

“‘IN THE END ITS ALL NICE’: SARA’S ADDICTION, TELEVISION, AND SELF-MEDIATION IN HUBERT SELBY JR.’S REQUIEM FOR A DREAM”

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDEMENTS	iv
DEDICATION	v
CHAPTER I	1
Selby and His Style	1
CHAPTER II	26
The Cultural Construction of Sara’s Selves and the Influence of Television	26
CHAPTER III	58
The Destruction of Sara’s Selves	58
WORKS CITED	90

ABSTRACT

In an effort to expand the small amount of criticism devoted to Hubert Selby Jr.'s work, this paper examines the character, Sara Goldfarb, in the novel, Requiem for a Dream. By focusing on the construction and destruction of Sara's identity, as well as her physical body, I primarily will look at how Selby's novel comments on culture as a "self" mediator, especially when acquired through the medium of television. I open with a brief discussion of Selby's life, particularly his relationship with the illness that made up a major part of it, and then turn to Selby's experimental style in an effort to understand how his mixing of first and third-person narrative perspectives helps the reader to see that Sara's interiority is comprised of the ideologies communicated to her through the cultural medium of television. Drawing from Ulric Neisser's "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge," the second part of this paper examines the five selves (ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, and conceptual) that comprise Sara's subjectivity, while primarily focusing on her conceptual self and her inability to accept her current roles as a widow and "sonless" mother. In addition, I also will concentrate on television's role as a cultural mediator for Sara's identity, including discussions about the televisual utopia of entertainment and the three-orders of signification as expounded upon by John Fiske and John Hartley. After examining the construction of Sara's character, this paper will conclude with a discussion of how the same cultural factors, as well as her sense of agency, both play role in the destruction of Sara's interior and exterior selves. Thus, the primary goal of this project is to provide further insight into Requiem for a Dream, since little has been written on it, and to understand how Selby's novel comments on culture's role in the formation of an individual's "self," while simultaneously destroying it.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to the loving memory of my grandfather, Bobby Gene Bowen, who always told me I could do anything I wanted if I only put my mind to it.

CHAPTER I

Selby and His Style

“Thirty-six hours before I was born, I started to die. Dying became a way of life” (Selby, “Memories”).

The first four books in Hubert Selby Jr.’s body of work are preoccupied with exploring what he refers to as the problem of “the disease. And the disease [...] is the lack of love” (Selby, “Interview” 315). In Requiem for a Dream (1978), the last of the quartet, Selby presents the grim and self-destructive lives of four interconnected characters struggling with disease-like addictions (physical and psychological) and searching for individual happiness in a brutal and desolate New York City of the 1970s. In his work, we witness Sara, Marion, Harry, and Tyrone as they struggle to find anything to hold onto in modern American society (besides each other), before eventually succumbing to the consequences of their choices: insanity, prostitution, amputation, and jail. When we first meet Requiem’s Sara Goldfarb, she is a lonely overweight widow sitting around her apartment seemingly waiting for death. She has nothing to live for, and due to the lack of love in her life, she becomes so immersed and distracted in a televisual utopia that her only sources for happiness are television and food. Essentially, Sara’s reality is mediated by television. She believes in happy endings. She believes her life is validated through active consumerism. And, she believes by losing weight people will love her. Sara is a tragic figure who is a victim of America’s consumer-based capitalism. While she only wants to make her life better, it only gets increasingly worse. After she receives a telephone call from a major corporation presenting her with an opportunity to appear on a game show, Sara becomes obsessed with changing her physical appearance, while destroying the thinking-speaking “self” inside her physical body. And at the same time, her physical body deteriorates to nothing more

than flesh and bones providing a frame for her blank identity. In an effort to show how Sara's interior and exterior "selves" have been formed by a consumeristic culture, my first chapter will provide a brief background of Selby's life (contextualizing his examination of "disease"/disease), and how and why his style (the lack of punctuation, the mixing of first and third person narrative perspectives, and the conflation of the narrator with the characters) works well for cultural criticism. In my second chapter, I will examine Sara Goldfarb's character by focusing on how America's consumeristic/televisual/patriarchal culture constructs her interior sense of being through her internalization of gender-specific social roles, such as her "need" to be a mother and housewife, and how the cultural medium of television and the ideologies communicated to Sara through that particular medium keep her situated in an immobile social position where she can vicariously (re)experience those roles in a televisual utopia. In addition, I also focus on how television functions as self-mediator for Sara's identity, since it provides her with conflicting notions of what a woman's role is "supposed" to be in American society. In the last chapter, I will end my discussion with an examination of how those same cultural factors, along with Sara's agency, destroy her identity and cause her physical body to deteriorate as if she had been ill with a debilitating disease.

But before discussing this, I must provide a brief background of Selby and his earlier novels, since he has not received much critical attention for his work and remains relatively unknown in American literature. I only can speculate as to why this may be, though there are three possibilities that may shed some light on the subject: style, profanity, and violence. In an interview with Allan Vorda, Selby was asked about the inattention to his work, and he simply responds, "That's the attitude of the literary establishment toward me in this country" ("Examining" 290). First, his stylistic choices, from his lack of punctuation to his slippages of

tense, intentionally disregard the conventions of “good” writing: “I’ll take liberties, though. I’ll change tense in the middle of a sentence if that’s what’s necessary to get across the emotional reality” (Selby, “Interview” 320). As I will discuss below, his style mixes first and third person narrative techniques to depict the obsessive mindset of his characters as they interact with the physical world, and the problem for readers may be that he compromises the rule book to fit his style rather than the other way around. Richard Wertime suggests that Selby is “a literary maverick whose practices run afoul of the unstated canons of current literary practice. [...] [H]e commits stylistic violence on his reader by sidestepping the most revered criteria of control in contemporary usage” (“Question” 407). And while Wertime defends Selby’s “control over structure and pacing,” as well as his ability to capture “certain thought-processes and certain types of spoken voice,” he places the author’s maverick approach in perspective in relation to his alleged lack of attention when he asks, “how does one deal with an author whose narrative writing causes his command of the language to appear uncertain, even inept or immature” (“Question” 407). One might suggest that Selby may be ignored primarily by scholarly critics because he disregards notions of popular fiction and/or “literary” etiquette, which inherently causes his writing to seem at times clumsy, immature, and awkward.

As mentioned above, two other reasons for his critical inattention could be his use of rampant profanity and/or the detailed violence that he incorporates into his work. The former of these is self-explanatory, since the language is not deemed as “literary” and rather “sometimes downright tasteless” (Wertime, “Question” 411). But where one finds fault, another finds art. One of Selby’s closet friends, and author, Gilbert Sorrentino, states that Selby “made literature out of a language, which is, in a sense, not fit for literature. It’s the sort of language that one usually might put in the mouths of vulgar, decadent, corrupt characters” (Sorrentino

“Interview”). And like his “unliterary” profanity, the detailed violence in his work is often graphically excessive too. The most infamous example is probably in Last Exit to Brooklyn (1964), since the novel arguably features one of the most gratuitous and sensationalized depictions of gang rape in American literature: “[They] tore her clothes to small scraps put out a few cigarettes on her nipples pissed on her jerkedoff on her jammed a broomstick up her snatch then bored they left her lying amongst the broken bottles rusty cans and rubble of the lot” (Selby, Last Exit 114). Based on this horrific example, there is no question that at times the inhumanity and brutality is extreme, especially considering that this tortuous rant lasts for pages describing how an entire neighborhood rapes a prostitute. Once again, Richard Wertime suggests that Selby “works acts of violence upon his reader’s expectations by dealing with material that is socially taboo, and the latitude he gives psychopathic brutality amplifies the inherently threatening nature of his matter” (“Question” 407). And as a result, critics are drawn to attacking his work. One critic, Leigh Buchanan Beinen, bitterly describes Last Exit to Brooklyn as “[d]egradation, long screeches of pain, injustice and a pervasive nauseating atmosphere of idiocy and purposelessness, these are the substance of Selby’s fiction. The only proper name for the genre is sensationalism” (20). But after all of this has been said, it is strange that other critics compare Selby and his work to the likes of Flannery O’ Connor¹, Stephen Crane², and Herman Melville.³

¹ Richard Wertime, “Hubert Selby, Jr.” DLB 2: American Novelists Since World War II. Eds. Jeffrey Helterman and Richard Layman. (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 1978) 444-47.

² James R. Giles, “The Game of Mum as Theme and Narrative Technique in Hubert Selby’s Last Exit to Brooklyn.” The Naturalistic Inner-City Novel in America: Encounters with the Fat Man. (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1995) 119-38.

³ Paul Metcalf, “Herman and Hubert: The Odd Couple.” The Review of Contemporary Fiction 1.2 (1981): 364-69.

Selby is by no means a popular name like the authors he has been compared to, and he has not experienced in any way the same amount of sustained interest as other American authors who were publishing during the same forty-year time period (1964-2004). While it may be easy to provide a historical frame of reference via the time period for the author, it is not so easy to label him with any specific school of American writing. Richard A. Wertime notes that

[c]lassifying Selby is a difficult matter. Having been on the fringes of the literary establishment has kept him, perhaps as much as the violence of his works, from being given much attention in formal academic journals, and so the number of serious critical studies devoted to him is small. It would seem most proper to regard him as a moralist – as a moralist primarily and social critic only secondarily. (“Hubert Selby, Jr.” 445)

Furthermore, he was known to hang around with some of the Black Mountain Poets, and his circle of friends included individuals such as Amiri Baraka, Robert Creeley, and Gilbert Sorrentino, the last of these being one of Selby’s closest companions (Giles, “Hubert Selby, Jr.” 275). What Selby shares with these writers, reflected most obviously in his style and subject matter, is the “anti-academic, anti-intellectual, anti-traditional” approach towards literature writing, as well as his “pro-spontaneity” (“Black Mountain poets”). In another attempt to contextualize Selby’s writing, James R. Giles states that “[h]e can perhaps best be understood in the context of the group of American novelists – including Jack London, James Jones, Nelson Algren, and [John] Rechy among others – who can be described as ‘social outlaws’” (Understanding 7). Obviously, where to place Selby in the American canon *is* a difficult matter. And as far as Requiem for a Dream is concerned, maybe the title would be a good place to start. Of the many sufferings in the novel, the death of the American Dream is the first/major causality.

It is like a lower-middle class Gatsby that exposes the futility of the “Dream,” which says “financial success is simply the product of initiative and hard work” and is attainable by “getting ahead,” thus, signifying “competition” and “rugged individualism” (Tyson 54). Selby portrays his characters pursuing happiness through material gain, and Harry, Tyrone, Marion, and Sara suffer horrible fates attempting to achieve their materialistic dreams.

In another sense, the novel resembles naturalist fiction, but differs in the sense of human agency.¹ While there are certain environmental forces that lead Sara Goldfarb to her destruction (gender roles, television, and the McDick Corporation), it is her conscious decisions and obsessive desires that *really* cause her to lose her identity. In this sense, Selby is a harsh critic of American culture, who simultaneously does not let his characters be absolved from the conscious choices they make: “I suppose Selby must be thought of as a Christian novelist. *The Wages of Sin*, etc.” (Metcalf 369). Furthermore, Selby’s style is similar to a modern stream-of-consciousness novel, and he acknowledges that one of his influences is James Joyce: “I have, of course, read Joyce and have been influenced by him. [...] But it’s the interior dialogue that we have with ourselves that really fascinates me and how it is reflected in our physical world. Maybe that is why my writing at times looks like it is a stream-of-consciousness” (“Examining” 288). At the same time, Selby even employs some of Joyce’s techniques: “Joyce’s approximation involved the removal of customary signals, such as quotation marks, hyphens in compounds, and chapter numbers and titles. [...] Thus,] moving the written text closer to the realm of speech, which is normally unpunctuated [...]” (“Stream-of-Consciousness Novel”).

¹ When I say “resembles” modernism, I mean it in the general sense that “[t]he naturalistic view of human beings is that of animals in the natural world, responding to environmental forces and internal stresses and drives, none of which they can control or understand. [...] [P]essimistic about human capabilities –life, the naturalists seems to feel, is a vicious trap, frank in their portrayal of human beings as animals by fundamental urges – fear, hunger, and sex” (“Naturalism”).

The point I am trying to emphasize is that it *is* difficult to place Selby within any particular school of writing, and ultimately perhaps he should be categorized as a New York City author, who addresses consequential aspects of living the city life: loneliness, seclusion, and despair.

One last thing to consider regarding where to place Requiem for a Dream in the American canon is that it is story about addiction, and not only to drugs (Harry, Tyrone, and Marion), but also to television and food (Sara). Ultimately, Selby writes about characters that are addicted to “hoping” for a better life (Sara, Harry, Tyrone, and Marion). While such addiction fits in with other books about drugs, it differs in its perspective. It is more than just a glorified “drug book,” as one might argue about Hunter Thompson’s work. Selby’s treats his characters as if they are sick with their addictions and obsessions. Harry, Marion, and Tyrone abuse drugs, and, rather than promoting the experimentation of narcotics by tapping into some pleasurable subconscious realm, their habits eventually take a toll on their physical and mental states: Harry loses his arm to infection; Marion prostitutes herself; and Tyrone is locked away in a Southern prison, where the racist guards call him and other black inmates “New Yawk dope fien niggas” (Selby, Requiem 272). Their worst nightmares come true and the only real solution to stop their pain is death. The story is a warning against drugs and other addictions that individuals let go too far for too long. As far as Sara Goldfarb is concerned, her addiction before taking diet pills is television and food. She loves television so much that she is willing to go without food to get her TV out of the pawn shop: “[She] checked her money and realized she would have to go without lunch for a few days, but it was worth it to have the TV set. It wasn’t the first time she gave up a meal for her set” (13). On the other hand, she loves chocolate so much that no matter how hard she tries she cannot save one piece of candy without devouring it: “[S]he was going to save the last for morning so she could say it was three days and now it was

gone [...]” (45). Selby portrays Sara, as well as the other characters in the novel, as being trapped by her addictions. Since her life is filled with dis-ease by the lack of love she has in it, she attempts to compensate for the void in her life by obsessively turning to other means to provide her with some degree of happiness (television, food, diet pills, and temporary fame). Thus, it is this obsession and addiction that is part of the sickness that Selby writes about in Requiem. So, before going any further with my examination of Sara, I want to place Selby’s preoccupation with disease within the context of the sickness that plagued much of his life in order to provide a better understanding how this idea of illness has been a major influence on much of his work.

When he was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1928, Selby experienced his first moments battling death when he was afflicted with cyanosis.¹ He claims the umbilical cord was wrapped around his head, thus thwarting the oxygen from reaching his brain and causing his whole body to turn blue, which inherently resulted in brain damage (Selby, “Memories”). According to Selby, this moment, before ever taking his first breath in the world, set the tone for the rest of his life. After dropping out of high school at the age of fifteen, he joined the United States Merchant Marines during World War II, and “[w]hile in Europe in 1946 he contracted tuberculosis and later almost died of an extreme reaction to streptomycin while undergoing surgery” (Giles, “Hubert Selby, Jr.” 275).² As a result of the streptomycin, Selby “had a lot of toxic reactions from that. I was partially blind and my equilibrium was affected, and I was partially paralyzed”

¹ The OED describes cyanosis as “[b]lueness or lividness of the skin owing to the circulation of imperfectly oxygenated blood (esp. as caused by congenital malformation of the heart)” (“cyanosis”).

² The OED lists streptomycin as “[a]n antibiotic, C₂₁H₃₉N₇O₁₂, produced by the soil bacterium *Streptomyces griseus*, which was the first drug to be successful against tuberculosis but is now used chiefly in conjunction with other drugs because of its toxic effects” (“Streptomycin”).

(Selby, "Interview" 333). In addition to tuberculosis and the negative reaction from the medication that was supposed to cure him, Selby also "had ten ribs cut out, lung problems, and asthma" (Selby, "Examining" 289).

