



JOANNE GREENBERG'S *I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN*: FROM LIFE TO PAGE TO SCREEN AND STAGE

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Abstract

First published in 1964 and republished repeatedly afterwards, Joanne Greenberg's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* is a beautiful exercise in vulnerability, both harrowing and hopeful. Forty years after the initial publication of the popular madness narrative, the present paper seeks to understand what motivated the writing of such a confessional book, how the book was translated into a 1977 movie and a 2004 play, and whether, in these seemingly progressive times, writing critically about those who write empathically about madness (particularly from a personal, albeit semi-fictionalized standpoint) still has relevance.

Keywords: *madness narrative; autobiographical fiction; adaptation; creativity; schizophrenia.*

INTRODUCTION

The present paper is part of a wider study,¹ essentially a celebration of seven remarkable American women who have been courageous enough to channel their experience with mental disturbance into at least one literary product. The

¹ Viusenco, Anca-Luisa, "The Madwoman: From Life to Page to Screen (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emily Holmes Coleman, Zelda Fitzgerald, Mary Jane Ward, Shirley Jackson, Sylvia Plath, and Joanne Greenberg)." PhD thesis. Iași, 2013.

texts chosen for analysis within this study, as well as the corresponding filmic adaptations (where available), have been placed within the context of the ever-shifting meaning of the concepts of *madness*, *femininity* and *identity*, the popularity of the inherently problematic *madness narrative* (a text at the border between pathography, scriptotherapy and activism), and two vivid controversies: *the madwoman in the attic* (feminist) controversy and *the mad genius* controversy.

For each of the seven authors selected, the analysis focuses on the complete path followed by the experience of madness (from the biographical events, to the manner in which they were filtered through the writer's imagination onto the page, to the way in which the literary text was interpreted by the screenwriter and the director, to the response of the readers and the viewers, to the impact upon the author herself), in an effort to contribute to the understanding of the cultural significance of female mental instability and the delicate relationship between madness and creativity, without disregarding, on one hand, the aesthetic value of the works themselves and, on the other, the all-too-human reality of madness² as personal trauma.

MADNESS AS PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Hardly ever can one find a person who has dealt with mental illness having a firmer position on the incompatibility between madness and creativity than the wonderfully witty Joanne Greenberg, the only one of the writers selected for the wider study mentioned above who is still alive.

Aged 92, she published her 21st book, *On the Run*, a memoir of the 13 years she spent as a volunteer Fire/Rescue EMT in the Colorado Rockies, in 2023. 2024, however, marked the 60th anniversary of her best-selling work, the highly successful semi-autobiographical novel *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, her second book, whose most recent edition was printed in 2022, by Penguin Classics, with a foreword by Esmé Weijun Wang, the New York Times bestselling author of *The Collected Schizophrenias* (2019). Published under the pen name Hannah Green upon the request of the author's mother, who feared the intrusive

² The terms "madness" and "mad" have no pejorative connotations in the present study, being used in the manner in which the authors of *madness narratives* themselves have been using them, in an attempt to reclaim what has often been dissected, medicalized or negated.

reactions to such a self-revelatory text,³ *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* is an account of a teenage girl's three-year struggle with schizophrenia and of her relationship with a brilliant therapist. In relation to the novel, Greenberg stated that she wrote it as a reaction against the very idea of madness as a spiritual experience favoring creative expression, one that was quite popular at the time.

Joanne herself was diagnosed with schizophrenia, "madness in its pure form" (Nettle 19), at the age of thirteen (she had been experiencing signs of mental distress for years), and, according to her own statements, decided to fictionalize her struggle with it (the period spent at Chestnut Lodge Hospital in Rockville, Maryland, during which she was the patient of the renowned Dr. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, in particular), so as to expose madness for what it truly is: a grueling, albeit possible to overcome, experience, but also to find closure, to distance herself from the tormented years of her adolescence.

Frieda, as most people, including her patients, called Dr. Fromm-Reichmann, the "physically diminutive and personally intense therapist" (Furst 212), played a decisive role in Joanne's life (hence the dedication of the novel: "To my mothers"). A German-born practitioner (one of the very few women in her field at the time), who had worked with brain-injured soldiers during WWI and had later fled Nazi Germany, later fictionalized as Dr. Clara Fried (evocative of the German "Friede," meaning "peace"), Deborah's gifted doctor in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, Frieda believed in the Freudian idea of childhood trauma as a source for mental distress later on in life, as well as in the intrinsic curability of mental illness, provided that sufficient time and effort be invested, and that, throughout the treatment, the therapist suspended all feelings other than empathy so as to be able to deal with the patient's inevitable relapses without being discouraged. What she did not believe in, however, was the idea of electroshocks or psychiatric drugs as adequate therapeutic responses to mental disorders.

