, undefinable parts of life that remain largely unwritten or obscured. Ultimately, it is through this act of making visible the elusive that the narrator proposes a cure to her blindness of reality. As she declares in

this moment, “by the time I have crossed my own wilderness of forty rooms, I too will be able to see the world as it really is—,” promising to herself that she will once again strive to see as she did in her adolescence (305). She then cements this decision by taking the clothes that she had previously tried on for hours upon hours without ever wearing them in public, haphazardly throwing them into a suitcase, and donating them to a local charity. Especially in conjunction with the narrator’s previous disgust at becoming the antithesis of a poet, materialistic and opulent, this newfound joy from destroying and giving away these meaningless possessions is oddly reminiscent of her burned poetry while still in college. In a way, this cathartic scene brings the adult life of Mrs. Caldwell full circle; from a Russian student only starting to assimilate into American culture, to an unfulfilled American housewife living in a doubled state of alienation, to a middle-aged woman returning to Russian tradition. Consequently, this chapter of the book signals a return to the main philosophy of the novel: the cost of both motherhood and selfhood as an artist.

For the first time in almost forty years, the narrator once again has a dreamscape liaison with Apollo. As she admits, “she had forgotten him decades before, and in the years since, had forgotten that she had ever forgotten anything at all,” further signaling a return of her lost identity, this time through the remembrance of her childhood and adolescent companion (307). Now fifty-seven and accepting of her life thus far, Mrs. Caldwell has her own advice and answers to give to her divine guest: immortality is, of course, achieved through memory, whether it is from writing great pieces of literature or taking up pages in a photo album passed from generation to generation. Indeed, this theme of immortality through familial connection has only grown since her first

conversation with Apollo in her college library. Though this theme of eternal motherhood as the root of lost identity leads to the narrator's fracturing identity (explored further in the following chapter), the acceptance of her life and limitations brings Mrs. Caldwell a sense of completion and unity. Furthermore, none of the shame or contempt previously felt for her conditions seems to exist in the present narrator. Instead, this Mrs. Caldwell is "happy with knowing her limitations at last," with the acceptance that she will never live an unexpected life or become an immortalized poet known for centuries finally allowing her to be content with her position in life—or so the conversation with Apollo begins (308).

Very quickly, it becomes clear that no philosophical debate could ever be so simple with the narrator; as Apollo mocks her, he brings that nagging doubt back into question: *could* she have become something great? In the end, did she fail to be a great poet because she was simply not talented enough, or did she waste her chance by never dedicating herself to any real emotion? Apollo's answer is clear, a mocking retort that reduces every struggle in her life to a grotesque prayer:

Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Please make my child well. Please make my father live. Please make my lover leave. Please spare me any real pain, any real joy, any real shame, any real life—yes, please make my life as smooth, as shallow, as easy as it can get, because all I want is to tiptoe on the surface of things, composing little ditties as I do laundry, not knowing gut-wrenching love, not knowing life-shattering loss—and in return I promise I will give up my passion, the only thing that makes me any different from millions upon millions of otherers, I will throw away every last crumb of inspiration I am granted, every last chance of becoming an artist, I will never break out of the circle of time, I will live a silent life and die a silent death, please, oh please— (313-4)

For all her claims of feeling fulfilled in her life, this cruel side of Apollo is only a manifestation of her own consciousness. She is regretful about wasting every possible

happiness and sorrow, never using either to create anything. She uses neither her feelings of regret from never returning to Russia to visit her parents before their deaths, nor her small bursts of happiness from holding her children—perhaps the only true emotions felt in her life—to create poetry. Instead, she is left with a hollow life without any real pain or joy, without any purpose, and without any poetic creation to show for how empty and unremarkable her life has been. Furthermore, Apollo even states, “I live in your head alone,” exemplifying the fact that the narrator both recognizes her failings as a poet and regrets her refusal of being a fully engaged mother and wife (315). This idea is particularly emphasized by the lines, “she felt that the fierceness of regret, the knowledge of all the things wasted, the sorrow of a life half lived—a life not lived—would consume her whole” (315). After evaluating her life, the narrator ultimately finds herself regretful about every possible choice she could have made, even going as far as to admit she has had a liminal existence, a non-existence marked by longing for endless possibilities while not living in the present time, in addition to never dedicating herself to her poetry or her family.

This last conversation with Apollo truly engages with the narrator’s contradictory and often fractured outlook on life. As opposed to the earlier conversations with Apollo, which outlined the price of rejecting womanhood in the face of individualism, this conversation seems to be more of an evaluation of what the narrator *did not do* to receive said individualism. Instead of on possibilities, it focuses on her failings, and presents an important question: how can one be immortal if one has never truly lived? Can someone create poetry from a place of limited possibility? While this is not explicitly answered in the remaining twenty pages of the novel, the narrator’s view of the world post-mortem

signals a foray into an uninhibited ability to create. After this separation of spirit from body, the narrator admits that she is able to see the world clearly, despite the darkness of the room, in addition to finally feeling freedom from a woman that she has never considered herself. After decades of being trapped within the expectations imposed upon a woman and alienated from Mrs. Caldwell's consciousness, the narrator's fundamentally poetic self is free. The act of being free of Mrs. Caldwell's materialistic and often limited life of non-existence is perfectly summed up by the narrator's admitting that "I am ready to go and live fully at last . . . I do not remember the last time I felt so alive" (325).

Grushin's narrator is only able to regain the power of speech after her death, and subsequently, is only able to create anything meaningful when the constraints of culture and society have no bearing. Similar to a dreamworld, this spiritual world is the only place in which the narrator has the ability to create and reflect upon the world that she is leaving behind, though there is no return to the material reality at the end of her musings. However, with the sense of freedom and promise of a selfish future, the narrator has no need to return from her final fantasy, and imagines a return to life with panic and avoidance. In the afterlife, there are no expectations of what she must do in order to be defined as a person, and it is only through this world that she has the space and ability to explore the world and write about her experiences. In a way, this ability to reflect upon the world and her previous circumstances, not through imagined conversations with gods or deceased relatives, acts as its own antithesis to the alienation and distance created by a fantastical journey. No longer does the reality of her circumstances create a feeling of impossibility, but the opposite.