And as if that was not enough, he would later struggle with substance addiction, stemming from the use of pain medication while he was hospitalized: "When I was in the hospital, I had a lot of drugs such as morphine, demerol, codeine, and various sleeping pills. I also used heroin. I also drank every opportunity I could so I had that point of reference [...]" (Selby, "Examining" 292). He even spent a brief period in jail for the possession of narcotics. A fellow friend and writer, Gilbert Sorrentino, places the author's unhealthy life, and lifestyle, in perspective when he states that Selby was "rather pessimistic and resigned to his fate in life, which has to be, essentially, never feeling right. Cubby never felt well. I mean, all his lifelong, he was sort of like half healthy. But he was great to be around" (Sorrentino "Interview"). Selby finally quit drugs, and in 2004, at the age of seventy-five, he died as a result of chronic pulmonary disorder. So, the question remains as to how a high school drop-out with no formal training in creative writing, who had suffered chronic health problems throughout his entire life, became an author. When Selby contracted tuberculosis, he was confined to a hospital bed for over three years. He maintains that when "[y]ou spend 3½ years in bed [...] it affects your life and [...] work. [...] Lying in bed also gives you a greater opportunity than usual to look inside yourself and find out exactly what's going on. I had never read a book until then. That's where it all started: reading and then a desire to write" (Selby, "Examining" 289). Selby's first novel, Last Exit to Brooklyn (1964), took six-years to write, and it is his first effort at exploring the problem of disease. Unlike Requiem, which examines addiction and obsession among the financially secure, Last Exit looked at the problem of primal

rage and raw anger in the lower classes of American society. Here, the larger concern appears to be that American capitalism, with its emphasis on individualism and material gain, fosters destructive behavior in the underprivileged because love is sacrificed at the cost of pursuing individual wealth.

Last Exit to Brooklyn (published by Grove Press) would probably be considered Selby's most critically acclaimed work, as well as his most controversial. The novel is interwoven with short-stories that follow a group of gang members, a transvestite (Georgette), a sexually-confused corrupt union worker (Harry Black), and a prostitute (Tralala). Each story ends tragically: an overdose, a brutal beating and modern day crucifixion, and a gang rape. Due to its graphic content, there was a substantial amount of controversy surrounding the novel. There were charges of obscenity in Great Britain, which sparked debate in the House of Commons, and it was later banned in Italy (Giles, Understanding 274). And in addition, Selby's short story, "Tralala" – originally published in The Provincetown Review in 1960 – became a subject of controversy before it ever became a part of the novel: "[T]he editor of that little magazine was arrested for selling pornography to a minor. [...] Although a lower court found the editor guilty, the case was eventually thrown out" (Giles, "Hubert Selby Jr." 274). As mentioned above, some critics, like Leigh Buchanan Beinen, panned Selby's work as unliterary sensationalism. Other reviewers and critics, in such venues as the Los Angeles Times, The Nation, and Newsweek, praised the novel. Allen Ginsberg is quoted with a blurb on the back cover exclaiming that "Last Exit to Brooklyn should explode like a rusty hellish bombshell over America and still be eagerly read in a hundred years" (qtd. in Last Exit: cover). Last Exit would be considered Selby's greatest commercial and critical achievement, and it even spawned a film adaptation of the same-

title in 1989.¹ In a 1998 article titled “Books of the Century” (published one year before the release of the film version of Requiem for a Dream), Elizabeth Young discusses the lack of attention to Selby’s books outside of Last Exit: “They remember the film, they may even recall the UK prosecution of the book, in 1967[.] [...] Yet mention any of Selby’s other great books to your literary friends and they will look blank” (50). While the film adaptation is not as bleak as the novel in that it offers at least some amount of hope for its anger-stricken characters, it does allow readers of another generation to rediscover Selby’s hyperbolic depiction of America as a “loveless” society.

Following Last Exit to Brooklyn, there were two other novels before Requiem for a Dream: The Room (1971) and The Demon (1976). Both utilize Selby’s experimental style and explore an equally, if not greater, amount of dark and disturbing subject matter as did their successful predecessor. Neither was as successful as his first, although James R. Giles considers The Room to be “the high point in Selby’s critical and popular acceptance” (Giles, Understanding 4). In 1978, Thunder’s Mouth Press published Requiem for a Dream. It remained largely unnoticed at the time, although Michael Stephens of The Nation claimed that “Requiem for a Dream is an American masterpiece” (123). His review concludes that Selby “really is one of our cultural assets, and his latest work could prove to be one the great American novels of the century” (Stephens 124). On the other end of the spectrum, Selby’s friend Paul Metcalf criticized Requiem as “a competent, ‘shocking’ commercial novel. [...] All the driving fire of Last Exit -- the author profoundly engaged in the flood of his material -- has disappeared”

¹ Even though the film-adaptation of Last Exit was not as successful as Requiem (see below), it did receive positive reviews from Roger Ebert and the Washington Post. It was directed by Uli Edel and starred Hollywood names, such as Jennifer Jason Leigh, Burt Young, Jerry Orbach, Stephen Baldwin, Sam Rockwell, and Alexis Arquette. Selby makes a cameo appearance as a taxi driver who kills one of the primary characters, Georgette.

(368). He concludes that Requiem is a “kind of literary commercialism,” and “[w]hat happens to the old mother, Sara, is rank meretricious melodrama” (Metcalf 368-9). In a sense, Requiem is more of a commercial novel than Last Exit because it has a structured plot. Where the characters in Last Exit roam the streets unleashing aggression and violence, the characters in Requiem are presented with goals to be achieved, and the audience must follow them through to the end to see if they are met. Apart from Selby’s vision, one thing they do have in common is that like Last Exit, Requiem eventually was turned into a film.

Twenty-two years after its initial publication, independent filmmaker, Darren Aronofsky (director of the 1998 indie-hit π), directed and co-wrote with Selby a film adaptation of the novel. The lead roles were filled by Ellen Burstyn as Sara Goldfarb, Jared Leto as Harry Goldfarb, Jennifer Connelly as Marion Silver, and Marlon Wayans as Tyrone C. Love. And like Last Exit’s film adaptation, Selby played a small role, this time as a racist southern prison guard. The film was even nominated for an Oscar, a Golden Globe, and a Screen Actors Guild Award, all three acknowledging Burstyn for her remarkable performance. While the film did not win at any of the “big” award shows, it was nominated for five Independent Spirit Awards. It won two: Best Cinematography (Matthew Libatique) and Best Female Lead (Ellen Burstyn). The film was definitely no blockbuster success story by Hollywood standards, but it was relatively well-received among critics, including praises from Roger Ebert (Chicago Sun-Times) and Peter Travers (Rolling Stone). And in addition to the critical praise, some may even say the film became a “cult hit” similar to Aronofsky’s first feature. As a result, the novel was re-released for a third time. The second release in 1988 was probably intended to promote the up coming release of the film adaptation of Last Exit to Brooklyn (1989), which added a foreword by

Richard Price. This version included an additional foreword by Darren Aronofsky, and a cover displaying Jared Leto standing in front of a Coney Island amusement park.

Without the success of the film-adaptation of Requiem, the novel could have easily remained in the margins of American literature, and Selby may have never been re-discovered by another generation of readers. Since without question our society grows more dependent on the consumption of commercial products, like iPods, cars, computers, clothes, etc., Requiem remains relevant today. For Selby's novel is a critique of capitalism gone awry. As James R. Giles puts it, Requiem is about how "American society has become entrapped in the pervasive materialism of a ubiquitous capitalism, and such a world is closed to any healing or saving Grace" (Understanding 112). When looking at Selby's life, it is easy to see why he writes about characters whose consumption-based addictions are equivalent to any sickness where the consumption of medication is the only way to cure disease and, more importantly, pain. As stated above, Requiem is the last of Selby's quartet of novels that deal primarily with this problem of disease, though he is not referring to the physical illness that was a critical part of his life, but rather dis-ease: "the lack of love. That's my precipitating force. [...] [A]ll of the people in my novels fail because of lack of control. Not because they are immoral by anybody's standards, but because they lost control. The lack of power is their dilemma" (Selby, "Interview" 315).¹ In America's capitalistic/individualistic/consumer-based culture, the lack of love, control, and/or power will force any individual into searching for some means to happiness, whether it is television, food, drugs, or sex. This is what Selby's fiction is concerned with: the

¹ In the same interview with John O'Brien, Selby alludes to his upcoming works and notes that they will also deal with the problem/disease: "I have notes for another three books where hopefully I will open up. These next books will incorporate the problem as well as the answer. These first four books have only been involved with the problem" (Selby, "Interview" 315).

interior of American individuals as they obsessively search for happiness in a capitalistic society.

In order to situate the reader inside the interior of his characters as they search for this elusive happiness, Selby uses a non-conventional and experimental narrative style, and at the same time, he utilizes this unique form to demonstrate how Sara's interiority is comprised of the ideologies communicated to her through the cultural medium of television. For the remainder of this chapter, I want to discuss Selby's style by focusing on the role of the narrator, the narrator's conflation with the characters, the textual construction of the character, and the placement of the reader in relation to the characters and narrator. In order to address these issues, I will begin with a simple question: why would Selby write in such a way –using no punctuation, notation, or spacialization – where it is at times hard to discern the narrator's voice from the characters?

Simply, he wants his readers to experience the character's subjective reality without the interference of a mediating narrator: "While making us almost unaware of the shift in perspective, Selby gives us certain narrative information but still maintains the sense of being inside his character's head. [...] Selby avoids a narrator who will act as a mediator between the character and us" (O'Brien, "Notes" 102-3). Thus, the reader encounters the perspective of the character through the characters' voices, the dialogue taking place within the characters, the dialogue between one character and another character, and the narration providing the details of the actions they perform. Selby claims, "I have no right as an artist to interpose myself between the people in the book and the reader. They should be able to communicate directly. They should not have to go through a middleman" (Selby, "Interview" 319). And, it seems that the style's effect minimizes the narrator's role as a judgmental mediator between the reader and the character because the narrator supports and/or justifies the characters' actions. It does not allow

the narrator to construct a negative portrait as to how the reader *should* view the characters, and so the narrator becomes a conflation of the characters with the actions they perform.

Since the reader immediately encounters this collapse between the narrator and the character's perspectives, I will begin with the opening sequence, which follows the two Biblical transcriptions placed before the opening of the story. Even though the Biblical verses are part of Selby's text as a whole, they serve a different function than Selby's style. Where his style attempts to place the reader inside of the characters' perspective as they suffer from their own demise, the verses function as an outside/objective commentary for the way the characters should live their lives in order to avoid destruction. They are Psalm 127:1 and Proverbs 3:5-6. As mentioned above, Metcalf claims that Selby is a Christian author, and it is with these two verses that Selby situates his position in relation to his characters. The first verse is "[e]xcept the LORD build the house, / they labor in vain that build it..." (qtd. in Selby: 2). Since Selby's characters attempt to chase "their" own dreams, they are following a false hope by Biblical standards. While he maintains that he does not believe in organized religion, he does state, "I do believe in a power that created and maintains the universe. I believe in a power of infinite and unconditional love, simply because that power has revealed itself to me from within me" ("Examining" 296). Their labor should be devoted to loving God (Selby's conception of the embodiment of unconditional love): the only "true" way to achieving individual and communal happiness. Thus, when they decide to take action for themselves by looking towards materialism for comfort, their labor is ultimately in vain. Furthermore, the second verse expands upon the first: "Trust in the LORD with all thine / heart; and lean not unto thine / own understanding. // In all thy ways acknowledge him, / and he shall direct thy paths" (qtd. in Selby: 2). When Sara decides to pursue her dream of being a celebrity, she attempts to achieve happiness through *her*

wants, rather than trusting in the unconditional love of God to fill in the void/sadness in her life. Since Selby claims “the lack of love” is the disease, this abandonment of the love of God to achieve her own happiness is what eventually brings about Sara’s destruction. Thus, the Biblical verses function as a commentary on Selby’s text, which begins with an encounter between Sara and her son.

The opening sequence provides a great example of how Selby’s style works with Sara’s character. The novel opens with Harry physically isolating his mother by locking her in a closet:

Harry locked his mother in the closet. Harold. Please. Not again the TV. Okay, okay, Harry opened the door, then stop playin games with my head. He started walking across the room toward the television set. And dont bug me. He yanked the plug out of the socket and disconnected the rabbit ears. Sara went back into the closet and closed the door. Harry stared at the closet for a moment. So okay, okay. He started to push the set, on its stand, when it stopped with a jerk, the set almost falling. What the hells goin on here? (Selby, Requiem 3)

As this passage displays, Selby does not attempt to elaborate on physical descriptions. Harry simply *locked* his mother in the closet or *opened* the door; Selby thus avoids an intense and overly dramatic sense of detail. This minimalist approach towards composing scenes – just stating the action performed – allows him to use the narrative details that are essential to push the story forward without the qualifiers in between, thus keeping the reader situated inside of the character’s interiority without being distracted by a string of metaphors and similes. It allows the reader to know who the character is on the surface level of their existence, rather than by a comparison to something else. Thus, we do not know who or what they are *like*. We know who

they are based on their decisions and actions, and, as a result, the characters are unmediated by the intrusive detail of an outside narrator.

But, there is more to the technique than just bare terms for describing action. There are only few places in the novel where the narrator provides us with any physical description of the character, and, when the narrator does, it seems to be used to comment on the condition of the character. One example is when Sara is losing so much weight that her skin is starting to hang from her body: “The flesh was hanging from her upper arms like a hammock, but she was still not eating” (Selby, Requiem 210). Yet, we find out most of the physical characteristics of the characters through the characters themselves. We later know Sara’s hair is red because she and Ada dye it that color. We know Sara is overweight because she says so. We know she cannot fit into her red dress because she constantly eats; because she wants to go on a diet and the doctor states, “I see youre a little overweight” (122). Thus, at the beginning of the story, the reader is thrown right into the middle of a situation without knowing what the characters even look like. According to John O’Brien, this is a part of Selby’s experimental style that differs from popular fiction: “One of the tricks of popular fiction and movies is to have a character’s external features (his looks, dress, hair style, weight, height, speech) conform to his emotional, intellectual, and moral condition” (“Materials” 379). Thus, Sara could *look* like a very nice and “normal” person, and her son could be physically depicted as doped-up monster (red eyes, track marks, dirty, etc.). But, the narrator avoids using physical descriptions and language to comment on the characters or their actions, which in turn keeps the narrator in the same position in relation to the characters themselves: on the surface level of their textual existence. According to Robert Buckeye, Selby’s style differs from other types of fiction in order to achieve this surface level of his character’s existence, because “[t]here remains none of the consolations of fiction (beauty of

language, genius of insight, storyteller inventiveness) whereby the reader (or a certain type of reader) might remove or disengage himself, so that he might, among other things, consider image or scene, ideas, the art of it all” (Buckeye 375). Although my analysis of Selby’s style *is* considering “the art of it all,” it is not in the disengaged New Critical sense of analyzing strictly forms. Instead, it is Selby’s form that allows the reader to analyze how culture constructs his character’s interiority without the mediation of the narrator. In the opening passage, there is the action expressed by the narrator, Sara communicating with her son, and Harry communicating with his mother. The omniscient narrator does not allow the reader to see what Harry or Sara is thinking during this conflict, except through their dialogue. What they are thinking is what they are expressing aloud, or, as with the resolution of the scene, what a character says to their “self” inside their head. And as a result, it is as if Selby’s style simultaneously places the reader inside of both characters at the same time. No one character’s perspective is favored, and readers find themselves within the characters or their situations looking outward at the world, as displayed with the opening scene. It seems that this effect is achieved through Selby’s lack of a mediating narrator. As Robert Buckeye notes, Selby “not only strives for a fiction that is all on the surface, without need of explanation or interpretation, but also one that readers experience without the apparent intervention of art” (375). This is not only applicable to his writing style, but also the technical side of his writing too. Thus, Selby does not include punctuation to notate who is speaking, which seems to be important in attempting to place the reader inside of the situation because quotations and line breaks would also break-up the characters and, more importantly, their experiences during the scene into two separate entities. The lack of quotation and the long blocks of unbroken text – the same in this passage as in other passages – provides an extremely tight and claustrophobic effect, since the reader has nothing to break up the monotony of the

paragraph. And without text broken up by character dialogue or narration, it allows the reader to primarily experience a character's subjectivity/interior self. As a result, we imaginatively experience their world as the character experiences it too.