After the three years (1948-1951) spent at Chestnut Lodge, notably, a private institution, a former hotel built in a wooded area, Joanne remained an outpatient until 1955, and a collaborative book on Joanne's treatment was to be

³ It was only four years later that Greenberg acknowledged authorship, upon discovering that there was another writer with the same name, and decades later that she openly discussed the book and its background.

written, but Dr. Fromm-Reichmann died prematurely, and Joanne ultimately published *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* on her own, albeit under a pseudonym. Over the years in which they worked together, the therapist, through patience and intuitiveness, managed to gain Joanne's complete trust, encouraged her to express herself through writing, and seemingly cured her.

It was not an isolated case: despite the distrust of her colleagues regarding the ability to reach severely psychotic individuals (which did by no means decrease the amount of respect she was afforded), as well as prevailing medical views of the schizophrenic (for schizophrenia was Dr. Fromm-Reichmann's main area of interest) as the victim of a largely hereditary disease of the structurally or chemically anomalous brain, therefore dependent on medication, Frieda reported great success employing "dynamic psychotherapy" (Fromm-Reichmann 404) alone when working with her schizophrenic patients. Regular psychoanalysis, Michel Foucault points out, "doubled the absolute observation of the watcher with the endless monologue of the person watched—thus preserving the old asylum structure of non-reciprocal observation but balancing it, in a non-symmetrical reciprocity, by the new structure of languages without response" (qtd. in Feder 32). The type of psychoanalysis that Dr. Fromm-Reichmann practiced, however, regarded the doctor and the patient as partners in both a therapeutic exchange and the struggle with mental illness, as a whole.

After the autobiographical nature of *Rose Garden*, as the title of the novel is often poetically abbreviated, along with the identity of the person behind the celebrated Dr. Fried, were revealed, Joanne Greenberg and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann became the epitome of the successful patient-therapist relationship, as well as the center of a heated debate on schizophrenia (and mental illness at large), its curability and its proper treatment.

However, since, despite the obvious differences in tone and intended audience, there is significant overlapping between Joanne's novel and Frieda Fromm-Reichmann's notes on her methods and the progress of her patients, there have been voices doubting the idea of *Rose Garden* being a novel informed by autobiographical experience, particularly since Joanne Greenberg is a perfectly functioning adult, with a happy marriage and a rewarding career, and schizophrenia is classified as one of most socially-impairing mental disturbances, largely regarded as a lifelong affliction. The word *schizophrenia* has Greek roots, referring to a split or shattered mind, and the symptoms commonly

associated with it include psychotic episodes during which the sufferer has trouble distinguishing between real and imagined experiences (which may result in violence inflicted onto self or onto others, although, statistically, individuals suffering from schizophrenia tend to become victims, rather than perpetrators of violent acts), as well as disorganized speech and behaviors, resulting in social dysfunction, withdrawal, and a loss of motivation, concentration, and emotional reaction.

Apart from her prolific writing career, Greenberg was a professor of cultural anthropology and fiction writing, which, coupled with the fact that at the time of her diagnosis, *schizophrenia* was an umbrella term covering a variety of mental afflictions, including mood disorders (it still is divided by specialists into several subtypes, some overlapping mood disorders, with various degrees of debilitation), has also led to the questioning of the true nature of her condition, which Joanne herself is dismissive of. As a non-specialist, as much as I do believe in extensive prior research into mental disturbances before embarking on such a study as the one I have conducted, I am not interested in diagnosing the authors my study focuses on, whom I often refer to using their first name, for I feel that there is an unavoidable sense of intimacy when being invited, through autobiographical writing, into a troubled existence. Applying such labels (or denying the validity of labels applied by others) is an act which, as helpful as it may be to a specialist and, ultimately, to the sufferers themselves, in my view largely still equates the person with the disease and invalidates their perception of their own experiences.