CHAPTER 3

MIRRORED SELVES AND FRACTURED IDENTITY

For all that the narrator of Olga Grushin's *Forty Rooms* regains her sense of self through the exercise of language in dream settings, it is the loss of voice, agency, and spiritual consciousness brought by her married life that constructs her fractured state of being. In this state, the narrator provides an analysis of selfhood in isolation due to cultural and gender barriers; the struggle of defining oneself outside of the dominant cultural ideology necessitates the fashioning of an alternative space, one wherein the narrator can explore the opportunities not afforded to her. For many women writers, these spaces are portrayed through mirrors or labyrinths, in doubled or multiplied selves, or in fractured consciousness (Tucker 6). As Rosemary Jackson posits,

Frequently, the mirror is employed as a motif or device to introduce a double, or *Döppelgänger* effect: the reflection in the glass is the subject's other . . . as an iconographical establishment of difference, illustrating self as other, and suggesting the inseparability of these devices and mirror images from fantastic themes of duplicity and multiplicity of selves. (45)

For a female protagonist, this idea of self as other within the space of a mirror has an additional layer of multiplicity. When considering the placement of woman-as-object, both to the male gaze and the cultural commodification of her labor, the use of a mirror becomes more than just a symbol of reflection or image. Instead, the mirror is a spatial construct, one which allows for an examination of visibility and identity as it relates to what Joanne Frye describes as the “cultural *idea* of femininity [which] overtakes and obscures the lived *experience* of being female” (143). As a portal into critique, the

mirror's visibility likewise allows for a woman to regain a sense of self-definition as subject, rather than object. Even in a Lacanian sense, the appropriation of the mirror stage as a rediscovery of bodily autonomy and distinct identity through mirrored selves underlies a fantastic concern with the inability to actualize this autonomy.

In *Forty Rooms*, an emphasized sense of doubled self coincides with both the narrator's marriage and a shift in the narrative's structure from first- to third-person. Part Three of the novel brings into the forefront that the narrator is nameless, gradually shifting into the unremarkable and impersonal woman that she was horrified by for many of the previous years. If the previous parts of the novel dealt with constructing an identity, avoiding expectations, and attempting to gain agency, then this part deals with the exploration of the opposite as if through a convex mirror. Here, the narrator turns into Mrs. Caldwell, losing her sense of agency narratively through the perspective shift of "I" to "she," and literally through the gradual confinement to her home and domestic duties. Additionally, the narration is interspersed with new perspectives, which further reflect the shift between the narrator as a conscious being and the narrator as perceived by others. Significant in this portion of the novel is the severe minimalization of dream visits from Apollo, in which the narrator's fractured sense of self seems instead to be realized by various doubles and mirror-selves. As the narrator becomes a dependent housewife, confined to her home through both her responsibilities as a mother and her lack of transport or financial independence, the part of her that is aware of alternative futures becomes materialized through imagined duplicates that act out her desires independently of reality.

This is particularly evident in scenes with mirrors, wherein the narrator's reflection is the corporeal manifestation of her passions and creative self. From the very beginning of the novel, the narrator identifies women or girls in the mirror that are similar, yet distinctly separate from herself. This interaction of the narrator and her plural reflections changes throughout the novel, from the narrator interacting with her reflection giving way to a mirror-self observing Mrs. Caldwell from behind the glass. This independent mirror woman, usually identified by her wild or Scythian eyes, acts as a foil to the narrator's own actions and position, acting as a visible reminder of the life Mrs. Caldwell could have lived if she were not caught in the trap of marriage and motherhood. Not only do these mirror selves recall the narrator's Russianness, through both the reference of Scythian imagery and her childhood desires, but they also underline the distance between the spiritual and material versions of herself. For instance, this mirror-self is present in moments when the narrator imagines possible futures or poems to be written, and even visits intermittently to show the sheer dissonance between the present Mrs. Caldwell and herself decades before. In these scenes, Mrs. Caldwell's concern with her marriage and material life obscures her previous obsession with language and poetry. As such, the woman in the mirror functions as the narrator's severed poetic self, ever present yet separated from her current consciousness.

Just as the novel's narrative structure shifts from "I" to "she," the narrator's interaction with her reflection shifts. As the distance between the narrator's desired freedom and her confinement to her domestic life widens, a split between acting in unison, acting independently yet in accordance, and acting completely separate also occurs. The biggest indicator of this is the sheer difference in interaction as the reader

progresses through the four major parts of the novel. Here, the narrator's life is divided into "Mythology," her childhood; "The Past Perfect," her independent college years; "The Past," wherein she marries and loses her agency; and "The Present," which focuses on the years after the birth of her second child. A fifth part, "The Future," occurs only after her death and consists of blank pages. The early depictions of the narrator and reflective surfaces are full of the imagination of a child, aptly constructing the mythology of her childhood. For example, the narrator's interaction with her reflection is introduced in the novel's very first chapter, at the age of four. She envisions herself being swept into another world after slipping down the drain and going on an adventure to a tree at the center of the world. Later, with the same childlike imagination, she sees her reflection as that of a mermaid entrapped in a jewelry box, learning about, but ultimately not understanding, her mother's history with sacrifice during the Bolshevik Revolution. Here, the narrator's reflection serves as a manifestation of her imagination, the conception of her ability to envision possibilities and create stories.

However, as the narrator grows and learns more of the societal pressures expected of her, reflections serve not as unmoored feats of imagination, but instead as reflections of desire. As she nears twenty years old, her reflection shifts to a manifestation of the paths that she wants to take, encouraging her in the moment or proudly supporting afterwards. The first instance of this comes in her adulthood, now in the "past perfect" stage, when the narrator is deciding to stay or leave a party. In the moment that the narrator attempts to leave, she studies her reflection in the mirror, describing the "awkward double" in the third- rather than first-person (Grushin 74). Though this is the first time that the narrator is given a fractured identity as shown through her reflection,

she only appears as such while standing on the threshold of a decision. For all that she dismisses her host when he tries to get her to stay, it is when her reflection nudges her to follow him that she steps away from the door and follows him to his room. Here, not only is the narrator's mirror-self distinctly different, but it is also directly linked to her hidden desire to stay and speak with the boy.

This depiction of the narrator's deepest desires as reflections that can act independently of herself is prominent from this point on in the novel, particularly in moments of cognitive dissonance or transformation. Interestingly, these mirror-selves are repeatedly described as wild, savage, or Scythian, drawing an undeniable connection between these selves and the narrator's Russian roots, especially those tied to Russian poetics or the Symbolist movement. Scythian mythology or symbolism was a prevalent part of Russian culture as revolutionary ideologies grew through the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this image of a wild, Scythian girl as the narrator's dissonant self only highlights the distance between her Russian childhood (including her adolescent desires) and her gradual American assimilation (Duncan). Furthermore, the fact that these scenes of her mirror-selves center around challenging her passive acceptance of gendered expectations only emphasizes the revolutionary complexity of her spiritual self that become trapped solely within reflections. Within this context, the various mirror women become not only material manifestations of the narrator's conflicting ideologies, but also become symbols of her Russianness portrayed in opposition to her assumed identity as an American housewife.