Robert Buckeye, in his article, "Some Preliminary Notes towards a Study of Selby," also suggests that the author "does not write about or speak to his subject as much as he locates himself in it" (375). And when we see how the previous scene is resolved, this statement seems more like a truth about Selby's style rather than an interpretation of it. For example, Harry leaves with his mother's television, and Sara remains in the closet sitting alone and talking to herself through her thoughts:

It wasn't happening. She didn't see it so it wasn't happening. She told her husband Seymour, dead these years, it wasn't happening. And if it should be happening it would be alright, so don't worry Seymour. This is like a commercial break. Soon the program will be back on and you'll see, they'll make it nice Seymour. It'll all work out. You'll see already. In the end it's all nice. (Selby, Requiem 4)

While Buckeye is primarily concerned with the author when he suggests that Selby "locates" himself within his characters, it also seems that this notion can work on two levels: for the author and for the narrator. He states that Selby's "characters discover they have no voice in the world, that their efforts to speak are frustrated, that no one listens, that at the end they are silenced and it is only their inner voice [...] that compels our attention. [...] [T]hat inner voice is Selby's testament" (Buckeye 375). And, this is exactly what is happening to Sara in the opening scene. Her son is attempting to silence her, and all we are left with at the end of the passage is Sara speaking to her "self," as constructed by her televisual experiences via the internalization of the Hollywood happy-ending myth. Furthermore, the inner voice compels our attention because,

in this particular instance, Selby is using the voice for an ironic effect. Not only does it display Sara's pleading for a hopeful resolution through her "private self" – which the resolution is anything but hopeful at the end of the novel – it also provides a glimpse into the utopian ideologies, as conveyed to her through her televisual experiences, that in turn comprise her "conceptual self." As discussed in further detail below, the "private" and "conceptual" selves displayed here are artificially constructed and, in this particular instance, by the cultural medium of television; thus, Selby's style allows the reader to experience the artificial nature of her constructed "selves." If Sara's pleading is Selby's testament to the reader about how American society silences individuals, then it is one that also bitterly expresses the exploitive orientation of a culture that ultimately leads to the destruction of vulnerable citizens, like Sara Goldfarb.

While in one sense the inner voice is Selby's testament to the reader of how his characters are silenced in the physical world they inhabit as, indeed, Buckeye suggests, it also can be applied to the narrator as well, which will provide further insight into Selby's style and its effects on the reader. For example, the narrator appropriates two important components of the characters: their language and their logic. In the previous scene, Sara pleads for a happy ending. But before she voices her hope, the narrator is stating that "[i]t wasn't happening. She didn't see it so it wasn't happening. She told her husband Seymour, dead these years, it wasn't happening" (4). It is obvious this is the narrator, and not Sara, speaking. First, the sentences are in past tense, and, secondly, the narrator is using pronouns to refer to her character. Selby uses the narrator to blur the lines between the characters and the third-person narration throughout the entire novel. Since the novel is split into sections and the sections are arranged according to which character(s) is/are being followed at any given moment, the narrative technique tends to draw attention to itself. To better understand this conflation of the narrator with the characters, it may

be best to look at other moments in the novel where the narrator appropriates the language of the characters to provide narrative details. Such a conflation seems to be most obvious when profanity is involved. When Harry, Tyrone, or Marion is speaking, it is usually profane; thus, the narrator's language is profane as well. For example, halfway through the novel, Harry and Tyrone are attempting to find heroin, but it is becoming increasingly scarce. The narrator states, "It seemed like the fuckin gods were against them. [...] At one time it seemed like they had a nice pile of bucks, now it seemed like they didnt have shit" (183). When Harry and Tyrone are talking about that situation, Tyrone states, "[T]hat was a bunch of mutha fuckin boolshit cause I heard it right from mah man there be a big bus on a ship carryin fifty mutha fuckin keys jim [...]" (183). On the other hand, Sara does not use profanity in her everyday language, but rather the language of someone who is naïve/innocent. So, the narrator does too. For example, when Sara is watching some Proctor and Gamble advertisements, the narration and dialogue is as follows: "She pulled her lips back as people brushed their teeth and ran their tongues over their teeth to be sure there was no telltale film, and felt a joy when that cutie pie little boy didnt have any cavities but he seemed so thin, he needs more meet on his bones" (12). Once again, the narrator has appropriated the language of the character ("that cutie pie little boy"), but looking at the structure of the sentence, it is obvious that the narrator, not Sara, is speaking; thus, Selby conflates the two and blurs the lines between the narrator and the character. But as the paragraph continues, it is harder to discern whether or not it is the narrator or Sara: "He shouldnt have any cavities, thank God, but he should have more meat on his bones. Like my Harold. So thin. I tell him, eat, eat, I see your bones" (12-3). Thus, Selby's narrator mimics the language of the characters in the given scene where the narration is occurring. However, there is more to it than just the appropriation of language. The stylistic choice allows the narrator to express the

mentality of the character for the reader; keeping the reader's experience on the surface level of text, which ultimately takes place inside of the character's existence: "What he seeks to present is the salient quality of his characters' emotional and mental existence" (O'Brien, "Notes" 101). Thus, in the previous scene, Harry and Tyrone are frustrated, so the narrator expresses, through the use of profanity, a sense of frustration too.

Since the narrator appropriates the language and voice of the characters, he/she (I use he/she for the narrator since Selby conflates the narrator with the given character in a scene) also functions as an outside, although blurred, entity that leads the reader into following the characters' logic in making their decisions, thus, justifying and contextualizing the characters' choices for the reader. A good example of how Selby uses the technique is when Sara starts her diet, where part of the character's meal plan is to have a half a cup of lettuce as the main course to her meal. In an attempt to compensate for the loss of food, Sara packs as much lettuce into half a cup as she possibly can. During this scene, the narrator, once again, appropriates the language of the character, but also enables the reader to follow the logic for her actions. As an omniscient third-person narrative perspective, the narrator, who avoids physical description and consequently mediation, should be, in this respect, an objective source for the reader's information. But since Selby blurs the lines between character and narrator, he/she justifies the character's actions and decisions based on the circumstances of the character's situation:

Sara checked the mail after a hearty lunch in which she had some extra lettuce. Well, actually you couldn't call it cheating because it was only half a cup of lettuce... Well, it really depends on how you measure: loose or tight. If you're just putting a little lettuce in the measuring cup there's already more air than lettuce. All Sara did was push out the air between the pieces of lettuce...very

hard, and got almost a half a head in half a cup. So whats the big deal? Youre not needing a toothpick no matter how much lettuce you eat. (74)

The narrator talks to the reader by using the “you” pronoun to relate the character’s actions, thus, speaking to readers as if this is something they will understand based on the contextualization of Sara’s circumstances. And once again, Selby is blurring the lines between character and narrator, and when the narrator speaks to the reader, Sara is too. What is most important in this stylistic choice is that it attempts to justify the mindset of the character, and, by conflating the narrator and Sara, as a result of which the reader is kept (in relation to the text) on the surface level of the character’s interior existence since Selby allows Sara’s logic and feelings to be expressed simultaneously through her actions and an outside source (the narrator). Since neither Sara nor the narrator explains why or how Sara does what she does, Selby’s style denies an objective analysis of her character’s history because there is always a context for any given event. In this sense, it seems that Selby attempts to adopt the modernist perspective that “we create the world in the act of perceiving it. *Modern* implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, loss, and despair. It rejects not only history but also the society of whose fabrication history is a record” (“Modern”). The conflation of character and narrator collapses any notions of objectivity. John O’Brien discusses Selby’s mixture of first and third-person perspectives and notes that “the narrator is not used to explain, interpret or comment[.] [...] What we have is a combination of how this character feels and thinks [...], while we are given a more objective perspective which the character himself could not supply and still remain the same character” (“Notes” 102). While we are given “a more objective perspective,” it is in the sense that Sara’s subjectivity – mediated by culture – creates her reality, and consequently, the narrator – the conflation of Sara’s thinking-talking self with the physical actions taking place outside of her

interior existence – is not directing for us to feel otherwise by contradicting/commenting on her actions. She acts based on the context of circumstance. If the narrator was not placed on the same level as the characters (expressed though language, voice, and/or logic), then the reader would be left to determine/judge the extent of their actions based on the mediation of an all-knowing narrator. It seems that Selby’s style collapses any concrete notions of right or wrong (outside of the Biblical transcriptions) due to the contextualization of the character’s circumstances, and, consequently, the effect of the conflation between narrator and character keeps the text on the surface level of Sara’s subjectivity as expressed through Selby’s style.

Since the reader (like Selby and the narrator) is situated inside of the character’s experiences, this hybridized-style allows the reader to primarily experience Sara’s interior self where she encounters the physical world and projects the ideologically-constructed reality of television onto her own experiences. What we see is Selby’s concern with “what goes on in our heads that creates the world we live in” (Selby, “Examining” 288). And for Sara, what is inside her head is mostly derived from the capitalist culture she is living within and experiences through her daily routine in front of the television. As noted above, Sara is a widow and lives alone. With the exception of the women in Sara’s apartment building, she is primarily isolated from human interaction. She does not have anyone to gauge her “self” against on a daily basis other than the artificially-constructed characters on her television-set, and as a result, Sara identifies with those characters as if they were real people. As will be seen in the following chapter, the scripted characters function as ideological substitutes for what *really* is missing in Sara’s life. While situated in the televisual utopia, Sara will not necessarily destroy herself *per se*, but she will remain situated in a static social position where she constantly (re)experiences the traditional gender roles that used to be a part of her life. As a result, she becomes a television

junkie “hooked” on the feeling of utopia, and, as will be seen in the last chapter, it is not until Sara gets the phone call from the McDick Corporation, presenting her with a chance to be on a game show, that her destruction truly begins. When the corporation offers Sara a chance to solidify her televisual experiences, it becomes apparent that Selby’s concerns are with capitalism and its victimization of vulnerable citizens like Sara. According to James R. Giles, “In it [Requiem] the various ways in which American capitalistic culture plays upon the resentment and loneliness of vulnerable people by promising them new identities is illustrated in grim and relentless detail” (Understanding 94). Giles concludes that in Requiem “American capitalism is viewed as a monolith that visibly and invisibly entraps and destroys its citizens” (Understanding 94). But rather than Selby totally absolving his character from any wrongdoing by placing the entire blame on societal factors (the naturalistic part of his fiction), the blame is simultaneously placed on both external (society) and internal (Sara’s agency) elements: “[A] profound emptiness at the very heart of America and of ‘the sin of pride’ that enables them [Selby’s characters] to deny the existential responsibility of asserting ethical control over their lives” (Giles, Understanding 104). If we recall the Biblical transcriptions prior to the start of the story, then it is obvious that Sara does not take the responsibility to change her life for the better: “She wanted to cry out, at least to herself, but she forgot that there was someone, something to call out to. [...] God” (Selby, Requiem 248). Before moving into that destructive realm of entertainment by chasing her dream of being on television, she lets food and television unreflectively control her life by living in an unproductive utopia of leisure and entertainment. In the following chapter, I will discuss the cultural construction of Sara’s selves, how these particular selves determine her reality, and the role television plays as a cultural medium in relation to Sara’s interiority.

CHAPTER II

The Cultural Construction of Sara's Selves and the Influence of Television

In order to examine the construction of Sara's psychical reality, it is important to establish the crucial role culture plays in forming the thinking-talking self inhabited within her physical body, since Selby's text is concerned with the interior of Sara's experiences.¹ While this brief overview of the theoretical points I plan to adopt in order to effectively discuss the role television plays in Sara's experiences will not be in any way complete in respect to the vast number of studies available about selves and culture and the relationship between the two, I have chosen two models that I feel will provide the best results when studying her character because they tend to avoid an oversimplification of the term "self." Instead, they complicate the notion of the self as a single entity. I first would like to look at the formation of selves, and, in order to understand this complicated process better, Ulric Neisser's "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge" presents a model that will provide a good start. I chose Neisser's model over others because Selby's style – particularly the mixing of the first and third person narration – addresses the fluidity of Neisser's five selves that comprise Sara's experience. As a companion to Neisser's essay, I also will draw upon Paul John Eakin's How Our Lives become Stories: Making Selves to add further commentary on the process and on Neisser's model since Eakin draws from its theoretical assumptions in his work. While Eakin is concerned primarily with the study of autobiography, the section dealing with Neisser's model can be applied to fiction as well, especially to Selby's particular style of writing. With the help of literature, psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy, his work breaks

¹ When I use the term "thinking-speaking self," I am referring to the fluidity of multiple selves that comprise Sara's subjectivity.

down the various factors involved in shaping our sense of self, thus, leading to the root of subjectivity. Like Eakin, I am drawn to Neisser's model over others because it addresses the notion that our unified sense of subjectivity is made up of multiple selves, rather than just one: "Self or selves? [...] His [Neisser's] fivefold modeling counters the tendency toward an oversimplifying reification that is one of the principal drawbacks of *self* as a term, a reification that obscures the multiple registers of self-experience he seeks to display" (Eakin 22). I primarily will concentrate only on his summary of and commentary on Neisser's model of five selves because Selby's style displays that all of these selves are present within Sara's character and come together to form Sara's subjective experience. Yet, it must be noted that Eakin cautions "that some [individuals] will detect overlappings and slippage among Neisser's five selves, while others will doubtless be moved to expand the list" (25).

Secondly, I will draw from three key terms of psychoanalytic criticism (ego, superego, and id) to provide further insight into Sara's character, because they address the pleasures she derives from eating and watching television. In this sense, we are able to see how Sara lets her id primarily control her experiences, rather than attempting to obtain any balance and self-control in her life, and as a result the reader can see why Selby claims that Sara, like the rest of his characters, "fail[s] because of lack of control" ("Interview" 315). While in this chapter I will be demonstrating how Selby displays Sara's experiences as ideologically constructed/formed, it will be even more important in the last chapter when we look at how those same cultural factors play a role in the destruction of her identity.

According to Neisser's model, the first self is the "ecological self": "the self as perceived with respect to the physical environment" (Neisser 36). Since Selby's style is a mixture of first and third person narrative perspectives, he does not allow the characters to state their physical

actions, but instead allows the intervention of the omniscient narrator to do it for them. Sara exhibits the ecological self with the help of the narrator: “She stared at the screen aware of the action and words, but her mind was still centered on the box of chocolates on the table next to her chair. She knew exactly how many were left...and what they were” (43). Thus, Sara is aware of her physical surroundings and mentally interacts with the physical world through her recognition of it.

Second, there is the “interpersonal self”: “[This self] is specified by species-specific signals of emotional rapport and communication: I am the person who is engaged, here, in this particular human interchange” (Neisser 36). Looking back at the first scene, Sara is interacting with her son, and vice versa. The interaction is in first person and unreflective: “Harold. Please. Not again the TV. Okay, okay, [...] then stop playin games with my head” (3). As displayed in the passage, Sara’s interpersonal self is simply the dialogue she is having with another character, and it can be seen in almost any scene where Sara is communicating with another individual.

According to Eakin, the first two selves are experienced by “unmediated, direct perception,” and the last three (extended, private, and conceptual) have a reflexive quality – which “follo[ws] the acquisition of language and the entry into symbol-making activity that accompanies it” – that provides an individual with the awareness of being alive: the “consciousness of consciousness” (24). And, it is these last three selves that are culturally determined: “Development of these selves is normally shaped and fostered in a concerted way at home and school by the adults of the child’s immediate culture” (Eakin 24). From childhood to adulthood, culture continues changing and affecting these selves as we live out our lives in whatever environment we inhabit. We encounter people, places, things, ideas, and events everyday, under the environment we are living within, that ultimately impact our subjectivity.

And in this sense, Eakin notes that the “[s]elf and self-experience [...] are not given, monolithic, and invariant, but dynamic, changing, and plural” (Eakin xi). Thus, our self experience is never static, but continually changing over the course of our lives.