Returning to the doubts that Greenberg's novel elicited, Dale Peterson, the editor of *A Mad People's History of Madness* (1982), suggests, for instance, that Joanne merely used her craft to give the cases that Dr. Fromm-Reichmann described a form that her readers would resonate with, and that "*Rose Garden* was simply a well-wrought piece of fiction, based upon historical research, written by a professional novelist." (284). Does this make *Rose Garden* a text with an agenda? Maybe, but then again who writes a *madness narrative* without hoping it would bring about change?

Joanne Greenberg is, indeed, both a writer and an advocate, as much as she may reject the idea herself: she has always spoken warmly of the appreciative reactions *Rose Garden* has received from readers over the years, yet regrets, after having lived a full life and written extensively, being associated exclusively with

her second novel and a mental condition she seemingly overcame in her youth. She has written empathically on various forms of disability and marginality and, with respect to mental instability, has questioned both the romanticization of madness and its association with creativity, on the one hand, and the equation of the mind and the brain within the medicalization of madness, on the other – significantly enough, in the age in which the youth were losing themselves in psychedelic drug-induced visions, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1964) was promoting the escape from the world of schizophrenia-induced hallucinations through psychotherapy and creative expression.

In 2008, Greenberg was interviewed for *Take These Broken Wings*, a 75-minute documentary on the possibility of recovery from schizophrenia without medication, produced and directed by former psychotherapist Daniel Mackler. In the interview, in the frank, but poetic manner that characterizes her,⁴ she states that, at the time when she developed her condition, she saw it as a defense mechanism against life itself. This immersion into what appears to be inner chaos as an escape from what should be an ordered outer reality does seem paradoxical. In fact, the fantasy world is, for the schizophrenic, the coherent one, at least initially.

In Greenberg's view, madness isolates the individual from the world, making communication between the two if not impossible, then at least quite challenging. She strongly believes that it is through writing and other creative endeavors that the spirit can manage to escape the confines of madness, but she insists that being able to express oneself creatively while being mentally unstable requires a great struggle with the disease itself, a struggle that most artists lose, and cites her own experience as example—after having begun writing at the age of twelve, by the age of fifteen she found it impossible to continue because of the overpowering illness.

What Joanne sees as particularly dangerous and feels warnings should be issued against is the fact that, since Antiquity, people have been conditioned into regarding madness and creativity as an inseparable duo:

Psychotherapists have to be very, very careful to separate these things so that people don't mess this up. This is one of the bad things that the Greeks have

⁴ Her speech seems to have borrowed from that of the Navajo whom her anthropological interest in Native American cultures prompted her to live with for a period of time.

done to us, talking about the muse that sort of drops on you and can go away at any time as though you have no action in the thing ... it's very damaging both to creative people and to mentally ill people. My sister, for example, was afraid of being creative because she thought she'd have to go nuts. This is not good. (qtd. in Sherman 86)

What such a view manages to do, in other words, is to portray creative expression as a premise for madness and to generate a biased attitude toward the former. On the other hand, people who are mad and who are still able to be creative often feel that, since their madness and their creativity are so inextricably linked, once they recover their sanity, they will lose the ability to write or paint or sing, therefore they choose creativity over mental stability and, as paradoxical as it may sound, cling to their own madness.

Joanne Greenberg dedicated her most personal work to proving that, in fact, creativity is “the strength you have to beat the mental illness” (qtd. in Sherman 86), rather than the source of it. She represents, as she claims, living proof that, along with empathy, writing, when one manages to hold onto it, despite the illness, can, indeed, heal.

I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN: FROM LIFE TO PAGE

In her essay “Psychotherapy of Schizophrenia,” Dr. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann describes a patient who had been “living for eleven years in an imaginary kingdom which she populated by people of her own making and by the spiritual representations of others whom she actually knew [all sharing] a language, literature, and religion of her own creation” (qtd. in Peterson 284). Deborah Blau, the protagonist of *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, fits the description perfectly.

Traumatized by an early childhood operation undergone to remove a tumor on her urethra, which made her feel “broken into like a looted room” (Greenberg 40), persecuted by her peers due to her Jewish ethnicity, unable to cope with the pressure to succeed exercised upon her by a domineering grandfather embittered by the rejection of his adoptive country, in a problematic relationships with her parents who, despite their love, are blind to her suffering, and usurped following the birth of her younger sister, young Deborah fabricated a vengeful refuge from “the injustice of having been born as herself” (Greenberg

58). The kingdom of Yr, “simple long sweeps of land where the eye was soothed by the depth of space” (Greenberg 52), inhabited by gods who were “secret, princely sharers of her loneliness” (Greenberg 52), was a place born from the imagination of a gifted, yet troubled child, a place she could access each time Earth proved unbearable, which became, over the years, more and more frequently.