This connection is especially apparent when the narrator decides to stay in the United States after university, and as an act of renewal, burns all of her poetry in her

dormitory sink. During this act, she notices that “from the mirror above the sink, I was observed by an unfamiliar girl with a determined dash for a mouth, her gaze not bitter but lit up with a ferocious joy” (93). This moment in the novel is pivotal; after realizing the frivolity of her poetry, the narrator decides that she must burn it all in order to start anew. As she gazes the “savage-eyed girl in the mirror”, the narrator is unable to reconcile her own sobbing with the joyous expression of the mirror-woman (94). Here the narrator’s reflection is a symbol of her contradictory feelings. Physically, she is incapable of feeling anything other than loss and the suffering that comes with burning the sum of her existence thus far, while her reflection shows the joy and relief of being able to start anew, without the burden of living with the shallow emotions and life displayed within the burned poetry. For this savage-eyed girl, the act of traumatically giving up the life the narrator has created through her poetry is not only celebratory, but also necessary. This mirror-self exists very much in the spirit of the Russian Scythian myth, fulfilling the tendency that Ekaterina Bobrinskaya summarizes as “the Scythian, a barbarian bring a storm to purge the old, decrepit world, came to stand for the revolutionary and nihilist tendencies” of early-twentieth century Russia (Bobrinskaya 144). Even further than creating a direct connection between the mirror women and the narrator’s Russianness, this revolutionary propensity of these wild women also directly correlates to the narrator’s desire to act outside of the options allowed to her by virtue of her gender. While this distance between desire and action widens as she enters into marriage and motherhood, the narrator is able to bridge the gap between her sorrow in loss and joy of rebirth in this scene, ultimately using the experience to create new and better poetry.

Although her reflection and her consciousness eventually unite, this scene exemplifies the ability of a mirror to represent the production and recognition of self. This idea is upheld by Jackson, who states that a mirror “establishes a different space, where our notions of self undergo radical change,” lending itself to the idea of encountering, recognizing, and subsequently integrating emerging consciousnesses (87). Of course, the inability to reconcile a new awareness, or consciousness, with one’s preexisting conceptions of selfhood only leads to a painful cognizance of possible selves, without the corresponding condition of completeness or unity. In fact, Leo Bersani describes the usefulness of a mirror as a metaphor for this exact phenomenon in *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (1976). Here, he posits that the mirror can function as distance between both a person and their possible self, thus prompting an evaluation of the self built upon desires and the denial or acceptance thereof. As he posits, there is a

suitability of the mirror as a metaphor for the inaccessibility of one’s possible selves to one’s present consciousness. . . It is as if the experience of perceiving ourselves elsewhere suggested the possibility of our becoming something else. Mirrors represent as a phenomenon of distance our capacity for unpredictable metamorphoses. (208)

Of this archetype is the concept of difference, transformation, and fragmentation. In the act of perceiving oneself through the lens of possibility, the distance between one’s present consciousness and one’s possible future consciousness deepens. There is a certain dualism in this self-realization of other and self, one with allows the double or imagined self to act independently.

In the tradition of female fiction, the construction of identity, especially in opposition to patriarchal underpinnings, is an act of allowing a protagonist the agency of

movement, both hierarchically through the social order and materially across the threshold of domestic spaces. In addition, this exploration and creation of identity allows for the agency of voice, especially as the use of “I” becomes a disruption of patriarchal sameness. In fact, it is even this use of what Frye labels the “subversive ‘I’” that creates a sense of otherness so deep-rooted that characters’ consciousnesses begin to fracture in response. Frye also points out the connection between the use of “I” and agency, stating that “by virtue of speaking as a woman, any female narrator-protagonist evokes some awareness of the disjunction between internal and external definitions and some recognition of her agency in self-narration,” creating a boundary between the dominant ideologies presented in an omniscient narration and the autonomy allowed by the first-person (51). When this exploration of agency goes a step further, that is, when it examines the cultural vision of her experiences, this recognition of otherness allows for a fantastic revisioning of doubling.

In the fantastic genre, the fractures caused by conflicts of same/other, internal/external self, and even “I”/“she,” are made material, with multiple selves and narrations breaking into the plot’s structure. In fact, the “division of the self into multiple selves to question and revise reality” is a common narrative device found within fantasy fiction, and doubly so for women’s writing (Walker 34). These visible, yet other, selves can act as symbols for possible futures, parallel versions of reality, or even shadows that taunt and rebel against the patriarchally defined feminine selfhood. The exploration of self through these visible versions of ideal possibilities does not shy away from the ancient archetypes that women traditionally emulated in their work, and instead uses this invisible framework to defamiliarize the existential conditions by which the loss of

agency and identity is perpetuated. In this construction, domestic spaces become grotesque prisons, reflections become split from one's consciousness, and multiplied consciousnesses create meetings with otherness that attempt to defy the cultural institutions that inhibit the full realization of agency. However, when a heroine has no ability to change her circumstances after encountering other possibilities, this awareness takes the form of further fracturing or alienation. Annis V. Pratt supposes that a woman's introspection, simultaneously personal and social, underlies the marital and sexual expectations that impede her development. Here, she states that "the woman encounters a being similar to herself, which empowers even as it exiles her from the social community," simultaneously placing the freedom gained from such an exploration in contrast with the heightened perception of containment (Pratt 163). A woman's encounter with her possible self, one that is not beholden to the social imprisonments that her real self is, highlights the distance between possibility and impossibility.

The polarity between possibility and impossibility can be translated into a duality of desire (possibility) and (in)action (impossibility). For the narrator of *Forty Rooms*, this model of conflicted self-awareness is visualized through her mirrored or doubled selves. The dissonance of desire and action is present for much of the novel following the burning of her poetry, or as the narrator characterizes it, the sacrifice of her existence thus far. The first scene that shows this independently doubled self is when the narrator decides against following her partner, Adam, to Paris, instead renewing the lease on their shared apartment. After he leaves her sitting on the bathroom floor, she can hear him leave and wishes that she could stop him, beg him to stay, and make him understand her motives. Yet, she is unable to move from her spot for at least an hour afterwards, and it is

only through a different version of herself that she does regain her ability to act upon her desires. In this instance, the narrator watches as her independent double receives a call from Adam and frantically packs to follow him:

I watched that other girl through the bathroom door she had left wide open behind her. I watched her flying around the room, pulling on clothes, tossing clothes into her bag, throwing on her coat, running out the door, coming back to pick up the keys she had forgotten, running out again. The girl looked frantic with the relief of happiness—happier, I knew, than I was ever likely to be now—but also somehow less real, diminished. The door closed behind her, just as it had closed behind him. (Grushin 103)

Here, the narrator's visualization of her doubled self not only depicts the distance between reality and fantasy, but it also does so by emphasizing the impossibility of a potential future. Yet, it is clear that this impossibility is of her own self-denial; not only would she be able to chase after Adam, but the circumstances following their separation are a consequence of her own decision not to leave the United States in the first place. Accordingly, the scene of her doubled self leaving acts as a manifestation of her irreconcilable consciousnesses, one which wants to stay and pursue her own career as a poet, and the other, one which wants to further sacrifice her poetry for love. Thus, the appearances of autonomous selves and reflections are directly linked not only to possible futures, but to the narrator's split between desire and denial as well. Where the narrator's previous interactions with mirror-women and doubles ultimately end in her acting in accordance with her desires or the consolidation of her duplicated selves, this interaction with the mirrored self actively acts against what the narrator truly wants. This instance of true suffering and misery is likewise the basis for the narrator's split consciousness in the following parts of the novel.