When determining how Sara’s sense of self is composed of various cultural factors, it is important to keep in mind how the character wants to return to a state of motherhood and being a housewife. Before we are introduced to her character, two events greatly impact her life: the death of her husband and her son’s emotional abandonment. Instead of accepting herself as a widow or recognizing that her son does not want to be a part of her life any longer unless he takes her television to pawn for drug money, she is compelled to divert her attention to consuming television images and food to compensate for the loss in her life; to fill in the empty void. Daniel Chandler notes that “[t]he most important constancy in our understanding of reality is our sense of who we are as an individual. Our sense of self as a constancy is a social construction which is ‘over-determined’ by a host of interacting codes within our culture” (156). Thus, who we are and how we define ourselves (in Sara’s case, mother and housewife) as individuals is determined by various cultural factors (marriage and children) within our environment (America). We either accept certain roles or reject them and adopt others, or “take for granted our status as autonomous individuals with unique ‘personalities’” (Chandler 157). Sara falls into the latter of these categories, since she does not have “recognition” of the housewife and motherly roles as cultural constructs, thus, accepting them as a natural way of life:

Roles, conventions, attitudes, language – to varying degrees these are internalized in order to be repeated, and through the constancies of repetition a consistent locus gradually emerges: the self. Although never fully determined by these

internalizations, the self would be entirely undetermined without them (qtd. in Chandler: 156).

Thus, the process of self formation is one of repetitive exposure to culturally-defined “roles, conventions, attitudes, [and] language,” where how we act becomes normalized over a period of time. It begins at childhood and is carried through into adulthood where the end result is the feeling of unified sense of being: “[S]ociety depends upon the fact that its members grant its founding fictions, myths or codes a taken-for-granted status” (qtd. in Chandler: 157). Of course, when changes (death and abandonment) occur to what has been internalized and/or normalized (housewife and mother roles), our unified sense of being becomes fragmented/disrupted. And, this is important when considering Selby’s elderly character. Thus, I now want to return to the last three selves in order to understand culture’s influence on Sara’s experiences.

Neisser labels the third self as the “extended self”: “[This self] is based primarily on our personal memories and anticipations: I am the person who had certain specific experiences, who regularly engages in certain specific and familiar routines” (Neisser 36). Anytime Sara is reflecting upon past memories or excitingly anticipating her upcoming appearance on the elusive television show, she is displaying this third sense of self: “[S]he looked through the eyes of many yesterdays at herself in the gorgeous red dress and gold shoes she wore when her Harry was bar mitzvahed...Seymour was alive then...and not even sick” (Selby, Requiem 28). Thus, Sara recognizes herself existing outside of the present moment, and, in this particular instance, the memory of being a beautiful wife is engaged by the act of attempting to squeeze into her red dress: the material object that is used to represent an idyllic physical and mental state of being Sara wishes to achieve by losing weight before going on the television program. Selby expresses

Sara's extended self in third and first person, and, as with the previous passage, the conflation of the two.

The fourth self is an important one for Selby, and it essentially is what we are reading on the page. This self is the "private self": "The *private self* appears when children first notice that some of their experiences are not directly shared with other people: I am, in principle, the only person who can feel this unique and particular pain" (Neisser 36). The private self is Sara's conscious everyday experiences as she moves and interacts in her environment. It is similar to her ecological and interpersonal selves, except mediated by culture since it is *her* private, conscious interaction with the immediate world around her. In order to illustrate this self's cultural influence, Neisser quotes Isaiah Berlin's record of Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico's discovery of having a private self: "He [Vico] uncovered a sense of knowing that is basic to all humane studies: the sense in which I know what it is to be poor, to fight for a cause, to belong to a nation, to join or abandon a church or party, to feel nostalgia, [...] to understand a gesture, a work of art" (qtd. in Neisser: 51). It is the type of knowing that is bound to the particularities of culture (economic position, technology, religious beliefs, etc.), or in Berlin's terms it is not "like knowing how to ride a bicycle or win a battle or what to do in a case of fire," but rather "a knowing founded on memory and imagination (qtd. in Neisser: 52). For Sara, it is to know that "[i]n the end its all nice" (4), because that is what she acquires from her televisual experiences. This self also can be articulated as Sara talking to herself inside her head: expressing hope, pain, happiness, sadness, etc. She is the only one who can feel these emotions. As discussed earlier, this is Buckeye's notion of the inner voice that the author uses when a particular character is silenced by the world, like Sara in the beginning of the novel. This is Sara in the first person consciously expressing that "[t]his is like a commercial break. Soon the

program will be back on and you'll see, they'll make it nice Seymour. It'll all work out. You'll see already. In the end it's all nice" (4). The private self is expressed through Sara and/or the narrator, when the narrator appropriates the logic of the characters, such as he/she does in the first scene when he/she is expressing that "[i]t wasn't happening. She didn't see it so it wasn't happening" (4). In this particular example, her private self as a cultural construct is explicit. She is locked in a closet expressing hope that things will eventually be better between her and her son like the ending of a television show. In other words, she is expressing through her private self her belief that things will work like she witnesses in the Hollywood happy-endings from her televisual experiences. Moreover, Sara even interacts and identifies with the characters on television through her private self, and we are able to witness her vicariously (re)experience the roles of the housewife and mother that are no longer a part of her life.

Finally, there is the "conceptual self," and it is this particular self that is the most difficult to define. Here, I will refer to Eakin's summary of the conceptual self: "the extremely diverse forms of self-information – social roles, personal traits, theories of body and mind, or subject and person – that posit the self as a category, either explicitly or implicitly" (23). It is important to note that, like the model of the five selves, Neisser's conceptual self lists five kinds of self-information that Eakin states is merely just "one such conceptual model" (23). Thus, it remains contestable and expandable, and it is not by any means definitive in respect to the possibilities for self-information. Furthermore, the conceptual self is important because it is how Sara understands who she is and who she feels she is supposed to be. It should be noted that is more difficult to discern than the other selves, and the reader is implicitly and explicitly informed of it through Sara's thoughts, memories, behaviors, and aspirations, such as her identification with the socially-constructed roles of the housewife and mother figures in the commercials and soap

opera. I will primarily focus on Sara's "conceptual self" throughout the rest of this study, since it is the one that is the most ideologically informed, and I will return to it briefly. First, I want to look at the relationship between Niesser's selves and three basic Freudian psychoanalytic terms (id, ego, and superego) that will provide further insight into Sara's character, especially her obsessive and uncontrollable desires.¹

In The Ego and the Id, Freud employs the term, super-ego (or ego ideal), to define our sense of "conscience or perhaps of an unconscious sense of guilt" stemming from "the influence of authority, religious teaching, schooling and reading" (30). Essentially, these are the morals and values acquired by society that provide us with a sense of right and wrong. This is an important concept when considering Sara's addiction to food and her struggles with it, since she feels guilty for eating chocolates and "almost cried as she remembered how she had fought so hard to make the box of chocolates last two days, something that had never happened before" (44-5). Thus, it is her super-ego, or conscience, that is battling with her id to fulfill her regretful desire of eating. Freud notes that "the pleasure principle [...] reigns unrestrictedly in the id" (19), and he defines "the id as the great reservoir of libido" (25n). In this sense, Sara's psychical drive/energy is to eat. Eating provides her pleasure. When Selby suggests that his characters have lost control, he is referring to Sara's inability to suppress her desires by letting her id control her decisions. This struggle between the id (the desire to eat chocolate) and super-ego (the social value that says we should control our eating habits) takes place in the ego. Freud notes that "[t]he ego, which to begin with is still feeble, becomes aware of the object-cathexes,

¹ It should be noted that Freud abandoned these terms mid-career for the terms, "Conscious vs. Unconscious." But, I chose to include them (id, super-ego, and ego) because they provide a better understanding of Sara's conflicting obsessions and her inability/unwillingness to suppress her uncontrollable desires. It sets up Sara's wants (food/overweight), society's influence (diet/thin), and the end result of the two (addict).

and either acquiesces in them or tries to fend them off by the process of repression” (23). Thus, the ego is the result of the battle between the id and the super-ego, and in this sense, Sara’s ego is driven by her unconscious desires. She does not practice self-restraint, but rather caters to her every want: television, food, and, later, diet pills. If Sara wants food, she is not going to stop herself from eating it, even if she feels, as a result of society deeming it so, that it is wrong to eat in such an over-indulgent way: “She never let that happen again. Never again was she so foolish as to try and make it last or save it for later or the next day” (45). Sara’s ego – which ultimately controls her subjective experiences – is almost completely given over to her id. In order to maintain happiness, she lets her desires control who she is, thus, compensating for who she feels like she is supposed to be (a nurturing mother and housewife). The ego is essentially the same as all five of Neisser’s selves working together in order to create our subjectivity. It is the most conscious of the three terms (ego, id, super-ego), and Freud notes that “[a]s a frontier-creature, the ego tries to mediate between the world and the id, to make the id pliable to the world and, by means of its muscular activity, to make the world fall in with the wishes of the id” (58).¹ When considering Selby’s style, it seems this is where he attempts to situate the reader in regard to the text. We do not get physical descriptions of her character, but are instead reading her ego as it interacts with the physical world. And when reading Sara’s self in Selby’s text, we can see how various cultural factors have come together in order to create it.

For Sara, her three primary forms of “self-information,” when we meet her at the beginning of the story, derive from her culturally-informed roles as a former homemaker, a

¹ An alternate definition of ego that is equally important as the psychoanalytic definition is “the conscious thinking subject” (“Ego”).

widow, and a mother to a child who has abandoned his nest.¹ Obviously, the men in Sara's life (husband and son) have a crucial part in each of these roles, and Selby's text suggests that she is a victim of America's patriarchal culture. When we look at Sara's character and how she has internalized the socially-defined gender role of the nurturing mother and submissive housewife so much that it effects every part of her present reality, it seems true that "[w]hat the whole tradition of culture does, and for whom, is at issue with Selby. [...] Selby's fiction is always essentially the same: his protagonists are dispossessed in one way or another by background, environment or education" (Buckeye 374). American life has taught Sara to be a housewife to her husband and a mother to her son, but it has not taught what to do when these roles are over. And since the primary component of Sara's character is her desire to be nurturing, she can no longer experience this role in her real life, since her husband is deceased and her son has nothing to do with her. This characteristic provides Sara with a sense of who she feels she is supposed to be. As Daniel Chandler puts it, "Learning these [cultural] codes involves adopting values, assumptions and 'worldviews' which are built into them without normally being aware of their intervention in the construction of reality" (157). It is this nurturing role that creates the most conflict for Sara's current sense of being, thus, causing her to feel that something is missing in her life without consciously knowing the "real" reason of how or why she is feeling like she is. Referring back to Freud, the superego is important here, too, because it implies that Sara feels this way because she has been programmed by society to feel as such. It is the internalization of the social value that a woman needs a man in order to be complete. Halfway through the novel, she desperately pleads to her son about her life, "What have I got Harry? Why should I even

¹ If the reader considers Sara's approximate age, along with novel's 1970 setting, it seems easy to historically contextualize the elderly character as growing up during a time period when she was constantly subject to internalizing the housewife role.

make the bed or wash the dishes? I do them, but why should I? Im alone. Seymours gone, youre gone [...] I have no one to take care of. [...] What do I have? Im lonely Harry. Im old” (143). When Harry counters his mother’s pleading by telling her that “[y]ou got friends ma” (143), it is then that Selby makes explicit that what *is* missing in Sara’s life is the artificially constructed “role” of woman as caregiver/nurturer: “Its not the same. You need someone to make for” (143). Sara’s “need” reveals that she has internalized the social role and accepts it as a natural measure of her life and identity. At the present moment, her husband is dead, her son has abandoned her, and there is no one left to nurture. Thus, with a disruption in this “conceptual self,” Sara searches for the means to “happiness” in other places.

As stated in the introduction, when we first meet Sara’s character, she seems to be sitting around her apartment waiting to die. It seems that she has nothing to live for anymore because her role as caregiver is over, and as a result she attempts to fill in the void in her life by watching television and eating food. In this sense, television functions as a utopian distraction from her real life. As Richard Dyer comments on the nature of entertainment,

[It] offers the image of “something better” to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don’t provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized. [...] [T]he utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. (373)

Like her son who is addicted to the numbing “feeling” heroin gives him, Sara becomes “hooked” on the feeling of utopia. And until she gets the phone call to appear on the game show, she lets that feeling primarily govern her experiences, before it is replaced by another one (the weight

loss, red dress, and game show appearance). Thus, there is almost no scene with Sara, throughout the entire novel, where the television is not powered on, before she is admitted into Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital. She is either turning the television on, already watching it, adjusting the tuning for clarity, or turning it off (e.g., Requiem 12, 24-25, 29, 42, 45, 51-52, 55, 62, 71, 85, 92, 96, 125, 151, 159, 162, 169, 182, 210, 211, 212). The last of these actions is especially important because Selby does not note that the television set is turned on at the beginning of the section, implying that Sara had it on throughout that entire portion of the novel. Even if the set does not appear to be there, it is. Since Sara is a widow living alone without anyone to keep her company, the omnipresent television set fills in the void in her life and serves as a substitution for human companionship. And as a result, she immerses herself in a conversational relationship with the televisual characters. These scripted and artificially constructed characters fulfill Sara's needs because of her identification with them.

There is only one section where Selby displays in detail what Sara is viewing on the television-set, but it is all the reader needs in order to determine how the character's utopian needs are met through watching television. It seems that Selby only provides detail for this one section because it represents Sara's general viewing experiences, thus, displaying that this is all television has to offer for her character. Furthermore, this scene displays Sara's identification with those characters that embody the social roles that informed aspects of her former conceptual self; the ones she struggles with leaving behind. In the first part of the section, Sara is watching a series of Proctor and Gamble commercials, and, in the second part, she is watching what appears to be a soap opera, even though it is not explicitly stated as such in the text.¹ The first

¹ The section is so short that it never really provides the reader with enough details to fully indicate that it is indeed a soap opera. But, the show is a drama, running during the daytime, and features commercials catering to women that appear to be of a housewife/homemaker status. What Selby does display for the reader does have some of the

commercial is for a brand of toothpaste. While she watches the commercial, she examines the young actor and expresses concern over his well-being as if he were a real individual, at the same time, comparing him to her son: “[She] felt a joy when that cutie pie little boy didnt have any cavities but he seemed so thin, he needs more meat on his bones. He shouldnt have any cavities, thank God, but he should have more meat on his bones. Like my Harold. So thin. I tell him, eat, eat, I see your bones” (Selby, Requiem 12-13). It is important for the reader to keep in mind that Sara is sitting alone, and Selby is displaying what it is going on inside her head, i.e. her private self. She not only associates parts of her life with what is happening on television, she seems to almost confuse it with reality itself, and it seems Selby is suggesting that her televisual experiences function as more than just escape. Since Sara’s son is absent from her life, the “cutie pie little boy” seems to work as an imaginative substitution. It allows her to worry about her son as if he were still present in her life, thus fulfilling that “needed” role as the motherly nurturer. As Christine Geraghty states, “Entertainment thus offers the experience of a different world, one which is escapist precisely because it is based on the inadequacies experienced in day-to-day life” (320). Even though hidden, it is the possibility of the utopia that is always present in Sara’s viewing experience, explaining her addiction to it. And as the scene continues, this becomes more apparent.

But before moving ahead to the next commercial, I want to discuss the complexity of the utopia Sara is “hooked” on through her televisual experiences in order to better understand what

conventional characteristics that measure up with daytime dramas, while it has some that do not. And if the reader follows the timeline of events, there is one more clue that the show she is watching could be a soap opera. After the detailed scene I have been discussing, the next scene that focuses on Sara is when she receives her phone call from the McDick Corporation. There is no indication of how much time has lapsed between the two scenes, but it appears to be minutes, maybe hours at the most. As soon as Sara hangs up the phone, she goes over to Ada’s apartment, and the text does indicate that they are watching a soap opera (Requiem 28). The point is that there is no concrete proof for labeling the generic form of her entertainment, but it does provide a basis for what kind of entertainment the character watches.

her character draws from those experiences and how she remains in a static social position while situated inside of the televisual utopia. First, I will look at Sara's entertainment to see if the utopian solutions are present within the text of the commercials and the show, and secondly I will examine the solutions' relevance to the issues in Sara's life. As Richard Dyer observes, "To be effective, the utopian sensibility has to take off from the real experiences of the audience" (377). The utopia that Dyer and Christine Geraghty expound upon is based on "real needs created by real inadequacies" ("scarcity," "exhaustion," "dreariness," "manipulation," and "fragmentation"). When examining the two commercials and the scene from the soap opera, all five of the real societal inadequacies are met with a utopian solution: scarcity with abundance, exhaustion with energy, dreariness with intensity, manipulation with transparency, and fragmentation with community (Dyer 376). For example, the household cleaner commercial depicts a "tired husband com[ing] home from a tough day on the job and is so overwhelmed by the dazzling clothes and sparkling floor that he forgets about the worries of the world and he picks up his wife [...] and spun her around" (13). Already, it is obvious that the husband's exhaustion from work is countered by the energy he has when he picks up his wife and spins her around. Scarcity of financial wealth does not seem to be a problem for the couple (displayed through the niceness of their material objects such as sparkling floors and dazzling clothes), and manipulation, on a larger scale, could be ruled out too, although it is acknowledged that the housewife has placed TV dinners on the table, and the husband is lead to believe that he is sitting down to a home cooked meal. But, this could be considered irrelevant in the scope of determining their relationship as truly manipulative since it is depicted in such a playful and flirtatious way.