At sixteen, Deborah finds herself trapped between two conflicting universes. Unable to detach herself completely from the world of deceit and humiliation that is Earth, despite Yr’s constant urging to do so and despite what she perceives as “the uncrossable expanse between herself and the species called ‘human being’” (Greenberg 102), the mentally-deteriorating Deborah, who, like other sufferers of schizophrenia, feels that her thoughts are audible, is in constant danger of revealing the existence of Yr to outsiders. Words from Yri, the language “for saying what is to be said” (Greenberg 53) start to permeate English, the language “for getting disappointed by and getting hated in” (Greenberg 53), and Deborah risks destroying her refuge, along with herself, in the process.

As a result, in order to keep “the world of Yr from blowing its secret seeds to ground on Earth, where they would spring up wide open to flowering lunacy for all the world to see and recoil from in horror” (Greenberg 52), the former gods of solace become gods of punishment, and, when self-mutilation becomes insufficient, Deborah attempts suicide. It is the image of their daughter on the bathroom floor collecting the blood from her slashed wrists into a cup that finally convinces the Blaus that what Deborah is experiencing is far more than the eccentricities of adolescence, and that they need to put a stop to their long-term denial (regarding her symptoms and their share of blame in her mental disturbance) and seek professional help.

Their decision to commit Deborah is, despite Jacob and Esther’s initial apprehension, the best thing that has ever happened to her. On the one hand, she ends up on the Disturbed Ward, a place, where, far from all social conventions (after all, one cannot be on the brink of adulthood and be allowed to preserve the imaginary friends of childhood), Deborah is free to be as mad as she needs to, as mad as the disbelief of her family, teachers and doctors in the veracity of her pain had never allowed her to be. On the other hand, she becomes the patient of Dr. Clara Fried, a warm, tactful physician, who accepts from the very beginning that

Deborah's illness is neither a fabrication, nor the triumph of the *id* over the individual "freed of social control, stripped of logical and moral imperatives, deprived of conscious directives" (psychoanalyst Marguerite Sechehaye, qtd. in Sass 7), as schizophrenia is often viewed, but a real condition which requires the close cooperation between patient and therapist, thus allowing the patient agency in their own recovery.

Like Dr. Fromm-Reichmann, who stresses the importance of the therapist being "a bridge to a better reality, the experience of which had previously been denied to the patient" (qtd. in Peterson 285), Dr. Fried conceives her role as one of guide or mediator, and the antithesis between her and Deborah's parents is more than obvious. Aware of the fact that people previously denied a voice are eager to communicate, if communication is properly initiated and sustained, she is able to connect with Deborah, while neither they, nor the pragmatic psychiatrist that temporarily replaces Dr. Fried while she is away on holiday, are not, and it has to do with both her human qualities and her professional skills.

Dr. Fried never imposes intimacy (the isolated occasion on which she touches Deborah is experienced by the latter as a burning of her flesh), for she comprehends the tearing confusion within the schizophrenic: as Dr. Fromm-Reichmann points out, schizophrenics' "fear of closeness is tied up with the discovery of their secret hostility or violence against persons for whom they feel also attachment and dependence" (409). After all, as behavioral and social scientists Daniel Nettle highlighted, "the emotional coldness of the schizophrenic may not mean lack of emotionality, but rather the experience of inappropriate emotions, or conflicting emotions at the same time" (23). As caring as she is, Dr. Fried is never forgetful of the boundaries between therapist and patient, for they are "people living in different worlds and on different levels of personal development with different means of expressing and of orienting themselves" (Fromm-Reichmann, qtd. in Peterson 215).

The therapist makes use of Deborah's intelligence to empower her to gradually dismantle the edifice of misperceptions about herself and about the world that Yr had been built on, and she encourages her patient to communicate through her ultimate passion: drawing. Like Joanne Greenberg's doctor, who understood that "the great perceptive sensitivity" (Fromm-Reichmann 411) her

patients had been endowed with was both their burden and their blessing, Deborah's therapist insists that she always be appreciative of her artistic gift.