After this scene, *Forty Rooms* assumes a shift from a first-person narrative to that of a third-person narrative. Furthermore, the novel shifts from the narrator refusing to commit to a relationship to her actively seeking one out with a college acquaintance, Paul Caldwell. After so many years of living to spite expectations, the narrator's decision to commit to life as a wife and mother truly fractures her consciousness. Not only does she hide her identity as a poet from the outside world, but she actively loses that part of her identity as she buckles under the weight of expected femininity. In fact, Paul is so different from everything that the narrator is—an immigrant, poor, creative—that the mere relationship with him causes a sense of non-belonging to emerge, a hatred and fear of becoming just another Mrs. Caldwell present in photo albums and remembered through pretty hairbrushes. At the same time, her refusal to follow Adam was so traumatic that the narrator compares it to killing herself and existing in the hellish confinement of their no-longer shared apartment. In this part of the novel, the narrator is unable to reconcile the lack of autonomy of motherhood and matrimony with her desire to break her solitude and loneliness. As she continues in her relationship, this conflict causes an additional visit from her mirror-self, who acts out her desire to have a happy marriage in this instance.

While visiting Paul's family's grandiose mansion, the narrator views her guest room through the vanity's mirror, and notices an uncanny perfection reflected within. Suspicious, she glances away to find that her belongings were tidied by a housekeeper, before once again encountering a woman in the mirror. After noting the difference between herself and the girl in the mirror, she is distracted by the several pictures of "unsmiling brides with wasplike waists" who have left behind heirlooms with their names

so worn out that they become indecipherable (122). When she looks back into the mirror, she greets the mirror girl, who smiles back. This reflection, which was “perfectly at home in her perfect Cinderella bedroom, if one paid no heed to the somewhat wild, startled look in her Scythian eyes and the pair of scuffed black pumps with soiled insoles,” is simultaneously who the narrator wants to be and who she dreads becoming (123). She is comfortable in herself and seems to accept her relationship with Paul, while the narrator is simultaneously repulsed and attracted to the opulent display of maternal history shown in the guest room. The narrator longs to become a part of someone’s tangible history in the way that the brush and photographs and perfume bottles carry the presence of previous Caldwell matriarchs, but she does not want to lose her identity in the process. The woman in the mirror, who evokes Russia through the imagery of Scythian eyes, similar to the mirror girl watching her poetry burn, is able to retain her Russian and poetic consciousness while also achieving the legacy of the many Caldwell matriarchs. Though not violently or traumatically revolutionary as in the scene of burning poetry, the act of retaining one’s identity while simultaneously assuming the persona of another does uphold the mirror-self’s trend of subverting dominant ideologies.

Yet, the emergence of this mirror-woman symbolizes the end of the narrator’s transgression against expected behaviors, and instead shows her acceptance of becoming a wife and mother. Until this point of the novel, the narrator’s motivation in life is to avoid the predetermined and predictable life set forth by societal and historical expectations of a woman’s role. However, in the very next chapter, the narrator has become Mrs. Paul Caldwell, finally given a name, though one marked by her relation to a man. As her life as a wife develops into a life as a mother, it is clear that the history she

sought came with the price of her own selfhood; once she agrees to marriage, she is no longer given full agency over herself, and especially as she becomes a mother, her ability to act outside of what is expected of her diminishes. Even the circumstances surrounding her marriage are due to the expectations and pressures placed upon her shoulders by those around her, and it is explicitly explained that her decision to marry and have a child is due to a sense of duty to give her ailing father the grandchild he hoped for before his death. Thus, there is a direct correlation between the narrator's sense of selfhood and her growing family and domestic duties. As her family grows larger, her identity and agency grow farther and farther apart from her consciousness.

It seems as though Mrs. Caldwell's identity becomes entangled with her domestic role, and it is through this that her consciousness begins to crumble and create visions of imagined selves fulfilling roles outside of her possibility. She views her condition in reality as a prison; there is always a reason for her to have another child, some justification whispered in the dark or some expectant look pointedly served her way by those around her. Never does the narrator decide to have a child for the happiness of doing so, never does she express anything other than dread at what she may become or relief at having saved her marriage for yet another few years. With this in mind, it is unsurprising that the narrator views her role as a mother as little more than a burden, as an eighteen-year long prison sentence, reset with every new child, that she must wait out until she will once again be free to create. The imagined versions of herself become her claim for individuality, even as she becomes a victim to the identical social condition described in Patricia Meyer Spacks' *The Female Imagination*. Here, a woman's lack of agency creates a passivity implicit in her existence as belonging to her husband or living

for her children (Spacks 322). In this paradigm, there is a sense of being contained not only through the institutions that mandate the characteristics of womanhood, but also through one's body, wherein the world is shaped *around* a heroine instead of her actively shaping the world.

This idea is the basis explored in Roberta Rubenstein's *Boundaries of the Self: Gender, Culture, Fiction*, which views the body as a template for exploring the boundaries that constitute a person's sense of self. When placed into the context of metaphorical enclosures, the experience of culturally derived boundaries is abundant in narratives dealing with motherhood. After all, it is the body that perpetuates the ideology of men and woman carrying different capabilities, and it is the body that betrays a woman's ability to act out the same capabilities. As she explains,

The body is also the template for figurative expressions of boundary conceived as enclosure (or its opposite) in temporal as well as spatial terms. Thus, rooms, wall, houses—including the more emotionally saturated meanings associated with “home”—are tropes for inner experience, as are imprisonment, escape, flight, and homelessness. (Rubenstein 233-4)

As Grushin's narrator becomes more aware of the boundaries keeping her from exploring her own identity, she likewise views her home and family as a form of imprisonment or even an unescapable labyrinth. Without adequate support from her husband, Mrs. Caldwell is always busy going from one task to the next, never having the time to sleep much less compose poetry. As she explains it, her existence is like a “never-ending sentry duty—or, as it seemed in her grimmer moments, a prison sentence with no chance of parole” (216-7). She is never alone, always surrounded by her children and rarely able to leave the house since her husband never buys her the car she hopes for, nor does he help her get driving lessons. As a result of her inability to exist outside of both her duties as a

mother and the house that keeps her tethered to such a life, the narrator must turn to imagined versions of herself to feel any sense of achievement.