As for dreariness, which is solved by intensity, the commercial uses “boxes of detergent explod[ing] into dazzling white clothes and bottles of household cleaner explod[ing]” too (Selby, Requiem 13). And as for the soap opera Sara is watching, the plot line involves a mother dramatically making a life-changing decision to let a doctor operate on her son. On the surface level, fragmentation, which is relieved by the feeling of community, does not appear to be an issue in the commercials or the show, unless we stretch what Sara is watching on television to incorporate the namely issue. Thus, the happy couple in the household cleaner commercial and the mother, son, and doctor’s achievement of a happy ending in the soap opera may be considered as meeting the communal need. Selby even makes a point to include in the commercial “that he [the husband] forgets about the worries of the world” (13); thus once again, meeting the utopian solutions. Sara, too, extracts these solutions from the commercials, which are arguably needed in her life.

On the surface level of the text, exhaustion, scarcity, and manipulation do not appear to be issues. But if we look at moments later in the novel, there are hints that these are issues in Sara’s life. Besides cleaning her apartment, she does not experience exhaustion from “the daily grind” and never really appears tired. On the other hand, exhaustion could be extended to include her lack of energy from old age, which may be why she loves her diet pills and coffee so much later in the story: “If only she knew about this before. She was feeling so young, so full of energy like she is climbing mountains. [...] She couldnt wait to tell them that she found the fountain of youth and Im telling you, its not at the Fountainblew” (124). Furthermore, Sara does not work and is never truly concerned with financial matters. As James R. Giles states about Requiem’s characters, “Three of its four main characters [Sara, Harry, and Tyrone] are from the lower rungs of the great American middle class; their initial level of economic security, while

certainly fragile, is still real” (Understanding 5). But, Sara does take pride in her material possessions. At one point in the novel, she begins hallucinating that her worst fears are coming true. Since she has been imagining herself on television throughout various parts of the story, she now sees herself and the TV announcer stepping out of the television set and walking around her apartment: “[S]he roamed around the apartment, occasionally looking at Sara disapprovingly and gave a huff and a humf, and continued on her way inspecting everything and finding fault with everything and giving Sara that look of looking down while looking up” (Selby, Requiem 162). Sara reacts to this by getting angry and defensive about the material objects: “For three mornings it happened and each time Sara felt worse as she watched them look at the shabbiness of her apartment, What do you expect? You could do better all alone? Its an old building. Ten years no painting, maybe more. Im old” (163). If scarcity is met with financial abundance, then Sara would not care about these issues since she would inherently have enough money to be able to “keep up with Joneses” by being able to buy nothing but new objects. In “Soap Opera and Utopia,” Christine Geraghty looks at how consumption figures into women’s entertainment in an effort to achieve utopia: “What *Dallas* and *Dynasty* offer is the feeling of what it would be like to have all material needs met, to conquer scarcity and enjoy abundance. [...] With a world where everything is on offer, the viewer is safe merely to enjoy, without the fear that anything will run out” (323). Since Sara takes pride in her material possessions, entertainment offers her the alternative to experience a world where financial scarcity is not a concern.

Manipulation, although present in her life, is never fully realized as a problem to Sara because Selby depicts her in such a naïve and childlike way. Christine Geraghty states that “a feeling of manipulation, an inability to get beneath the surface, is contrasted with the utopian concept of transparency, of ‘open, spontaneous, honest communications and relationships’”

(320). Sara does not have this feeling of “an inability to get beneath the surface” in her real-life relationships, which is obvious since she has no idea that her son is really using and dealing drugs, that all doctors are not as good as she thinks, and that the McDick Corporation really does not care about her, although, Sara could be in denial about these things and therefore does not ever admit it. Even though manipulation is relevant to her life, she is not looking for this need to be met in her entertainment, since she does not seem to realize it as a problem in her real life. She seems naïve rather than living in a blissful oblivion.

The last two societal issues, dreariness and fragmentation, are more obvious than the other three. As for the former of the two, this societal issue is “set against the utopian solution of intensity with its emphasis on excitement and drama in individuals’ lives” (Geraghty 320). When she is pleading with her son that she has no one to care for, she exclaims, “What do I have? Im lonely Harry. Im old” (143). Her life consists of her daily routine: cleaning, watching television, eating, sleeping, and occasionally going outside with her friends. Furthermore, when Sara attempted to wait all night and not eat one of her chocolates but could not control her self and failed to do so, the narrator states, “That was a bleak day in the life of Sara Goldfarb” (45). It was not only bleak because she failed, but also because she does not have much going on with her life other than watching television. Outside of the opening scene where Harry locks her in a closet, this is the extent of the excitement in her life. Thus, she turns to television to fulfill this need.

As for the last of the issues, fragmentation is met with the feeling of community. In one sense, Sara has friends (Ada and Rae) who are there for her and genuinely seem to care about her. For example, when Sara begins losing her mind and is on the sidewalk holding onto a pole, the ladies help her back to Ada’s apartment, give her warm tea, and then take her to the doctor

for help: “Why dont you go to see your doctor? He can give you a anti something. My appointment isnt for two days. For two days? Whats the matter, you get sick by appointment?” (168). In this scene, Ada and Rae attempt to reason with Sara to go to her doctor, even though Sara does not feel like she needs to go. In another scene, Ada shows compassion for her friend after she notices that Sara is growing increasingly thin: “You should eat. [...] Sara, theres something wrong. Im happy the dress is fitting, but Im worried. Your eyes dont look good doll. Please, please, let me fix something for you... some soup. [...] Ada looked sad as well as worried” (194). Another instance of Sara belonging to a community of friends is when she sits outside with various women from her apartment building as they attempt to get some sun as it comes over the city buildings. While Selby does not provide any details about the lives of the other women, there is a sense of a feminist sisterhood among them. When Sara reveals that she is on a diet, one of the women comes to her defense when another one is talking about food: “You shouldnt talk like that already when someones on a diet” (75). Thus, Sara and the other woman share a similar experience of attempting to assert a form of self-control over their eating habits in order to lose weight, and the woman quickly comes to Sara’s defense. Another woman in the same group suggests diet pills to Sara as a quicker and easier way for her to lose weight. Even though these ultimately lead her to her destruction, the woman is attempting to help Sara, not hurt her. In another sense, Sara is able to achieve a feeling of community by watching television with her friends: “They [Sara and Ada] sat down in the living room, strategically, so each could keep an eye, and ear, tuned to the television set [...]” (28). And, it is their similar tastes in television shows that creates a stronger bond between the two women, since “taste is the key to the *formation* of social groups and alliances” (Frith 170). Yet, even though Sara achieves

some sense of community in her real life, there is a lack of it in her immediate family, since her husband is dead and her drug-addled son has nothing to do with her.

Other than her friends who live in the same building with her, Sara lives alone, and Selby only displays two scenes in the entire novel where she and her son are together: the beginning when he locks her in a closet and the middle when he realizes she is on speed (diet pills), promising to return, though he never does. Geraghty notes that the utopian solution for fragmentation is achieved through women characters who take “the form of the matriarchs[:] [...] they bring isolated and disparate individuals into the community/family; they organise its rituals; they transmit its values and spin the web of gossip through which it is continually renewed” (324). We do see Sara attempting to “spin the web of gossip” after Harry leaves her the last time: “[S]he decided to finished the pot of coffee and then go out and tell the ladies about how good her Harry was doing with his own business and a fiancée and how she/ll soon be a grandmother” (145). Of course, Harry only tells her what she wants to hear, and none of this is true, even though Sara really wants it to be. Furthermore, when we see Sara interacting with her entertainment and projecting the ideals she acquires from it onto her son through her private self, it seems that she is trying to achieve, through a matriarchal role, the feeling of community. And, this is explicit at the end of the section where she is watching the soap opera and commercial: “Some day he/ll meet a nice girl and he/ll settle down and make me a grandmother” (14). Thus, Sara displays a “real” societal need for community that is met through her televisual experiences, even though it does not explicitly appear to be present in her choice for entertainment. In the final chapter, I will return to the concept of community because, even though Sara wants it, it is only in the sense of her being at the center of its attention.

Even though some of the “real” issues do not appear to be present in Sara’s life and are not fully realized by Sara as problems, they are there and the commercials and shows she watches address the issues with the proper solutions. Likewise, the concept of utopia being achieved through entertainment based on Sara’s personal wants is also achieved. But as Richard Dyer states, “[E]ntertainment, by so orienting itself to them [real needs], effectively denies the legitimacy of other needs and inadequacies, and especially of class, patriarchal and sexual struggles” (377). Once again, Sara does not realize herself as a victim of patriarchal culture. So, if the entertainment she was watching did, in fact, attempt to meet those particular needs (patriarchal and sexual struggles), it is possible her character would not fully realize those inadequacies as problems of the culture anyway. Sara’s personal or non-real issues are met by the entertainment’s reinforcement of social roles as being a natural component of everyday life. This is what Sara also “needs”: to live vicariously through the actor’s scripted lives. Thus, the first commercial, as well as the soap opera, fulfills one role and the second commercial fulfills another to add another layer to the utopian feeling Sara is searching for as a television junkie. And by constantly (re)experiencing these roles within the televisual utopia, Sara is situated in an immobile social position where she is comfortably at home within her meager existence, since it provides a substitution for the real lack of substance in her life. Therefore, she does not try to change it, until she receives the telephone call from the McDick Corporation.

After the toothpaste commercial, there is the household cleaner commercial. This commercial is equally important because it allows her to vicariously (re)experience her role as housewife. After “the boxes of detergent exploded” and the tired husband “forgets all about the worries of the world,” he “picked up his wife and spun her around and they ended up stretched out on the sparkling and dazzling bright kitchen floor [...]” (13). Once again, the scene

reinforces patriarchal roles, and the ideology that the commercial communicates is part of the American discourse on domestic life: “the tired husband [who] comes home from a tough day on the job” and the “nice girl [who] keeps a clean house” sitting down to dinner at the end of the day (13). Even though Sara is watching a commercial during the break for a soap opera, one of Christine Geraghty’s suggestions about the different functions of soap operas can apply to the two commercials when taken together: “Different functions are fulfilled by different programmes and it is only when we look at the range of soaps that we can understand that the utopian promise is offered by the soap opera genre taken as a whole” (321).

There are two reasons why I have chosen to include the commercials as a form of entertainment similar to the soap opera. First, Sara enjoys commercials, and she even interacts with them like she does with the characters in the show: “The next one should be a kitty litter. They got nice pussy cats. They purr so nice. [...] O hello puss. O, youre a sweetie little puss. So cuddly like a baby” (51). For Sara, the commercials seem to function in the same way as the soap opera does: to achieve the utopian feeling. Yet, the commercials are only one part of the complete utopian experience. Secondly, the two commercials are strategically designed to run during the time of day that soap operas/women’s entertainment programs are being aired, which inherently shows the constructed nature of the entertainment industry as well as the audience being viewed as a type of commodity. Simon Frith states that “‘entertainment’ in this context does not describe the sort of work sold to an audience, but the sort of audience sold to an advertiser, an audience at leisure, *having a good time*” (169). When placing the commercials and the shows together in this context, there is the sense of “flow” that is created. John Fiske observes in this regard: “[T]elevision is a continuous succession of images which follows no laws of logic or cause and effect, but what constitutes the cultural experience of ‘watching

television” (99). The concept of flow is important here because it suggests that “this associative sequence of images in which any realistic sequence within films or programs is constantly interrupted by commercials, by news breaks, by promos” (Fiske 99). Even though the commercials in between the programs interrupt the flow of the shows, they are strategically used by advertisers as an ideological thread for commercialism, which bonds the entertainment together back into its continuous flow. John Fiske notes that “[s]cheduling strategy designs the sequence and choice of programs in an attempt to build and hold a large prime-time audience whose demographics are desired by advertisers” (102). In this respect, the commercials, when taken with the soap opera, reinforce culturally-constructed gender roles and, ultimately, contribute to Sara’s disruption in her conceptual self by aiding in the naturalization of the motherly and subservient housewife roles that the character no longer can identify with as a part of her current self. Ian Ang notes that “daytime soap operas [...] *are* made with an eye to a specific social audience, namely housewives” (117). And when we see how the entertainment and advertising industries work together to naturalize these roles, it is no wonder why James R. Giles states that “[t]he unifying motif in Selby’s novel is that American capitalism rests upon certain unifying structures that are ultimately antagonistic to the welfare of its individual citizens” (Understanding 110). While Giles is referring to the combination of Sara’s television addiction and the call from the McDick Corporation, the commercials (the advertising industry) and the soap opera (the entertainment industry) could also be included as part of those “antagonistic” structures working together to contribute to the disruption of Sara’s conceptual self by propagating the outmoded role of woman as nurturer, which only sets the character up later for destruction.

As discussed above, while the commercials create the utopia based on the “real” needs of society, both of them serve different functions for Sara’s personal needs: the nurturing mother and the housewife. Thus, what is telling about the scene is that, as the commercial continues, we see Sara happily identifying with this image of the housewife:

[A]nd then the TV dinners were artistically arranged on the table and the wife smiled at Sara, that sly, we have a secret kind of smile, when the husband exclaimed enthusiastically what a great cook she is and Sara smiled and winked and didnt tell that it was a TV dinner and the happy couple looked into each others eyes as they ate their dinner. (13)

Here, her identification with the housewife role is obvious: “we have a secret kind of smile [...] Sara *smiled* and *winked*” (13). Like the previous commercial, Sara is identifying with the image depicted because it is supplying the need of an inadequacy in her everyday life: her former role as homemaker. John Fiske labels Sara’s identification with the television actress as a “psychological identification”: “the projection of personal characteristics onto an external body or object in order to understand them better” (170). This idea helps the reader understand the relationship Sara experiences with the characters within the domain of her private self. First, it emphasizes the wish fulfillment that Sara is searching for: “[I]t is mere escapism, and in encouraging people to imagine a better existence for themselves discourages them from working to achieve it in reality” (Fiske 170). Keeping in mind that Sara lives alone and primarily in her imagination, it keeps her in a static social position where she is happily “hooked” – “the reward for identification is pleasure” (Fiske 170) – on the feeling of what that role used to feel like, instead of moving forward with her life.

The second implication of Sara's identification with the television characters, this time from an ideological standpoint, shows that she is internalizing, or maintaining, the socially constructed gender roles that are reproduced and projected onto her television screen: "[T]he ideologists argue that identification is the process whereby the values of the dominant ideology are naturalized into the desires, almost the instincts, of the individual, and are thus endlessly reproduced and perpetuated" (Fiske 170). Thus, instead of Sara accepting herself as a widow and former housewife, she can continually re-experience the role because "[t]his sort of identification enables a viewer to enter the character's skin in a way that is impossible with real people for characters are never fully represented in the text – they are metonyms that invite the viewer to fill in the rest" (Fiske 170). When Sara identifies with the characters, she can project the fulfilled role back onto her real situation, since her loneliness and real societal need of "fragmentation" makes her yearn for a family, which she expects her son to provide for her: "Some day he'll meet a nice girl and he'll settle down and make me a grandmother" (Selby, Requiem 14). Thus, she wants Harry to meet someone like his mother: a caring housewife. And since Sara is the cliché smothering mother, she will not let her son breathe, which is displayed through his tension whenever she wants to know about his life. This scene reinforces the source of Sara's values, and how she projects and perpetuates those values onto her son: "My Harold should find such a girl. A nice young jewish girl like that" (13). Thus, Sara wants her son to find a housewife that represents the ideals that she embodies and television reinforces as the natural way of life.