What Dr. Fried understands, from the very beginning in fact, is that Deborah will not renounce Yr overnight and that convincing her to do so will require offering her something that she might regard as a viable alternative for a world that had only recently lost its function as sanctuary and that was, hence, still alluring. Dr. Fromm-Reichmann rejected the idea that "recovering patients should learn to detest and eject their psychotic symptomatology, like a foreign body, from their memory" (406). As a result, what Dr. Fried offers Deborah in exchange for Yr is the chance to see the real world as it truly is, not as a perfect rose garden,⁵ but as a place where one both suffers and is happy, and, above everything, she offers Deborah a choice, the choice between the tormented being she is and the young woman she may become.

After one more suicide attempt and several episodes of self-mutilation through burning, Deborah chooses to face "the awful chaos-ocean of the world that made the drowning ones go back to it, still pale and choking, for another try and another and another" (Greenberg 161), rather than withdraw from it, as she had been doing for a very long time. The urge to inflict harm onto themselves that certain mentally unstable individuals feel is explained by psychotherapist Margaret Fagan as follows:

From a position of a fortress-like omnipotence, the psychotic mind starts to "dish-out" hatred and sadistic cruelty. These projections of a hatred of weakness can be forced onto other people, and into other parts of the self, including the body. The net-effect is to leave the non-psychotic part of the mind weaker and intimidated by powerful destructive forces. This prevents the subject, or damaged self, from obtaining psychic nourishment and help. (135)

In Deborah, however, the self-mutilation is, rather, an attempt at confirming her own corporeality and exiting the state of emotional numbness in which she had been living for a long time. Over the course of three years, she switches from the

⁵ Interestingly, the phrase that Dr. Fromm-Reichmann seemingly originally uttered and which gave the novel its title has already become a cliché, particularly after the 1967 song with the same title by American singer-songwriter Joe South was converted by singer Lynn Anderson into an international hit in 1970.

near-catatonic state in which she enters upon closing down her physical senses as a coping strategy, to the inner turmoil of finding herself in the abyss between her sanctuary-turned-prison and the outside world, and what keeps her on the right path toward recovery, apart from her own will power, is Dr. Fried's ability to establish a balance between her hostility and her dependence, as well as the therapist's undaunted faith in Deborah's ability to overcome the illness by improving her deeply negative self-image.

Deborah had been regarding herself as "plague-pouring" (Greenberg 190), therefore toxic to the women in her life, particularly her sister, whom she wrongly remembers having intended to murder as an infant. With the help of her doctor, the girl reaches the truth about her relationship with her family and the history they share, for "patients have to learn to integrate the early loss and to understand their own part in their interpersonal difficulties with the significant people of their childhood" (Fromm-Reichmann 414).

What *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* ultimately teaches is that, if one is to overcome mental distress, communication, either with a sympathetic human being or through artistic means, is vital. Unlike her therapist, who strives for accuracy and essence in her notes, the fiction writer does not need to "fight off a temptation to dramatize" (Fromm-Reichmann 411), and *Rose Garden* becomes the exquisitely-worded story of two remarkable women, Joanne's gift of gratitude to her doctor and her gift of hope to all those struggling with a mental affliction.

I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN: FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

The 1977 homonymous adaptation of *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, directed by Anthony Page, with a screenplay by Gavin Lambert and Lewis John Carlino, was nominated for Best Motion Picture–Drama at the Golden Globes, Best Adapted Screenplay at the Oscars, and Best Drama Adapted from Another Medium at the Writer's Guild Awards. The then-unknown 23-year-old Kathleen Quinlan also received a Golden Globe nomination for her role as Deborah, and was subsequently set on a path to stardom. Equally appreciated at the time was the embodiment of Dr. Fried by Swedish actress Bibi Andersson. The film itself, which had been years in the making, with various names attached over time to the project, has earned, however, mixed reviews over the following decades,

being classified as either too intense (even lurid) or, on the contrary, too melodramatic.