In this same chapter of considering her home as a prison, Mrs. Caldwell admits that “she felt nonetheless sustained by the secret fantasy of another, happier woman,” who had run away with Adam (217). Here, she reflects that “this imaginary woman, whose parallel existence ran like an intermittent ghostly thread through her mind, was an unnatural mother who *had* abandoned her children,” an act that she considers freeing, yet impossible due to her past rejection of Adam (217). Instead, her new fantasy is one of being free after her children are adults and no longer necessitate her presence in their lives. Lost in the vision of this future self, she is brought to the present with a call from her son’s doctor, who informs her that he may have a terminal illness. With this sudden realization that her dreams could be answered, if only in the most horrific of ways, the narrator rejects the idea of freedom all together. While waiting for a confirmation of conclusive results, she laments:

I did this. This is my punishment—my punishment for always thinking this isn’t enough, my punishment for always dreaming of a life I will lead once I am free, once I am an artist, once the children are gone. This is the gods throwing it back in my face, this is the gods, yet again, granting the most evil of my wishes, answering the darkest of my prayers. You wanted your children gone, and so they will be, one by one by one, so now go stuff yourself full of your fucking freedom, full of your fucking art . . .
(222-3)

This short chapter is another turning point in the novel; not only does the narrator decide to lessen her focus on being a poet, but she also fully assimilates into the persona of Mrs. Caldwell in all subsequent chapters. Until this moment, the narrator despised the expectations imposed upon her by virtue of her role as a mother, and used the visualization of future or parallel selves to escape. Yet, in this instant, she states that she

will end her battle against these expectations and accept her life the way it is, even if that means giving up her artistic pursuits and fantasies of regaining her agency. In doing so, she exiles the creative part of herself, the part of herself that is most tied to her identity, in order fully to assume the role of Mrs. Caldwell.

This presents another layer to the relationship between Mrs. Caldwell's identity and her consciousness. Before, her internal identity was that of a poet, even as she hid it from showing externally. Now, she has fully accepted the external identity of a housewife and all that entails: motherhood, house decorating, and certainly not a dark longing to be free from her family. She gives up on poetry, calculating it as an unnecessary risk. But she does not kill her poetic soul; the mirror woman returns, this time completely autonomous and in opposition to the narrator's actions. For instance, after Mrs. Caldwell spends her day sorting through her closet full of luxurious and too-small clothes, she realizes that the occasions she bought them for—a night of gambling at a Monte Carlo casino, drinking cocktails on a Caribbean beach, eating lobster bisque at a romantic Paris restaurant—will never happen (228-9). Instead, she will stay in the too-large house surrounded by luxuries and her children, ultimately dissatisfied with her life and the struggles she never had to experience. After a conversation with her husband confirms this, Mrs. Caldwell steps away from the mirror, which leaves another woman assessing her.

The mirror woman considers the state of Mrs. Caldwell's life and finds it lacking. For all that she has a collection of shoes and clothes and comforts, what good would these do if she ever needed to act for herself? If a catastrophe or revolution swept her home and husband away, how would the attachment to frivolous material goods help her

save her children? These are the critiques that the mirror woman makes of Mrs. Caldwell's life, though she ultimately dismisses any interest in following this inspection further. In this moment, the narration shifts from Mrs. Caldwell observing her mirrored selves to the mirror women interjecting their own perspectives into the narration. Here, readers are given insight into the mirror woman's thoughts:

There might be a poem here, she thought, happy as always when things shimmered with potential in her mind; but as she glanced again around the closet, she decided against it, already bored with the meaningless clutter of the costly ephemera—bored with Mrs. Caldwell. She picked up her notebook, rubbed the bridge of her nose in a small gesture she had inherited from her father, and left to search for ideas in the wider world.
(234-5)

This reemergence of the mirror woman is significant in its emphasis of not only Mrs. Caldwell's lacking potential, but also of her dysphoric identity. Clearly this mirror woman is Mrs. Caldwell, and these considerations of her life are her own. Yet, her refusal to even look at herself in the mirror makes this separation of self all the more evident. At its core, this bifurcation of the narrator's consciousness through separate mirror-selves is due to the suppression not only of her desires, but of her poetic self. Furthermore, this mirror-self recalls her Russian heritage, not only through the mention of her father, but also through the reference to a revolution and the personal changes it would bring. Yet, with Mrs. Caldwell's refusal even to acknowledge her reflection, in addition to the mirror woman's contempt for her lavish lifestyle, there is no reconciliation between the narrator's desire for poetry and life defined by materialism. Consequently, Mrs. Caldwell's decision to deny herself her imaginative musings and fantasies only creates a sense of lost identity, of living passively within a body that never attempts to breach the boundaries imposed upon it.

It is only years after her decision to abandon her pursuit of art that she finally confronts how empty this decision has made her. She admits that in trying to fabricate a happy marriage and family she has only shrouded her true desires in falsehood, keeping them secret from even herself. In fact, the narrator buries her selfhood so effectively that she admits to her husband:

I think maybe I chose the wrong thing to keep secret. It's dangerous to make a secret not of something you *do* but of something you *are*, because if you go about wearing a mask for years and years, you may end up becoming what you were only pretending to be all that time—you may find that there is no face under the mask. (288-9)

This is a character whose existence is saturated with literary figures and their creations: Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexander Blok, Marina Tsvetaeva, Innokenty Annensky. These figures are irrevocably tied to her Russian identity, and in parts, coincide directly with her own perceptions of the world; the narrator's struggle between identifying as a mother or as a poet echoes some of Tsvetaeva's work, Annensky's verse about imagining parallel selves is quoted not once, but twice by the narrator, and Blok's lines from "The Scythians" are recited when describing her Moscow home. Despite this, the narrator has forgotten these fundamental connections to both her homeland and her poetic desires. Here, she explicitly admits that her creative self has been hidden for so long that she has forgotten that there was anything hidden at all. Furthermore, she cannot even remember any of her poetry, as evidenced by her stating, "I can't . . . I don't remember any, it was decades ago" (290). The only poetry that she remembers is a clumsy poem written in English, *not* Russian, her first try at composing in the new language, a haiku with miscounted syllables. In this way, the narrator's loss of identity and fractured self is linked to a loss of memory, especially when considering the

relationship between language, expression, and how the interaction of the two constructs her selfhood. Her fractured consciousness, which is an effect of the divide between her internally and externally selves, has caused these gaps in her memory, leaving her with a longing to remember, a nostalgia for what was forgotten and what could have been had she pursued her career as a poet. Despite all of her efforts to avoid the path chosen for her and to escape the chains that bind women into categories of “same” or “other,” the narrator has still become frozen by the expectations which bind her to patriarchal conceptions of womanhood, even forgetting her desire to escape such bindings.