In order to further understand how television propagates the naturalization of gender roles, it now seems necessary to consider what John Fiske and John Hartley call "the three-orders of signification" used to decode the signs of the visual images displayed to Sara in the form of

the commercial. The first-order of signification is described as denotative; the second as connotative and mythological; and the third as ideological. The first is relatively straightforward as it is used to define what is literally being depicted on the screen, i.e. the self-contained surface level of meaning. For the second and third-order levels of signification, I will refer to Daniel Chandler's summarization of Fiske and Hartley's concept because it is concise. It is "[t]he second (connotative) order of signification [that] reflects 'expressive' values which are attached to a sign" (Chandler 145). And, it is "the third (mythological or ideological) order of signification [...that] reflects major culturally variable concepts underpinning a particular world view – such as masculinity, femininity, freedom, individualism, objectivism, Englishness, and so on" (Chandler 145).¹ The first order is easiest to see because it is literally what the narrator states as being displayed on the television screen. The second levels of meaning reinforce Sara's former conceptual self and what she is extracting from her television viewing: the woman's role is to happily serve, emotionally and physically, her husband who has been working to financially support the family.

According to Fiske and Hartley, the idea of the myth occurs "[w]hen a sign carries cultural meanings rather than merely representational ones, [thus,] it has moved into the second order of signification" (41-42). It seems that myths serve an even more important role because "[t]heir function is to naturalize the cultural – in other words, to make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes and beliefs seem entirely 'natural,' 'normal,' self-evident, timeless, obvious 'commonsense' – and thus objective and 'true' reflections of 'the way things are' (Chandler 145). Thus, Sara's continual exposure to the housewife role as her "natural" state

¹ It should be noted that all three of these theorists, Fiske, Hartley, and Chandler, relatively define the three-orders of signification in the same way. Fiske and Hartley place the mythological component as part of the second-order sign. And, Chandler places it within the third.

through a cultural medium such as television only helps to complicate her current role as a widow and “sonless” mother, and since she views the binary (masculine and feminine) roles as natural, she attempts to pass the ideology onto her son. Furthermore, the connotative level of meaning works in other ways too. In Watching Dallas, Ien Ang examines the popular TV series, Dallas, and looks at the denotative and connotative levels of meaning in relation to the viewers’ experience. While she suggests that on the denotative level the viewer realizes the show is only a scripted drama, on the connotative level, there is a sense of realism: “In other words, at a connotative level they [the viewers] ascribe mainly emotional meanings to *Dallas*. In this sense the realism of *Dallas* can be called an ‘emotional realism’” (Ang 45). When we see Sara interacting with the boy and woman in the commercials or when Sara is leaning forward in her chair anticipating the next move and guaranteeing one of the characters that everything will work out in the soap opera, what we see is Sara experiencing the emotional realism of the entertainment: “[W]hat is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: ‘a structure of feeling’” (Ang 45). In life, we experience a range of emotions. This rollercoaster ride of emotions is what psychologically sucks Sara into her televisual experiences, especially with the soap opera, and the connotative level of meaning further emphasizes the realism of the show and fulfills a need that is missing in her life.

To bring the first and second levels of meaning into the third, Fiske and Hartley maintain that “the range of cultural meanings that are generated in this second order cohere in the third order of signification into a comprehensive, cultural picture of the world, a coherent and organized view of the reality with which we are faced” (41). As noted above, since Sara has been repeatedly exposed to the ideological construct (wife, mother, and homemaker), her televisual experiences only help to propagate this view as a reality. It is reinforced through her

real-life past experiences with her husband and her son, and it is achieved by being gauged against the actors and their relationships on the television screen. Of course, this is where Sara's naiveté comes into play once again since she mentally acts with the scripted characters as if they were real, thus, never realizing the artificiality of television production. Therefore, Sara's need to be her former conceptual self is constantly reinforced through her televisual experiences and will only bring her problems later when she searches for happiness by changing from television viewer to participant.

After she views the series of Proctor and Gamble commercials, the television screen returns to its program. Playing out before her is a scene of a doctor saving the life of a worried mother's child. In this scene, Sara gets to vicariously (re)experience her former role as the motherly caregiver. Sara's private self, interacting with the characters on the screen, reassures the female character that the male doctor will save her son. While the female protagonist is dramatically considering her options of whether to let the doctor operate on her son or not, Sara tells the character as she is "leaning as far forward as she could, clutching her hands together, Let him....Yes, yes. Hes a good doctor. You should see what he did for that little girl yesterday. Such a surgeon. A crackerjack. [...] He/ll save your son. Youll see. Im telling you. Such a surgeon" (14). According to the text, it is implied that the main/reoccurring character of the show is the male surgeon who is competent and effective at doing his job. Christine Geragthy's analysis of soap operas as utopia suggests that "the emphasis is on the central woman protagonist(s) whom the reader [or viewer] is invited to support and whose reasons for action are understood by the audience" (319). While the woman in Selby's soap opera is not indicated to be a main character or a reoccurring character, she is, at least in the current scene, "the central woman protagonist" and it appears that the viewer (Sara) is supposed to support her decisions.

As the scene continues, Selby plays upon the happy-ending convention that Hollywood has naturalized in films and television shows:

When the scene changed to the operating room Sara quickly looked at her clock and sighed with relief when she saw that there was only a few minutes to go and soon the mother would be smiling and happy as she looked at her son with the doctor telling her its all over and hes going to be alright, and then a minute after that we would see the outside of the hospital again but this time the boy would be walking with the mother – no, no, he would be in a wheelchair – to the car and everybody would be happy as he got into the car and they drove off, the doctor watching them from the window of his office. (14)

When examining the scene, it seems easy to see Sara's familiarity with the codes operating within the program. According to Daniel Chandler, the "code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework" (148). She sees how "the womans face got larger and larger and the fear and tension were so obvious" (14). Thus, the zooming in of the camera functions as a code for the viewer that this is the climatic moment and the resolution is approaching. And by looking at her clock, Sara notes that the end of the program is near. Like the commercial where the tired husband "forgets about all the worries of the world" (13), the soap opera also ends on an explicitly happy note with Sara knowing that "everybody would be happy" (14).

The happy-ending myth that Hollywood has naturalized as a reality has already been instilled into Sara: "Sara sat back and smiled, and relaxed with the inner knowledge that everything would be alright. [...] Everything will be alright" (14). As Dyer would explain, this is the stuff utopia is made of: "Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape

into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide" (Dyer 373). This is even reinforced later in novel when Sara is watching a show, and the narrator explicitly indicates that "[t]he ending was not only happy, it was funny and heartwarming and her heart was even more joyful as she got her towel and left the apartment" (71). As this short passage displays, instead of maintaining this myth in the private sector of her home, she now carries it out into the real world, projecting the myth onto the public sphere. This process is similar to her internalization of socially-constructed gender roles. Sara's entertainment is constantly reinforcing and, therefore, maintaining the happy ending myth as "natural." The narrator later states that "[e]very day on the television she saw things suddenly work out for people. People get married. Sons come home. Everybody is happy" (77). Once again, Sara projects this ideology back onto the real world. When she meets with Harry for the last time, she tells him that "I see on the television how its always alright in the end. All the time" (144). Before he leaves her apartment, he promises to return, and the narrator states that "[i]t was a happy ending" (145).

Here, if we refer back to Ien Ang's concept of "emotional realism," when Sara watches her shows she experiences at the connotative level of meaning the fluctuation between sadness and happiness in the show: "This structure of feeling can be called the *tragic* structure of feeling; tragic because of the idea that happiness can never last for ever, but, quite the contrary, is precarious" (46). Since Sara's life is not full of happiness, but rather monotony and dreariness, she primarily looks for and extracts from the television shows the happy ending myth: "Life presents a problem according to the tragic structure of feeling, but that does not mean that life consists solely of problems. On the contrary, problems are only regarded as problems if there is a prospect of their solution, if, in other words, there is hope for better times"

(Ang 46). As a television addict, Sara is “hooked” on this feeling of hope. As we will see in the final chapter, her internalization of this happy ending myth is what will distract Sara as she destroys her fragmented identity. As Richard Dyer states, television (a symbolic medium for commercialism and capitalism) offers Sara utopian alternatives through entertainment. Yet, in the real world, they can never be achieved: “At our worse sense of it, entertainment provides alternatives *to* capitalism which will be provided *by* capitalism” (Dyer 377). For Sara, her choice in entertainment allows her to experience and continually re-experience the utopian feelings that cater to her ego and lead her to believe that “[i]n the end its all nice” (4). Yet, by this logic of mediation, Sara does eventually end up “all nice” in the end since she has been reduced to an automaton-like state where she has been stripped of her emotions and, as a result, shows no signs of resistance.

When Selby depicts the different orders of signification at work within the soap opera, we “see” all of them occurring simultaneously. As noted above, the first-order is literally the scene that is played out on the television screen: a young male doctor saving the son of a young worried mother. Furthermore, the connotation, here, is that an emotional and weak woman needs a strong and decisive man in order to be helped, once again, reinforcing gender roles. The soap opera plays upon the myth of the good doctor as the all-powerful life-saving authoritative figure. The doctor takes the traditional male role, and the helpless mother, who is in drastic need of saving her son’s life, displays the traditional maternal instincts of any “good” mother, who knowing “the possibilities of failure” and “wrestl[ing] with the decision of whether or not to allow the doctor to operate,” finally “assent[s] as she wiped at [the] tears streaming down her face” (14). The myth reinforces the idea that the male doctor inherently will beat the odds and save the young boy no matter what happens. In reality, this type of scene is played out in

hospitals everyday. Of course, the opposite is too (the doctor who fails and the child who dies), and the recognition of this aspect provides the myth with its power. Thus, Fiske and Hartley maintain that “[t]he myth is validated from two directions: first from the specificity and iconic accuracy of the first-order sign, and second from the extent to which the second-order sign meets our cultural needs” (42). As noted by Fiske and Hartley, “[t]hese needs require the myth to relate accurately to reality out-there, and also to bring that reality into line with appropriate cultural values” (42). For Sara, the second-order sign meets her cultural needs because it displays her dependence, as a housewife and mother, on the male figures missing from her life: the doctor (the life-saving male authority, i.e. her dead husband, Seymour), the caring mother (Sara), and her son (the child that needs saving/nurturing, i.e. Harry). First, this connotation taken from the scene provides Sara with the “real” need of community because the mother and son leave happily together. And secondly, to further emphasize culture’s influence in the naturalization of social roles, this reading of Sara’s subjective response displays that “[t]hough these responses occur in the individual, they are not, paradoxically, individualistic in nature. [...] This is the area of ‘subjective’ responses which are shared, to a degree, by all members of a culture” (Fiske and Hartley 46). By appealing to the cultural needs of the American widow, television and its scripted characters then become the “perfect” companion Sara “needs” to achieve her addictive feeling of utopia.

As seen in this chapter, Sara’s subjectivity (the ego/’self’/fluidity of five selves) is constructed by cultural factors, such as the socially-informed gender roles she continues to identify with years after they are no longer a part of her sense of being. These roles are continually reinforced, and vicariously (re)experienced, through her televisual experiences, thus, serving the function of naturalizing the gender specific role of woman as caregiver and nurturer.

Sara does not contest these ideologically-constructed roles she identifies with, but rather unsuspectingly accepts them as being natural because they have been a part of her life for so long. The ability to (re)experience these roles, through her private self, is what constantly draws Sara to her television set, and, as previously stated, Sara's "hooked" on the utopian feeling that television provides her. Furthermore, the entertainment that Selby details for the reader does meet all of her "real" societal needs, and the televisual utopia thus keeps Sara in an immobile social position, where she is content with her existence. While it does provide a distraction from her real life, it will not necessarily destroy her per se. And thus, this is essentially Sara's life at the beginning of the novel: alone, overweight, addicted to food, and hooked on the utopian feeling achieved through her televisual experiences. It is not until she receives the fateful phone call from Lyle Russel of the McDick Corporation about a once-in-a-lifetime chance to appear on a game show that everything drastically turns around from maintaining to destroying herself: "I know how you feel, you are wondering why you should be so lucky when so many millions would give anything to be on one of these shows" (26). And, it is at this point that the quick destruction of her identity and physical body begins. As James R. Giles notes, out of all of Selby's characters, "Sara Goldfarb emerges as Selby's most sympathetic character largely because the external factors that contribute to her destruction are so obvious and so overwhelming" (Understanding 104-5).

Essentially, only the first few sections of the novel are concerned with the cultural factors that make up her life and the rest of the text details her quick downfall. This is what Requiem for a Dream is concerned with: "[T]he inhabitants of this particular 'waste land' [America] lose their souls and often their lives pursuing false and empty promises of salvation" (Giles, Understanding 112). In the next chapter, I will examine how the same cultural factors that have

formed Sara's current identity also will "aid" in its destruction, as well as the deterioration of her physical body. While keeping in mind that culture only plays a part in this destruction, it is Sara's agency that ultimately ends her in a mental institution, receiving shock therapy, and sitting silently in front of television as if her sense of self has been erased.

CHAPTER III

The Destruction of Sara's Selves

In the previous chapter, I discussed the five selves that make up Sara's subjectivity and established that Sara's "self" is mediated by culture and the cultural medium of television through the naturalization of gender roles, the reinforcement of the happy-ending myth, and the utopian escape that keeps her situated in an immobile social position. In this chapter, I will look at how the same cultural factors cause Sara to destroy the thinking-speaking self inhabited within her physical body, and I will focus on the events that occur after she receives the phone call from the McDick Corporation about being a participant on a game show. After this crucial moment in the story, she not only becomes obsessed with being on the show, but also with consuming her diet pills in order to look thinner. When Sara moves from television viewer to potential participant (the significance of the phone call scene), her destruction begins. In addition, I also will look at the agency Sara has in a hegemonic state since she feels that appearing on television will liberate her from her current situation.

In order to better understand Sara's destruction, in relation to her agency, I want to begin with a brief discussion about the different types of television viewers Selby presents in the novel. In other words, what are the options Selby presents as modes of resistance to entertainment? When Ian Ang wrote Watching Dallas, she attempted to understand why millions of viewers

worldwide were interested in a primetime soap opera that cultural critics dismissed as “bad mass culture.” She states that “popularity is never the unique accomplishment of one isolated cultural product. It is also dependent on and connects with the context in which it is consumed” (Ang 4). Sara derives meaning from her entertainment based on the five utopian solutions (abundance, community, energy, intensity, and transparency), as well as the need to vicariously (re)experience her role as a housewife and mother. As Ang states about the pleasurable effectiveness of Dallas on its viewers, “What matters is the possibility of identifying oneself with it in some way or other, to integrate it into everyday life. In other words, popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition” (20). Since Selby’s novel is concerned with displaying the interiority of his characters as they struggle with addiction, then obviously Sara’s addiction is television because of her “need” to identify with the housewife and motherly characters. But whereas Sara is fully immersed in the act of watching television, the other characters Selby presents interact with television differently. It must be noted that while the other characters struggle with heroin addictions, Selby merely draws parallels between their addictions and Sara’s. Like Sara’s televisual experiences, the heroin-addicted characters use heroin as a “pleasurable,” and temporary, escape from their current situations. Halfway through the novel, Sara’s son suggests buying his mother a television as an act of love for her. He states, “I finally asked myself, what’s her fix? and I told myself, television, right? If ever there’s a TV junkie it’s the old lady” (127). Since heroin addiction mediates Harry’s reality – buying it, using it, selling it, and withdrawing from it – he expresses his love to his mother in terms of her addiction; a gift from one addict to another. If he buys her a new television, he can make up for all the “wear and tear her set got from being *schlepped* back and forth to old Abes” (127), as when at the beginning of the novel, Harry and Tyrone pawn Sara’s television in exchange for money in order

to buy drugs. For them, the television set functions as a valuable commodity to be exchanged for money. Once the exchange has been made, they use the money to buy heroin, which (unlike Sara) has greater use-value for them than the television. As James R. Giles states, there are a number of “unifying structures that are ultimately antagonistic to the welfare of [capitalism’s] individual citizens” (Understanding 110). In a hegemonic state where negotiation provides a sense of liberation, Harry and Tyrone reject being controlled by the television, but still participate in the capitalistic “system” by using the television to feed their own (heroin) addictions.