Often regarded as the female (and sub-par) version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), directed by Miloš Forman, based on the 1962 novel by Ken Kesey, whose success ultimately prompted Roger Corman, a trailblazer in the world of independent film, often associated, however, with low-budget cult classics, to produce *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, the film, rather than being centered on plot, is built upon the relationship between Deborah and her therapist. One essential element, Deborah's Jewish ancestry, is, however, completely removed. In the film, she is no longer Deborah Blau (*blue* in German), the fictional extension of Hannah Green (and Joanne Greenberg), but the all-American Deborah Blake. The character's ethnic background is, yet, by no means superfluous for the story, as Deborah's experiences with antisemitism in post-WWII America, which draw upon the author's own negative experiences, act as catalyst for her withdrawal into the kingdom of Yr in Greenberg's novel. Three decades, however, distance Page's film from the rawness of the post-War years, which is not to deny the endurance of antisemitic attitudes in the United States into the present, particularly in the recent international context. It is also true that removing the protagonist's Jewish background may have also been an attempt at preventing it from potentially threatening the viewers' ability to relate to the experiences of two women who, to a certain extent, share a common history alien to the audience—the movie was meant to appeal to a wide teenage audience and, thus, contradict the assumption that a film dealing with madness could not become a box-office success.

However, once the idea of the constant discrimination endured by Deborah is removed along with her Jewish name (which Greenberg herself, who was not asked to offer input on the movie and was, consequently, not pleased with it, interpreted as mere cowardice), the remaining explanations for the source of her deep-seated anguish, namely the emotionally-scarring surgery (an echo of the traumatizing medical interventions Greenberg herself suffered to correct malformations in her urinary system at a time when no distinction was made between urinary and reproductive morphology), and a difficult relationship with her family (the parents are given a very small role in the film), prove rather unsatisfactory, particularly for a viewer who reaches the movie by means of the book.

Another aspect that is altered in the film, most likely so as to bring Deborah's image closer to that of a conventional cinematic heroine, is her appearance. In the novel, there are several indications of her being overweight, probably as a result of overeating in order to fill an emotional void, and, according to Deborah herself, "ugly" (Greenberg 17). The movie, on the other hand, features a physically attractive actress, with highly feminine traits and eyes as blue as Deborah's surname, for, as Lactamaeon, one of the gods of Yr, points out, "if one is to be doomed, one must be beautiful, or the drama is only a comedy." (Greenberg 44).

Moreover, the gods of Yr, depicted in vivid scenes which occupy significant screen time, are highly sexualized in the movie, being portrayed as young, physically-fit men, half-bare, half-clad in furs and feathers, riding horses through a desert-like landscape. There is even a scene in which Deborah loses herself in a sexual fantasy featuring one of these tribal-like gods, whose inclusion in the film, given the fact that she is at the age at which girls discover their sexuality, does, up to a certain extent, make sense. It does seem, however, a gratuitous addition meant to increase profits. The (initial) ethereal nature of the alternate world of the novel is lost, and detractors of the movie attribute it to the insufficient funding that the off-Hollywood production had at its disposal to bring Yr to life on screen. It is undeniable that, even in the absence of the expensive special-effects technology that is only available nowadays, the directorial choices in terms of the depiction of the Kingdom of Yr seem questionable. Nevertheless, as dated as some of the techniques used in the movie may seem, one must bear in mind that the more subtle, dream-like sequences that would probably have been chosen in similar movies to depict Deborah's visions would not have conveyed the fact that the gods of Yr are palpable to her, and that eventually they bluntly disrupt her everyday existence.

The Dr. Fried of the adaptation distances herself from the Dr. Fried of the novel in a similar way. In a conversation between two of her colleagues, Clara Fried is described as a "chubby little woman" (Greenberg 102), while Bibi Andersson is tall and slender. It is true: on screen, Deborah preserves her awkwardness and Dr. Fried preserves her gentle nature (it is, however, doubled by a certain vulnerability which is lacking in the novel), and the quality of the performances of the main actresses is undeniable (they both deliver nuanced,

both sensitive and sensible, renditions of their characters), yet one cannot help feel that their sheer beauty considerably distances the movie from the book.

There is, then, the idea that the Dr. Fried of the movie is, apparently, yet another example of the inability of women to successfully combine a career and a family, for, during a role reversal between Deborah and her therapist, one learns that the doctor is, in fact, divorced and that she has channeled all her energy into her work. Is Deborah, therefore, a child surrogate for Dr. Fried? Is she an avenue for Dr. Fried's otherwise unfulfilled nurturing impulses? Her great tenderness when dealing with the troubled girl seems to suggest so. The Dr. Fried of the novel, on the other hand, despite the book's dedication and the prevailing notion that "the therapist should play the role of benign and wise parent who gives the patient a second chance to be nurtured toward maturity" (Sass 7), does not seem to regard Deborah as a symbolic daughter, but as one patient in great need of the help she is able to offer.