This concept of memory, space, and selfhood is prevalent in scenes with her mother, where her lost Russian roots are connected to her lack of identity within a chain of Mrs. Caldwell's. For example, when Mrs. Caldwell asks her mother to sell her childhood home, her mother's thoughts interrupt the narration, undoubtedly connecting space, identity, and memory: “any place is only a place, four walls, a door, a window—it's the accumulated living, the weight of memories, that make it magic, that make it *yours*” (268). Memory forms a space into a living, and in order to exist in a space, one must acknowledge the past. Indeed, this is the elusive connection that must be made between the novel's layout and titular subject, the forty rooms in which the narrator lives, and the emerging theme of lost memory and tradition. The narrator's current home has neither the weight of memories, nor does it even hint at her past as anything other than Mrs. Caldwell. In fact, the mother's thoughts go further to state:

Your past is not past, and the love you have felt all your life is bright within, and you never age, and you never, ever forget. But she left, and she has forgotten. . . No one can have a future without a past. She is only forty-three, but she has misplaced her childhood and now she looks so old. (268)

In the narrator's dedication to conforming to societal pressures, there are no meaningful memories or experiences that ever make the space hers to inhabit fully. As a result of forgetting her origins, the narrator also does not have the possibility of ever reconciling her fractured selves, nor will she be able to break out of the generational chain of Mrs. Caldwell.

It is not until a conversation with her housekeeper that Mrs. Caldwell truly realizes how wide the chasm between her past (Scythian in spirit, poetic, subversive) and present (passive, materialistic, conforming) selves is. Unsurprisingly, this scene of realization revolves around a mirror, and more importantly, the evaluation of herself as a materialistic woman far removed from a literary life. After having her husband's inherited furniture moved into their home, Mrs. Caldwell specifically admires an antique Venetian mirror, eventually glimpsing her housekeeper, Mrs. Simmons, in the reflection. Unlike the narrator, Mrs. Simmons glances at the opulent furniture with distaste, bluntly telling the narrator that, "the more things you have . . . the faster your time runs through your fingers. In case you were ever wondering why that was. And then you have no time left to think about things that are distant and hard. Like God. Or death. Or poetry" (279). At its core, this simple statement about the limited time needed to maintain the unnecessary parts of life is a direct rebuke of how the narrator has filled the void of her identity with material beauty. Furthermore, the hard path of subverting expectations that Mrs. Caldwell was so dedicated to following has instead been replaced by the daily tasks of supervising plumbers and painters, washing laundry, and waiting for her family to return home from school or work each day. Instead of struggling for her agency and

identity, the narrator has taken the comfortable path, the one already chosen for her just as it was chosen for the countless women before and after her.

The narrator's forgotten dedication to avoiding a domestic life is an indication of a much larger forgotten self and youth. While forgetting small things from childhood is nothing extraordinary, the fact that this forty-eight-year-old Mrs. Caldwell has forgotten something so fundamental to her—her motivating mantra for years, even the cause of some of her biggest regrets—proves that there is a relationship between memory and identity, especially in the case of living with a fractured sense of self. Mrs. Simmons even states, “every day I kept expecting you to do something different. Just waiting for you to wake up one day and say: Now. Today. But you didn't, and you haven't, and you won't. . . I fear it's you who forgot yourself” (280). Indeed, the narrator has chosen conformity over subversion, leaving nothing of interest, nothing to distinguish her from any other stay-at-home mother. Before she fully assumed the role of Mrs. Caldwell, the narrator lived in opposition to norms, inspired by the different futures she could make for herself. Now, looking at herself in the mirror, she acknowledges, “she had seen herself, seen herself with an absolute, pitiless clarity, and had found herself lacking, and had shrunk back from the fullness of her knowledge” (281). With a simple clarity, the criticism prevalent in the previous mirror woman's perspective is finally internalized by the narrator. For the first time since her promise to give up poetry in exchange for her son's life, she truly begins to attempt a rediscovery of her identity. Important here is the use of mirrors, even if not inhabited by other selves. Instead, Mrs. Caldwell looks at her reflection as it is, is horrified at how her longing for art has shifted to a longing for material wealth, and has a realizing moment of the distance between herself and the

person she hoped to become. In that moment, she seems to ask herself how this insipid caricature of her dreams and desires could be anything but a shining example of following the expected path, of losing oneself to expectations, and becoming a nameless, faceless woman in an eternal line of women just like her.

This idea of eternal motherhood is repeated multiple times throughout the novel, and the narrator's connection of motherhood to feelings of solitude, loss, and isolation is shown by a poem that she writes during college and recites to Adam years later.

Originally written for the narrator's Cycle of Solitude, this poem states:

*And I am, once more, my own grandmother,
I am knitting an eternal scarf,
And my life is pasted in an album
In a row of brown old-fashioned photos.
As I knit the scarf, for my granddaughter,
In the resonance of solemn hours— (92, 211)*

Ironically, this is one of the only poems the narrator remembers after assimilating into the role of Mrs. Caldwell; when Adam visits thirteen years after their separation and rekindles her love for him, she suddenly remembers this poem while wishing they would kiss. Here, the poem serves as a reminder not only of the expected role of women, but also the inevitability of taking up the position of grandmother-mother-daughter. From the earlier scene of her burning her poetry, we know that the poem also states:

*You can escape this maze if you grow old in it first.
The windows here are transparent walls,
Your fingers stick with the blood of childhood games,
And Ariadne's thread is a ball of chewed gum . . . (95)*

Once again, motherhood is presented as inescapable, and in this case, something that you only escape in death. Yet the very institution of motherhood sustains itself; just as the grandmother exists the labyrinth, so does the granddaughter enter it. Drawing upon

Adrienne Rich's definition of the institution of motherhood being the male-dominated control over a woman's potential reproductive power and relationship with her children, the fact that the narrator's own daughters are named after Paul's many grandmothers makes this cycle even more undeniable (13). In fact, the only women given names in her family are her three daughters, Emma, Celia, and Margaret, who share their names with their predecessors. The narrator herself is never named past "Mrs. Caldwell," and instead bears the identity of "wife or mother of." Yet, she is a part of a longstanding tradition, a cycle of women joining the Caldwell line, only to meet a newer version of themselves years later.