Similar to Harry and Tyrone, Selby presents the reader with the minor character, Tony, who destroys the television set as a sign of active resistance against commercialism. But, it is important to remember that Tony is still controlled by an addiction. Harry, Tyrone, Marion, Tony, and other characters are hanging out, getting high, and watching television. When a television commercial gets in the way of a show Tony is watching, he begins shouting at the set:

[Tony] frowned at the television set as the story was interrupted for a commercial, and then a few more, and then a station break and then a few more commercials and Tony took another hit and fidgeted in his chair and started grumbling under his breath about the goddamn bullshit, he wanted to see the goddamn show not some bullshit dog eatin horse meat, and then he started yelling at the set [...].

(Selby, Requiem 36)

Unlike Sara who becomes completely immersed into the televisual world of the shows and commercials, Tony is seduced by the show, but reacts violently to the commercials because it interrupts the “flow” of the show he is watching. As the scene continues, Tony keeps shouting and yelling profanity at the television set, before he finally snaps, pulls out a pistol, and shoots

the television: “IVE HAD YA BULLSHIT YA FUCKIN PRICKS, and he squeezed the trigger and the first slug hit the tube dead center and there was a mild explosion that momentarily covered the hysterical laughter [of the others]” (40). Thus, another option Selby presents as an alternative to complete immersion into the commercialized world of television is destroying it: a sadistic and masculinized way of rejecting capitalism. But like Harry and Tyrone, Tony’s rejection of television still makes him a part of the capitalistic “system,” since he still watches the shows that are produced and programmed by major corporations like the McDick Corporation.

Whereas Sara watches television to be distracted from her current situation, Selby presents moments, with the other characters, where distraction fails. At one point in the novel, the heroin-addicted characters realize that their ability to score drugs is getting slimmer, and so they decide to prove to their selves that they are not *really* addicted and quit using. Marion (Harry’s girlfriend) and Alice (Tyrone’s girlfriend) watch television as a way to distract themselves from their withdrawals. But, it fails. Their own addictions, which mediate their reality by consuming their thoughts and actions – need it, get it, use it, and withdraw from it – are far too great to allow the television to distract them for very long, and they once again go back to using. In another scene, Marion is on a date with her psychologist (Arnold) in order to get money so she and Harry can buy drugs. After she suggests to Harry that she may have to have sex with Arnold in order to get the money, his mind is filled with thoughts of her being with another man. As a way to distract himself from his thoughts, he turns on the television and “trie[s] to develop an interest in the show by staring at the tube, but it wouldnt even absorb the energy in the surface of his mind [...]” (203). As Harry continues to watch the television, the distractive quality television provides for Sara fails for him: “he/d curse the fuckin tube and

change the channel hoping there would be some fuckin thing on that he could watch and he kept telling himself they were just going to dinner” (204). Like Marion and Alice, television fails Harry as a distraction from his current situation because there other things on his mind than television.

Finally, Selby presents one more type of television viewer. When we meet Sara at the beginning of the novel, she mainly stays planted in her chair watching television and eating food in order to make up for the absence of her husband and son, and through her choice of entertainment, she is constantly exposed to commercials and programming that propagate the ideology of consumerism. As I previously noted, whereas Sara likes the commercials, Tony reacts violently to them. Ian Ang notes that in many European countries there are studies devoted to the adverse effects of being exposed to such American entertainment, like Dallas, since it is seen as “a threat to one’s own, national culture and as an undermining of high-principled cultural values in general” (Ang 93). While Ang is more concerned with how these studies reveal people’s attitudes towards commercialized television shows, like Dallas, one account she provides offers insight into the type of entertainment Selby depicts Sara watching:

The most important characteristic of a TV series is that the film content is dependent on its economic marketability. Aiming at a very broad market means that the content must be reduced to universally consumable motifs. This applies in particular to American series which in the United States serve as “commercial” packaging. (qtd. in Ang 93)

When Ian Ang researched her study of the television show, Dallas, she looked at the difference between people who love the show and people who hate it, and she came up with two opposing ideologies that comment on the cultural tastes of the viewing public: the ideology of mass

culture and the ideology of populism. The people who hate the show or love/like it but recognize it as a part of “bad culture,” and therefore watch it for its ironic (and distancing) appeal of being “bad,” subscribe to the elitist ideology of mass culture: “In this ideology some cultural forms – mostly very popular cultural products and practices cast in an American mould – are *tout court* labeled ‘bad mass culture’” (Ang 93). The alternative to the ideology of mass culture is the ideology of populism that “consists of common-sense ideas which are assumed almost ‘spontaneously’ and unconsciously in people’s daily lives” (Ang 114). This particular ideology is almost impossible to formulate and is not based on any theoretical aspects, unlike the ideology of mass culture which provides reasons that differentiate between why a show is “good” or “bad” to watch (commercialism, stereotypical, etc.).

Selby presents Marion as having adopted the ideology of mass culture: “[S]he gradually became aware of how dumb the damn show was she was watching and she stared at it, wondering how in the hell they could put anything so absurdly infantile and intellectually and esthetically insulting on television” (230). It should be noted that in this same scene Marion is going through withdrawal symptoms and needs something to provide her with the illusion that she is in control of her habit. Selby portrays Marion as similar to the letter-writers in Ang’s Watching Dallas who use the ideology of mass culture to provide them with a sense of security: “The fact that those who hate the serial do make such a connection indicates that categories like ‘commercial’ and ‘stereotypical’ exercise a certain attraction, because using them gives the letter-writers a feeling of security. [...] They seem to give these letter-writers the conviction that they are right [...]” (92). By criticizing the shows on television, Marion feels like she is above the “duped” people who become completely immersed in “bad mass culture” like Sara Goldfarb: “[A] commercial came blaringly on and she stared at them too, wondering what sort of cretins

watch this garbage and are influenced by it and actually go out and buy those things, and she shook her head [...] how can they manage to make so many obnoxious commercials” (231). Also, it is important for the reader to remember that Requiem is about addiction in American society. Whether if it be drugs, food, or television, all are alike and mediate the reality of the addict. Thus, like Sara who is completely immersed in her televisual experiences, Marion is absorbed in her self-destructive relationship with her heroin addiction, revealing that neither character is above the other. While Marion may feel like she cannot be manipulated by the commercialism of “bad mass culture,” she still is a part of the capitalistic web of American culture by having to financially support the drug habit that mediates her reality and consumes her every thought.

Like Marion, it seems that Selby *attempts* to place us (the readers) in the position of subscribing to the ideology of mass culture. But, it also seems that we do have a choice as to whether we want to subscribe to it or not, since we see the other types of television viewers presented and know that they are not affected in the same way that Sara is. We know that what Sara watches is “bad,” because Selby depicts it as affecting *her* in such a negative way, such as her wholeheartedly believing in the connotative happy-ending myth that she acquires from watching television. Sara tells her son that “I see on the television how its always alright in the end” (144). Of course, the ending is not “alright” for Sara, and in this same scene, we witness Harry identifying, based on his personal experiences, the grinding noise his mother’s jaw makes as a sign that she is on stimulants. We already know how strung out Harry is from his drug use, and it seems that Selby suggests that there are similarities between the mother’s addictions and the son’s. We see her mindlessly consuming television images the way she does food and the way Harry, Marion, and Tyrone consume heroin. While Selby draws comparisons between the

different types of addicts, he also makes a connection between her televisual consumption, her eating habits, and her physical body.

One aspect of Sara's "conceptual self" that is a crucial part of her understanding of who she is, causing her to go on the diet that eventually destroys her, is her physical body. According to Neisser, the "conceptual self" utilizes personal traits as a form of "self-information" that "straddle[s] the boundary between social roles and internal models" (54). He notes that "[i]nternal models [...] concern our bodies and our minds. In modern Western culture, self-theories of the body [...] are mostly based on biology and medicine" (54). Sara's physical body is overweight according to her standards, which are based on the images she sees on television, such as the housewife in the Proctor and Gamble commercial who is "thin," "sweet looking," and "nice" (13); or, like "Spring Boyington" (27), "Lucille Ball" (75), or "Rita Hayworth" (150).¹ But, there is more to Sara's diet than just physical appearance. She states to Harry that taking the diet pills is "a reason to lose weight so I can be healthy" (143). Sara's concept of healthy is thin, because being overweight, according to biology and medicine, can cause health problems. According to Neisser, what Sara knows about her personal trait of being overweight has been acquired through culture, and what she assumes about herself has a direct impact on her actions and behaviors. Likewise, individuals may assume that they "are clever or stupid, handsome or ugly, fortunate or unlucky. Although these dimensions are essentially conventional – not all cultures classify along the same dimensions, or value them to the same extent – they can be of considerable importance" (Neisser 54). Since Sara's reality is mediated by television, she may believe she is overweight and unhealthy, but she also feels, based on the women she identifies with through the programs she watches, that she does not look good

¹ The classic Hollywood actress's name is actually Spring Byington, but Sara probably pronounces the name "Boyington," due to her New York dialect.

enough to appear on a televised game show. Since her weight is a part of her physical image, she decides to change it like she does her hair. She also obsesses over wearing her “gorgeous red dress and gold shoes” when she makes her television debut because it also will enhance her image (28). Neisser states that “[j]ust as our concepts of intelligence can affect what we learn in school, for example, so our conception of our own body and its movements may affect our physical activity and motor skill” (54). Thus, Sara’s concept of her physical self as being overweight and unhealthy may be informed by biology and medicine, but her feelings of being unattractive because of her weight/image comes from the commercialistic mass media that uses “thin” and “attractive” women in their commercials to help sell their products, as Selby displays with the Proctor and Gamble commercial.

Prior to the McDick Corporation telephone call, we only see Sara consuming television images and food: the only sources for meaning she currently has in her life. As mentioned above, Selby hints at how she has uncontrollably “let” her life become the way it is by allowing her desires to control her, instead of the other way around. This is explicit when the narrator tells the reader about how Sara tried to wait all night one time to eat the last chocolate covered cherry in a box of chocolates, but failed to do so: “She never let that happen again” (45). Is Selby attempting to make a connection between Sara’s consumption of popular culture (the commercialized ideologies that comprise her interior subjectivity) and her overweight physical body (the result of the overindulgent consumption of a life-sustaining substance)? And if so, then does that not mean that culture has formed Sara’s interior self as well as her physical body?

Sara consumes food the same way she consumes television images, a pleasurable form of entertainment. As Giles states, Sara believes that her “essential reality can only be proven through active consumerism” (Understanding 109). If Selby is attempting to connect Sara’s

obsessive (interior) consumption of televisual images and food to her (exterior) physical body, then culture has played a role in forming Sara's interior "self," as well as her physical body. If Sara's "conceptual self" is based on the concept of "consumerism" stemming from the commercial ideologies she internalizes through the repetition of mass commercial viewing, then it seems Sara's active consumerism affects her physical body too. As Ang observes, "Ideologies not only organize the ideas and images people make of reality, they also enable people to form an image of themselves and thus to occupy a position in the world" (102). Thus, the ideologies that Sara acquires through the medium of television not only organize her reality and how she makes sense of the world, but also Sara's physicality on two extreme levels: the overweight Sara (consumer of food) and the extremely thin Sara (consumer of diet pills). Since Sara's reality is proven through "active consumerism," she visually and mentally consumes (on an abstract level) commercials and commercialized media, and consequently she becomes immersed into a televisual utopia where she is distracted from her life by the act of consumption. According to Geraghty's "Soap Opera and Utopia," the solution of abundance offers the elimination of material want: "Consumption as spectacle contains the promise that want will disappear. The deceptive, brutal and obscene features of this festival derive from the fact that there can be no question of a real fulfillment of its promise" (qtd. in Geraghty: 323).

If, at the beginning of the novel, Sara's interior is comprised of consumerist ideologies as acquired through watching television, then her physical body is overweight from her obsessive consumption of food. But when Sara switches from consuming food to diet pills, then she begins destroying her physical body (although not entirely which would result in death), and as a result, her obsessive consumption of a commercial product like diet pills eventually destroys her interior selves too. Unlike the food-consuming Sara, the dieting Sara is the most dangerous for

her well-being because it does not sustain life. If the disease/dis-ease Selby writes about is the lack of love, then Sara fills in the missing love in her life with her addictions and obsessions (occurring in her private self). Neisser comments on this disease of the private self: “Outside the normal range [of private information and experience] are the pathologies of the private self, which include obsessive thinking, repression and denial of feelings, multiple personality, and related conditions” (51). After she receives the phone call from the McDick Corporation about being a participant on a game show, her obsessive thinking takes control of her actions, and she constantly consumes diet pills in order to achieve her ideal physical state when she appears on television. And before the end of the novel, it seems that Sara’s body begins to consume itself: “The flesh was hanging from her upper arms like a hammock, but she was still not eating” (210). Thus, according to Selby’s portrayal of Sara’s character, he seems to be connecting her mass media consumption with her oral consumption of food and diet pills, and as a result, culture, as acquired through television, has constructed and destroyed Sara’s interior “self” and her physical body.

Like “consumerism,” there is another concept Sara bases her identity around that has negative consequences for her interiority. Neisser claims that the conceptual self “draws its meaning from the network of assumptions and theories in which it is embedded, just as all other concepts do”(36). The key word is “concept,” since we have an idea of who we are based on “self-concepts” that we acquire from our culture: “Self-theories are distinguished from the other four aspects of the self by being based primarily on socially established and verbally communicated ideas” (Neisser 54). But, what does it mean to base one’s self on a concept that has no standard definition and no known origins? Neisser can only take us so far with the idea of the conceptual self by looking at self-defining concepts that have established conventional

meanings. He notes that there are a variety of self-concept “theories [that] concern social roles (husband, professor, American), some postulat[ing] more or less hypothetical internal entities (the soul, the unconscious mind, mental energy, the brain, the liver), and some establish[ing] socially significant dimensions of difference (intelligence, attractiveness, wealth)” (36). Sara bases her ideal state upon the concept of “zophtic.” Twenty-five times throughout *Requiem*, Sara states that she wants to be “zophtic” (64, 74, 86, 90, 96, 107, 123, 125, 145, 150, 160, 162, 194, and 210). I have searched for a definition of the concept in the *OED*, *Merriam-Webster’s*, and various Yiddish dictionaries (*English-Yiddish Dictionary* and *Modern English-Yiddish, Yiddish-English Dictionary*). I also have checked online websites that allow individuals to post entries, such as *Urbandictionary.com* and *Wikipedia.com*. So far, I have come up with nothing. “Zophtic” seems to be a neologism Selby employs to represent Sara’s ideal state of being, and we only can determine what the concept means by looking at how Sara uses it in attempting to define her “self”: “She finished her water – *thin, th- zophtic, zophtic, zophtic*” (86).¹ In this particular instance, Sara is using the word in the physical sense of being “better” than just being thin. In another example, Sara uses it to mean something similar to sexy: “When she first met Seymour she had curves. She was firm then. Thats right, firm. Curvy. [...] I was so beautiful. *Zophtic*. Thats what I was, *zophtic*” (64). But even when “the flesh was hanging from her upper arms like a hammock,” she was still “thinking *zophtic*” (210). Sara *claims* to have achieved this state of being once in her life, but can she achieve it again? It seems that Selby uses the term to represent the unattainable state of being that Sara is attempting achieve, and one way to approach the concept is to assume that Selby is employing the term as an empty signifier. An empty

¹ A neologism is “[a] new word introduced into a language, especially for enhancing style. [...] Many *neologisms* employed by authors or by stylistic “schools” [...] have not gained a permanent foothold in the vocabulary” (“Neologism”).

signifier “is variously defined as a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified. Such signifiers mean different things to different people: they may stand for many or even *any* signifieds; they may mean whatever their interpreters want them to mean” (Chandler 74). The last time we see Sara in the novel is when she is in a mental institution sitting in front of a television. In this scene, Selby portrays her character as having no identity; an “empty” piece of flesh that refers to nothing. If Sara bases her conceptual self on a concept with no meaning, then she can never achieve her goal because there is no goal to be met. Or, if Sara has achieved the state of being “zophtic” once in her life (based on her purely internal and self-defining meaning), Selby’s text suggests that she can never achieve it again. Thus, Sara can never return to her former self.