As important as the relationship between Deborah and Dr. Fried, for both the message and, through the contrast it provides, the structure of the movie, as well, is the portrayal of the other patients of the chaotic Disturbed Ward, played by a well-chosen supporting cast. The passionate efforts of these psychiatric inmates to impose their flawed logic upon individuals equally keen on their particular version of irrationality, the bursts of violence that follow the failures of such efforts, but also the unexpected instances of wisdom or common sense and the awkward, yet moving attempts at establishing connections among themselves, and their rapport with their either abusive or humane caretakers, are all depicted or, as some might claim, exploited by the creators of the film, since it is a known fact that the public is most often inescapably drawn to outbursts of emotion verging on the grotesque. A more sensitive viewer, on the other hand, will generally shy away from such harrowing portrayals and the unavoidable comic relief they provide to the less-advised audience. However, one must bear in mind that there is a certain tragicomedy to their lives which many mentally disturbed individuals seem to embrace as part of the richness of their experience, and this is very well portrayed by the film's supporting cast.

The performances of the latter (as well as the gratuitous nudity and violence of the film) have at times been classified as excessive, yet mental disturbance, a type of human experience so alien to anyone who has not been touched by it, is particularly challenging to embody on screen, as it requires the

careful balancing of the delivery of the role so as not to render it pathetic or too uncanny to elicit empathy from the viewer.

There is, nevertheless, one undeniable flaw attached to *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* that is, up to a certain point, inherent in all filmic adaptations. It is the unavoidable compression of the action, which makes events seem to be unfolding at an accelerated, unrealistic pace. In Anthony Page's movie, this compression is particularly detrimental, for it hardly feels like 3 years of consistent therapy unraveling before one's eyes. The cathartic role of drawing, which plays an important part in the novel, is also downplayed, being reduced to one scene in which we see Deborah scribbling.

There is, however, no doubt regarding the protagonist's deep mental disturbance, and the apparently speedy cure, doubled by the highly optimistic ending, featuring a life-hungry Deborah relating to people her own age, seems far from believable, as gifted as Dr. Fried may be and as much as we would like this witty teenager, in whose struggle we become invested, to have a chance at happiness or, at least, peace. Like Mary Jane Ward's *The Snake Pit* (1947), another novel included in the wider study mentioned in the introduction of the present paper, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* portrays mental illness as curable, but this time the curability is not unavoidably attached to the conformation to preordained patterns of feminine behavior (although the movie does hint at Deborah starting to behave as a "normal" girl her age following her discharge from the hospital). Moreover, it outlines the image of a very different kind of therapist.

One feels, however, that the fact that Deborah and Dr. Fried share a gender in the movie as well (indeed, it would have been a considerable deviation from the novel to portray Dr. Fried as a man in the adaptation) is somehow detrimental to the central idea of the film, which is that empathy from their therapists may very well be all that mentally unstable individuals require so as to recover their sanity, for there is, on the one hand, the preconceived notion of women being inherently more capable of empathy than men, and, on the other, the idea of the almost unavoidable female bonding. In other words, the relationship between Deborah and Dr. Fried is so successful simply because they are women, rather than an extraordinary doctor and a particularly intelligent and creative (albeit severely disturbed) patient.

From *Carefree* (1938) to *A Dangerous Method* (2011) and onward, the relationship between a male psychiatrist and a female patient is often sexualized in numerous movies dealing with mental imbalance (as is, to an even greater extent, the relationship between a female psychiatrist and a male patient), and it would have been refreshing to witness an exception: a film in which the male therapist is not involved in a blatant breach of ethical boundaries, but acts as a genuine caregiver in relation to his female patient, especially since Deborah's vulnerability is doubled by her age.

Despite the shortcomings described above (and others, such as the excessive use of dim lighting and the questionable musical score), which ultimately turn it into a film that attempts to be respectable and memorable, but appeals excessively to emotion and, thus, never quite achieves its goal, Anthony Page's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* is, in the end, a stepping stone in the evolution of filmic portrayals of mentally disturbed individuals.