For all the narrator's fear of becoming another bride in a long legacy, she still has the very same experience of catching her son with his girlfriend that her mother-in-law had during their first meeting in the Caldwell family guest room. After planning a late-night meeting with her fiancé, "the original Mrs. Caldwell" becomes aware of the narrator's plans when helping her try on an heirloom wedding gown, subsequently discovering her barely-there lingerie (272). Here, the narrator acknowledges her own realization of cyclical time, stating that "Emma Caldwell must have known it, just as this lovely girl will know it in her own Mrs. Caldwell moment two or three decades from now" (273). The moment described is Mrs. Caldwell's realization that her life is anything but original or unique; she has lived the same life of the many Mrs. Caldwells before her, to the point that she has the same pearl necklace and even experience as her mother-in-law. Compared to the mirrored version of herself, the wild-eyed girl who retained her Russian identity, there is nothing to set the narrator apart from generations of women in

the same place as her, causing her to be simultaneously horrified and embarrassed by her inability to escape the eternal chain of Mrs. Caldwell's.

At its root, the shift in the narrator's desires is due to her full assimilation into the role of an American housewife; no longer is her identity dependent on the traditional role of a Russian poet. Consequently, she has likewise consciously separated her Russian and American selves, forgetting Russian traditions, never speaking or writing in Russian, and even refusing to teach her children these things. In this sense, it is as though she has exiled this part of herself, and indeed, her experience seems to mirror what Maria Rubins describes as "inevitably an existential choice" between language, identity, and cultural memories within émigré spaces (Rubins 3-4). Her sense of self, and thus, much of her sense of fractured self, is deeply tied to her pursuit of Russian poetics, yet her decision to fully conform to American expectations rejects the previous acknowledgement of her differing ideologies. In this way, her feelings of otherness and alienation, both from herself and her environment, are replaced with a forgetfulness of what differentiated her from those around her. However, in this scene of acknowledgement, Mrs. Caldwell seems to internalize the perspective of the Scythian mirror woman, who repeatedly calls to mind the narrator's Russianness, even if it is in opposition to her assimilation of American ideals.

The final reconciliation between the narrator's spiritual and material selves only occurs in the narrator's final moments, as she sits to watch a film with a screenplay written by her childhood friend and foil, Olga. Throughout the novel, Olga is mentioned in opposition to the narrator's life: where the narrator does not kiss her childhood crush, Olga does; where the narrator does not travel or see the world, Olga does; and where the

narrator does not experience the freedom of existing without any domestic responsibilities, Olga does. For everything that the narrator sets out to achieve, Olga has already done it, and done it better. Olga exists as everything that Mrs. Caldwell is not, but wishes to be. Despite her anger at Olga's accomplishments, the narrator still chooses to watch the film, which soon proves to be an eerie recreation of her own childhood. At first, it seems as though Olga has based her characters off of the narrator, but it is soon discovered that Olga never actually existed. There are hints of this throughout the novel, such as her parents' confusion when she mentions her friend, or her family members insisting that she only had imaginary friends growing up. By the end of the novel, Olga's existence is not left ambiguous, but is instead explicitly stated to be imagined; as shown through Mrs. Caldwell "tiring of the imaginary conversation" with a "nonexistent receiver" (323). In this manner, Olga comes to represent the narrator's possible futures, a form of herself that actually followed through on her desires to kiss the neighboring boy or to submit poetry or publication. This moment of realization also occurs in the final moments of Mrs. Caldwell's life, and it is as she slumps over that the narrator regains both her identity and her agency in the narrative.

Now equipped with the use of the personal "I," the narrator views the world with a newfound attention to detail. Here, she states that "I see things so surely, down to the smallest of details," along with the fact that "invisible things strain to burst into light" (324). Through the death explained by her poem, the narrator has escaped the nameless, faceless existence of Mrs. Caldwell. In fact, the narrator exclaims:

I am overtaken by a marvelous sense of an unexpected, unhoped-for liberation. I am free, I am somehow—finally! —free of this woman who is not me, who has never been me—free of the complacent, materialistic,

dim oppression of her timid spirit . . . For now, it is enough to know I am free. I am ready to go and live fully at last. (324-5)

It seems as though the narrator has finally escaped the mirror that she has been trapped in for decades. Having watched and critiqued Mrs. Caldwell from behind the glass, she now is able to move freely from the body left behind, and acts as the reconciliation between identity, autonomy, and freedom. For so much of the novel, the narrator's desire to become a poet is at odds with her constant concessions to those around her: having a child to fulfil her father's desire for a legacy, spending endless hours on the treadmill to gain her husband's approval, staying at home to attend to her children's needs. In every case, she is too exhausted or powerless to write anything, and as a result, has stopped seeing the potential artistry in the world around her. Yet, in this final splitting of the self and the spirit, in this case literally, the freedom to once again act upon her desires and assume agency in her own life makes death not something horrific or sad, but instead euphoric. With the assertion that "I do not remember the last time I felt so alive," the narrator steps over the threshold of the room and into the hallway, and with her joyous agitation, resolves to finally leave the house, travel the world, and capture all of her newfound joy in the poetry that she was always hoping to write (325).

As the narrator stands in the entrance hall, she examines her house and life. When she first moved into the house, she was enchanted by its enormity and possibility, and now understands that it is a much smaller world than one would expect. Yet, what is interesting about this final chapter of the novel is the ways in which the narrator's spiritual form allow her to physically envision the many paralleled and fractured versions of herself reflected in the polished marble floors. Here, the different versions of herself each reflect the paths both followed and not followed throughout her life, passing through

what she describes as “mirror dimensions” before they finish some talk or errand in the house (329). She is at once nameless and lost within the many Mrs. Caldwelles and freed from any of the material existences that her doubles simultaneous act out. Here the narrator examines the several Mrs. Caldwelles, and for the dozens of unhappy and miserable versions there is only a single happy version, content with her maternal life, seemingly whole and satisfied with her opportunities. While the discovery of this parallel self makes the narrator ashamed of her own wasted life, it still brings comfort to her, and seeing the lives of those who either acted upon her denied desires, or perhaps even more significantly, denied her biggest desire, gives the narrator the final closure of wholeness and unity that she has searched for in most of the novel.

At its core, *Forty Rooms* deals with the idea of identity and desire as possible through one’s condition. For the female narrator, this is examined through the conflict of identity as constructed externally, that is the ever-present expectations of womanhood imposed upon a woman, and internally, by the desires and interests formed by a woman independently, and perhaps especially, against external pressures. The confrontation with the impossibility of escaping pressures of femininity, such as marriage, motherhood, or domestic duties, leads to a sense of split self. Here, the irreconcilable chasm between the internal and external allows for the use of mirrored or fractured selves to metaphorically enact the protagonist’s desires independently from reality. As a portal to introspection and identity, mirrors and mirrored surfaces act as opportunities to explore the possibilities of the female condition, with the fracturing of selfhood becoming visible and material in its observation of the world outside of the mirror. For the narrator of *Forty Rooms*, the use of mirrors and fragmented selves serves as a way to explore that which has been left

impossible to the narrator. Here, she is able to be a poet, a happy mother, or even just free from the claustrophobia of never transgressing the boundaries imposed upon her. As her selfhood diminishes through her motherhood and domestic labor, her fractures become infinite and seep into her house, present just beneath the polished and reflective floors or the mirror hanging in her closet.