I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN: FROM PAGE TO STAGE

In 2004, 4 years after the publication of *To Redeem One Person Is to Redeem the World*, Gail A. Hornstein's biography of Dr. Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, and against the backdrop of a vivid debate over the widespread use (and abuse) of antidepressants and similar forms of medication, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* occasioned a play by Walter L. Newton, directed by Rick Bernstein, and starring Karalyn Pytel as Deborah (Debbie) Klein and Paige L. Larson as Dr. Fried. It premiered at the Miners Alley Playhouse in Golden, Colorado, and earned positive reviews.

Throughout the 2 hours and 20 minutes of Newton's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*, which Greenberg consulted upon and was, in the end, complimentary of (the play was intended to be everything that the movie was not), the voices of Yr, embodied as brightly-costumed sinister monsters, rather than alluring desert gods, constitute a threatening backdrop during all scenes depicting therapy sessions and inner dialogue. Their ominous presence is doubled by a stage largely shrouded in darkness, with sharp focus on the actors delivering their lines achieved through lighting.

The Jewish background and ensuing antisemitism are restored, and Dr. Fried speaks in an appropriately thick German accent and is appropriately

middle-aged in both appearance and mannerisms, unlike the conventionally attractive and fairly young therapist of the film, who, as discussed above, departs from the image of Dr. Fromm-Reichmann (and Dr. Fried) for reasons related to commerciality.

The parents, along with their conflicting views (and corresponding torment) on the proper course of action regarding Debbie's mental instability, are given a greater part to play than in the 1977 film. Interestingly, prior to hospitalization, Deborah and her mother are dressed almost identically, in the proper floral print dress and cardigan of the age, this choice of wardrobe being by no means accidental, as this is the facade of propriety that the teenager is required to maintain despite the constant attempts of Yr to ambush through. A poignant scene features a breakthrough in the relationship between Deborah and her family, with a lucid Deborah confessing to her crying father that, despite her resentment toward her relatives, there are moments when she understands both them and herself.

In a creative plot twist, the ending shows the two main characters reversing fates and the therapist giving way to her own demons and ending her life. The self-inflicted death of the psychotherapist becomes, thus, symbolic of a world which no longer believes in psychotherapy as the response to mental instability, a fast-paced world in which the guiding role of the psychotherapist through the often prolonged and painful process of peeling the defenses the world perceives as symptoms to uncover the raw wounds underneath (in the end, a privilege for the therapist, who is ultimately granted access into the depths of another human being) has been replaced by the (deceivably) fast fix of medication. It also highlights that fact that, ultimately, we are all, in our humanness, prone to madness.

The play concludes with a reflection, enunciated by addressing the audience directly so as to add emphasis and leave no room for interpretation, by Dr. Abraham, Dr. Fried's male colleague that she had been discussing Deborah's case with and whom she had denied permission to include the teenager in a clinical trial on a new psychiatric drug, and a sane Deborah, on the elusive nature of madness and its treatment, which is reflective of Joanne Greenberg's involvement in the production, but also of a shift in perspective.

In the midst of psychosis, madness does seem, to the less empathetic witness, a performance, one with specific codes regarding gestures, posture,

voice and facial expressions. It does seem understandable, thus, that it has always lent itself wonderfully to theater. What has changed across centuries of portraying madness on stage, and Walter L. Newton's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* attests to that, is the lens through which it is depicted: from the *hybris*-induced divine punishment of Antiquity, it is now, both on stage and, largely, elsewhere, a profoundly human experience, as fascinating as it is fearsome.

CONCLUSIONS

With mental health awareness on the rise, does *He/she is mad.* continue to be both a sentence and a *sentence*, in other words, “not just a discursive act [but] a label that has profound consequences for how a person is perceived, interacted with, and treated, perhaps for a lifetime” (de Young 9)? There is still much to be done towards destigmatizing madness, but the progress of the past decades is undeniable. We owe it to mental health experts, human rights activists, artists and sufferers alike.

In the present paper, I have briefly discussed the transition from life to page to screen and stage for *one* madness narrative that has managed to act as an agent of inner and outer change, proving that, once again, fiction can tell the truth of life better than life can. There are others like it, some adapted for other media, worth a read, a watch and a thought. I invite you to search for them, as problematic and emotionally-taxing as entering a troubled existence, albeit via a semi-fictional text or the silver screen, may prove.

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BIONOTE

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