It is only through death, or rather, the separation of the spiritual and material self, that the narrator of Grushin's *Forty Rooms* considers herself able to see clearly and compose poetry once more. Often at odds in the narrator's consciousness are her two identities: that of a wealthy housewife and mother of six, and that of a poet desperate to be retain a sense of identity and self through her creations. From the beginning of the novel, the narrator sees the world through the lens of creation, an ability that she loses during her marriage, yet regains after her passing. This lens of creation is the perspective of her poetic self, whom she exiles from her consciousness through the course of her marriage and journey into motherhood. Consequently, the narrator is ultimately unable to reconcile her life at age fifty-seven to that of her teenage and college years. Though she had declared that she would live to subvert the expectations imposed upon her in order to retain her poetic abilities, the narrator never had any agency or time to publish any poetry. For all her desire to become a great poet, to create meaningful works of literature, Grushin's narrator ultimately resigns herself to an unremarkable and unfulfilling domestic life, and it is the end of her physical life that allows the fractured parts of herself to become whole and autonomous once more, freeing her from the confinement of her existence defined by external expectations.

CONCLUSION

The use of fantasy as a narrative tool remains one of the ways in which female writers explore topics of identity, womanhood, and reality. For writers of the female fantastic, an evaluation of the circumstances that bind women to their homes or roles as mothers necessitates movement outside of the social structure that creates their heroine's identity. This movement is articulated as a departure from reality itself, especially as the opportunity for traveling outside of one's circumstances is limited for many. As examined by several critics of the fantastic, such as Tzvetan Todorov, J.R.R. Tolkien, Brian Attebery, and Rosemary Jackson, the return from a journey into the fantastic is also an act of rediscovering one's homeland (Sandner). In this case, the fantastic journey is also one of interpretation, evaluation, and discovery. For the heroine who discovers alternative possibilities, yet cannot act upon them, this evaluative action culminates in a sense of alienation. This alienation is twofold: first, a woman's discovery of the constraints leveled against her causes a sense of alienation from the social structure imprisoning her, and second, the desire and inability to move across those boundaries causes a sense of self-alienation wherein her body remains inert while her spirit explores different potential futures. Similar to a gothic sense of awareness, this rediscovery of the world, in addition to the newfound perspectives for interpreting it, only inhibits one's capacity to unite the conflicting layers of otherness that mark a heroine's consciousness.

For Grushin's narrator in *Forty Rooms*, this twofold alienation is expressed physically, through both dreamscape conversations, underlying her fantastic journey, and

the manifestation of duplicated selves acting independently of her body, underlying her split consciousness. It is through her interaction with both of these that she is able to contextualize the world around her and examine her own desires against what is expected of her. As she becomes disillusioned with the world's potential, her sense of self turns inward, splitting and bending to external ideas of her womanhood. In fact, much of the narrator's fractured selfhood, speechlessness, and sense of confinement is due exactly to this dichotomy of internal and external definitions of her identity. Externally, she is expected to marry, have children, and selflessly support her family. Internally, she wants to live an autonomous life as a poet, where she can travel and experience the things that a life contained to the domestic sphere would make impossible. Any escape from this conflict is temporary, and even detrimental, to the reconciliation of these opposing pressures. While conversations in her dreams allow her to verbalize her struggles, waking up emphasizes the inability to change her circumstances, and while watching fictional versions of herself act with freedom and independence allows her to escape her imprisonment, they only serve to show the distance between her and her desires.

As this distance elongates, the protagonist becomes Mrs. Caldwell, growing into everything that she thought she would avoid. She becomes a wife, a mother, and a being contained within a series of rooms that become more and more suffocating as she is unable to escape them. Her sense of agency shifts from the personal "I" to the omniscient "she," and her name becomes one given to her by her husband. Her identity shrinks within the small life of stunted creativity and overwhelming impossibility. As the world around her changes, it is clear that she moves through life passively, without any sense of uniqueness or difference between her and the countless women before her. Even as the

fantastic surrounds her, for instance a mirror woman who watches her from behind the glass, she loses her ability to see anything past the surface of reality and instead sinks into an almost dissociative state. However, regardless of her not noticing or dismissing the fantastic, these elements persist throughout the novel. These fantasy elements serve as portals to possibility: the narrator *could* be the happy Mrs. Caldwell she sees reflected in her marble hallway, *could* be the critical and independent woman in the mirror, *could* be the fictional Olga who has everything she desires. Yet, the fact that these versions of her are only possible in parallel dimensions or pure imagination pushes her limitations to the surface of her being. In fact, she *becomes* the limitations that are imposed upon her, especially as she denies her artistic self and assumes the path that was chosen for her.

The fantastical exploration of fragmentation, imprisonment, and alienation within *Forty Rooms* emphasizes the powerlessness of one's determinate position in society. The institutions that have bound women to their expected positions are nearly inevitable when the escape from them requires more than simple determination. Recognition of the injustices faced is not enough to break the cyclical repression of women, and the desire to avoid one's fate must also consider the loneliness and isolation that the path of subversion brings. For Grushin's narrator, ending this path of loneliness is what ultimately encourages her to begin a relationship with Paul Caldwell, and it is the realization that she can create something tangible through a family that encourages her to marry him. As Mrs. Caldwell, the need to retain her connection with her ailing father is what determines her fate as a mother, and it is the desperation to save her marriage that continues her growing family. The fact that her power comes not in her own agency, but instead in the loss of it, brings to focus the cultural condition of womanhood; as far as the

narrator is concerned, the only way to form a connection to those around her is by giving pieces of herself away in turn.

The final piece that she keeps to herself, her poetic self, is ultimately lost beneath the full assumption of identity as Mrs. Caldwell, and it is not until her death that she is freed from the constraints of this identity. Only after her death and subsequent exploration of the world as a spirit does the narrator have the ability to fulfill any of the possibilities that she saw in her parallel selves. In this final scene of the novel, which takes place exclusively within the fantastic, the narrator regains the use of the first-person, taking control and agency over the narration once more. Once she is freed from the expectations and culture that attempt to define her identity externally, she is likewise free to explore the world and live the poetic life that was denied to her. In this final space of the novel, the shift to a purely fantastical world not only emphasizes the impossibility of a reality constructed by patriarchal and repressive ideologies, but also highlights the possibilities and potential that can be explored in its absence.

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