Like the concept of “consumerism”, it seems that Selby is attempting to connect Sara’s conceptual self (“zophtic”) to her physical body (withering away from weight loss). If Sara’s conceptual self is comprised of “consumerism” (as acquired through the televisual medium) and “empty” linguistic concepts (the sources of which are unknown), then it seems that her physical body (overweight from consuming food and thin from consuming diet pills) also is culturally and linguistically formed, like her interior selves. When Sara moves from consuming food to consuming diet pills, she destroys herself from the inside-out by the same cultural and linguistic factors.¹ As soon as she receives the phone call from the McDick Corporation, Sara moves from television viewer to potential participant, and it is at this point that her destruction begins. Yet, in the sense of agency, Sara’s reality is mediated by what she watches on television, and therefore her destruction is precipitated by her chance to liberate herself (viewer to participant) from her immobile social position within America’s hegemonic structure.

¹ While culture determines language, the origin of “zophtic” (in terms of this paper) is unknown.

The most crucial plot point in the story is the telephone call because it is at this point that Sara moves from viewer to participant; from immobility to “liberation.” In addition, this moment sets forth all of the action because it presents her with a goal (the game show appearance) to be achieved before the end of the novel. According to James R. Giles, Selby is using the name McDick to “ech[o] the street or slang term to ‘dick,’ or to cheat and manipulate, someone” (Understanding 107-8). The act of moving from one status (immobile viewer) to another (liberated participant) provides her with a sense of agency, where she feels that she can make things better for herself by moving up in social position. As previously stated, there are a number of “unifying structures that are ultimately antagonistic to the welfare of its [capitalism’s] individual citizens” (Giles, Understanding 110), and, by this logic, the McDick Corporation is one of them. Since Sara is addicted to television, the corporation that offers her a chance to be on television represents an antagonistic source even down to the manipulative way Lyle Russel talks to Sara: “Well, Mrs. Goldfarb, I cant tell you why you are so lucky, I guess its just that God has a special place in his heart for you” (26). Sara is a naïve, vulnerable, and gullible character. And consequently, she is easily manipulated by statements such as this, giving her a false sense of what her place is in the world, i.e. God’s plan: “[T]hey [Sara and Ada] discussed and speculated on the enormity of the coming event in the life of Sara Goldfarb, an event of such prodigious proportions and importance that it infused her with a new will to live” (29). As stated earlier, Selby’s issue is with “[w]hat the whole tradition of culture does, and for whom” (Buckeye 374), and when placed in this context, it is no wonder that Selby extends Lyle Russel’s dialogue to reveal the television industry as an embodiment of the monolithic and capitalistic force responsible for Sara being who she is and who she later becomes: “I consider myself one of the luckiest men in the world because every day I get a chance to help people just like

yourself, Mrs. Goldfarb, to be a part of programming that not only are we proud of but the entire industry – no, the entire nation is proud of” (25). First, Lyle Russel uses “nation” to bolster Sara’s sense of a national identity. By being a television viewer and an active consumer, Sara represents the worst case of what America is all about: consumerism and capitalism. Secondly, “programming” takes on a double meaning: the television programs and the cultural programming of individuals like Sara. Thus, one way America’s capitalistic culture is propagated is through the medium of television, and, thinking of Sara’s conceptual self as being comprised of consumerist ideologies, programming assumes a double meaning. And with the chance at potential stardom planted in her mind, Sara’s destructive obsessions, her self-centeredness and vanity, begin as soon as she places the phone on the hook, and she states “[w]hat will I wear???? What do I have to wear? I should be wearing a nice dress” (27). Sara becomes obsessed with her physical appearance, and she wants to modify her physical body in order to appear what she feels like people on television should look like. This is destructive for her because vanity and narcissism precipitate her change. But when I say that Sara is vain and narcissistic, it is only in the sense that her reality has been mediated by her televisual experiences. I want to (re)emphasize this point because it reveals an important aspect about her character and her sense of agency. As discussed earlier, besides the women Sara communicates with inside her building, she lives a private life. Her private self is influenced by what she views on television, and the programs Sara watches display life outside of the private sphere (the public self). Her conception of what her public self should be like (her television appearance) is based on what she views on television. Within her televisual mediated reality, Sara is provided with two options: television viewer and television participant. Selby depicts the former as constructing/maintaining Sara’s current selves and the latter as destroying them. Thus, when I

refer to Sara as vain, narcissistic, or self-centered, it is in the sense that television has led her to be this way.

Since Selby depicts Sara as such a naive and vulnerable character, I want to look at how Selby, writing from a male perspective, attempts to portray television's influence on Sara's subjectivity. As stated earlier, Selby attempts to place us in the position of subscribing to the ideology of mass culture, and since Sara's character is so naïve and easily "programmed" by American culture, it could be considered a fault of Selby's for characterizing a main feminine character in such a weak and vulnerable way. Or, since this study has consistently viewed Sara as a woman who has mindlessly internalized the socially constructed gender roles, and happily maintained those roles through her televisual utopia, the same criticism could easily be applied to my own examination of her character, since it also originates in a male perspective.

In "Gender and/in Media Consumption," Ien Ang and Joke Hermes criticize previous theoretical studies that promote the idea that women are mindless and unwilling victims of popular media. For example, the two critics criticize Gaye Tuchman who "proposes that since mass-media images are full of traditionalist and outmoded sex-role stereotypes, they will inevitably socialize girls into becoming mothers and housewives, because 'girls in the television audience 'model' their behavior on that of 'television women'" (Ang and Hermes 111). Even if Selby is not intentionally characterizing Sara as a naïve and vulnerable character, then it should be acknowledged that I obviously am interpreting her in such a way. Although the difference between Ang and Hermes's critique of Tuchman and my study is that instead of television completely socializing Sara into becoming a mother or housewife, my assumption is that Sara's social role was constructed by culture before her reality was being mediated by television, and Selby's presentation of Sara's viewing habits only perpetuates her need to be her former

conceptual self (mother and housewife) by vicariously living through the scripted characters via her private self. And consequently, the television women function as a model of femininity for her. Thus, Sara wants her son to marry a woman much like the one Sara identifies with in the television commercial: “My Harold should find such a girl” (13). Ang and Hermes maintain that these types of cultural criticisms are baseless in terms of their point: “first, that mass media imagery consists of transparent, unrealistic messages about women whose meanings are clearcut and straightforward; second, that girls and women passively and indiscriminately absorb these messages and meanings as (wrong) lessons about ‘real life’” (111). Furthermore, they endorse the idea that “media representations and narratives *construct* a multiplicity of sometimes contradicting cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity, which serve as subject positions that spectators might take up in order to enter into a meaningful relationship with the texts concerned” (111). An important thing to remember when reading Requiem for a Dream is that Selby does not present the media in this light; thus, to do so would miss the point and the author’s social criticism/protest completely: “He is presenting a nightmarish vision of America as a society that induces addiction in its citizens in order to assert complete control over them” (Giles, Understanding 94). Like Sara and the rest of Selby’s characters who are not well-rounded in terms of characterization, the little detail he provides to the scene where the reader can actually see what Sara is viewing on television is more like a one-sided caricature sketch of mass media with all of the harmful qualities emphasized to accentuate the negative portrayal.

One important thing to keep in mind when examining Selby’s treatment of Sara’s susceptibility to the commercialism of television is that he does provide some balance by allowing the reader to see one other female character around Sara’s age, who watches television the same way as Sara. Unlike Tony, Marion, Harry, or Tyrone who interact differently with

television than Sara, Ada is considered one of Sara's peers and friends who watches television in the same manner as Sara: "Ada stared for a moment (with one ear she caught the end of the scene of the soap opera). [...] [T]he music told her they were fading out on the scene. She knew instinctively that a commercial was coming on even before there was that sudden increase in volume and explosion on the screen" (28-9). When referring to Ada's viewing habits being like Sara's, I mean that she is "tuned-in" to the TV, even though there are other things going on around her like Sara explaining her good news about the McDick Corporation phone call. We know that Sara is the same way because the narrator states that "[h]er conditioning had been long and thorough and Sara was able to do anything while watching the television, and do it to her satisfaction, without missing a word or a gesture. [...] No matter what she is doing one and a half eyes on the television makes the job" (42). The point is that Selby – even though he does not provide enough details of Ada's life – does present another character similar to Sara who watches television like Sara. The difference is that Ada does not become completely immersed in the world of entertainment.

If Selby's protest is against the capitalistic control of people's lives, Sara does not stand as a representation of all of America's vulnerable elderly feminine characters, and as a result it seems that the author avoids running the risk of over generalizing his concerns with gender and the consequences of consuming sexist media, an over generalizing tendency noted by Ang and Hermes: "[T]ext-oriented feminists analyses have often run the risk of being reductionist in their theoretical generalizations about gender and media consumption [...]" (112). Based on information from the text, the difference between Sara and Ada is that Sara is concerned with modifying her physical appearance in order look like the television actress in the Proctor and Gamble commercial (Selby, Requiem 13); or, like "Spring Boyington" (27), "Lucille Ball" (75),

or “Rita Hayworth” (150). And after Sara receives the telephone call from the McDick Corporation, the chain of events set in motion, because she immediately begins stressing over her image. According to Selby, Sara “fail[s] because of lack of control” (“Interview” 315). Like the other main characters (two males and two females), they each destroy themselves due to their unwillingness to control/suppress the obsessively destructive qualities. And for Sara, it is this obsession of modifying her physical appearance in accordance to the conventions of television actresses.

Since Sara obsessively works to change her image before appearing on the elusive game show, I would like to look at some different aspects of the game show genre. Since the primary result of Sara’s downfall is her obsession over changing her appearance (her public self as mediated by watching television), the game show genre could not be more perfect for allowing the character to bask in the spotlight of her televisually-informed narcissism. Drawing on Levi-Strauss’s theorization of games and rituals, John Fiske provides important insight into the quiz and game show genre by noting that these types of shows have both qualities of games and rituals. Games are “cultural forms in which participants start out equal and finish differentiated into winners and losers” (Fiske 265). Obviously, Sara plans to finish as a winner, which is why she “stud[ies] all the quiz shows so she would be able to compete no matter what show she went on” (210). And when Harry and she meet for the last time, she tells him, “And who knows what I might win? A new refrigerator. A Rolls-Royce maybe. Robert Redford” (143). She is not saying “if” she wins, but “when” she does win these could be options for prizes. By winning, Sara would be granted a social power/dominance over the other contestants, and inherently the audience will cheer as she is granted with this status, thus, catering to her ego. Yet, it should be

noted that there is one point in her and Harry's conversation where she tells him that "[i]t doesn't make any difference if I win or lose or if I just shake hands with the announcer" (143).

Obviously, what Sara really wants is to be on television. But, she expects to be a winner since she states at various times how she does not want the prizes and plans to "give it already to the poor" because "it'll make somebody happy" (214). Furthermore, telling Harry that she just wants to shake hands with the announcer is important for Sara because it symbolizes celebrity power. In the world of the game show, the handshake functions as a ritual, and according to Fiske, rituals utilize "differentiated groups and provide them with equalizing communal meanings or identities" (265). Even though Fiske does not mention the contestant-announcer handshake at the beginning of game shows, he does note that "there are important rituals particularly at the beginning and sometimes at the end" (265). Since it is the norm for the announcer to shake hands with the contestants before the game commences, it assigns special importance to each of the contestants because they, like Sara, are the chosen few who have made it on the show; thus, shaking hands solidifies their gaming experience by physically touching "the bearer of social power – the question-master," who is usually a star personality (Fiske 265). By merely appearing on the game show and having her hand shaken by the announcer, Sara's ego is administered to, and her vanity is justified because it means that she is one of an elite group of American individuals who have made it onto television.

Selby does not provide any details about the type of game show Sara will be on (she obsessively struggles with this throughout the whole novel). We only know that she plans to be on a game show since Lyle Russel claims that the McDick Corporation "represent[s] the quiz shows on television. [...] the shows millions of Americans want to be on; the shows that are looked forward to anxiously by millions" (26). The game show genre is ultimately antagonistic

to the standardized utopian solutions of the soap opera/women's entertainment. This antagonism is important because it also marks the difference between Sara the viewer and Sara the participant. Drawing on the game show Sale of the Century, Fiske notes that the "ritual-game-ritual [structure] is an enactment of capitalism" (266). At the beginning of the show, there is a ritual where everyone talks a little about the different aspects of their life; affording every player a chance to articulate their own individuality. This ritual then "moves them from differentiated individuals to equal competitors" (Fiske 265). The competition part of the show follows this ritual, and each is given the opportunity to be a winner. Once the winner is decided, the prizes are awarded and the game is over. As I have been emphasizing, Sara's destruction begins when she moves from viewer to participant. Whereas she was once immersed as a viewer in the televisual utopia where "real" societal needs are abstractly met, the game show seems to oppose the utopian solutions, especially for the participants: "Individuals are constructed as different but equal in opportunity. Differences of *natural* ability are discovered, and the reward is upward mobility into the realm of social power which 'naturally' brings with it material and economic benefits" (Fiske 266). Once again, the "real" societal problems are scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness, manipulation, and fragmentation. If scarcity is solved by abundance in utopia, it is the opposite in a game show; only one individual will go home a winner with possible (lesser) consolation prizes for the other contestants. Like a capitalistic society, there is an uneven distribution of wealth, and no problems/needs have been resolved. Another societal need that the game show opposes is fragmentation. The audience could qualify as a community, since they are all equal spectators of the competition. But for the contestants, it is the opposite. Each contestant is playing against the other in an effort to come out on top of the game. As for exhaustion, the contestants are excited and have energy, but the game itself is a form of work.

Like the concept of the American Dream, the hardest worker is rewarded with the financial reward.

Manipulation and dreariness are different. For the standard question-and-answer game show, manipulation does not factor in among the contestants. Each contestant is honest in their yearning to win and cheating is not allowed. Lastly, dreariness is solved by drama and intensity. And, this is exactly what the contestants and the audience do experience. Who will get the next right answer? Who will be wrong? Which one will win? Thus, if Sara were to make the crucial move from television viewer to participant, she would no longer be passively situated in the same societal position and could actively be a part of climbing up the social ladder. Even though she has this sense of agency, she still remains a part of the system that ultimately destroys her: “Selby’s work insists [...] [that] [o]ur culture commits suicide on the altar of individualism” (Atchity 401). In order for Sara to climb up the social ladder (her individualistic struggle), she feels that she must first change her physical appearance in order for people to like her on television, and as a result, she can be granted with celebrity status. Thus, after Sara receives the phone call, she obsesses over changing her image and pursuing her dream of being a television celebrity, and through this dream she is able to experience fame via the affection of her friends and neighbors: “Sara felt warmed not only by the sun but by all the attention she was suddenly receiving. She felt like a star” (93). While her “real” societal need of community is met in the televisual utopia, the chance to be on television suddenly changes her need into nurturing her ego-centered self. She wants the community, but she wants to be at the head of it: “[B]ut now they know, even little children, Im going on the television and they like the red hair and they like me. Everyone likes me. Soon millions of people will see me and like me” (142). Sara’s ego and obsession with her physical appearance ultimately destroy her.

While this seems like a harsh interpretation – maintaining that she is vain, narcissistic, and self-centered – of such a sympathetic character, the reader must remember that Sara currently is who she is because of television. She identifies with scripted characters and bases the world on scripted drama. She is lonely and uses television as a source to fill in the void in her life, and as a result, television has taught her that beautiful people are accepted and well-liked by society. And more importantly, they are loved. Sara wants to be loved, but her conception of love is based on the commercialized programs she watches on television. In order to liberate herself from her current situation (the lack of love Selby states as being part of the disease), she can only choose from the options her life provides her (lonely viewer or loved star), and as a result she attempts to do the only thing her televisual mediated reality has informed her as the only way to achieve success: going “into” the television.

As stated earlier, when Sara hangs up with Lyle Russel, the first thing that comes to her mind is “[w]hat will I wear???? What do I have to wear? I should be wearing a nice dress” (27). Her seemingly “materialistic” way of thinking, internalized from the constant exposure to commercials, is derived from her conceptual self, i.e. a form of “self-information” from the personal trait of being overweight that conflicts with the image of the actors she sees on television. Thus, after the dress, the next thing that comes to her mind is her weight: “Suppose the girdle doesnt fit? Its so hot. Sara looked at herself then rolled her eyes back and up. Maybe I/ll sweat a little bit but I need the girdle. Maybe I should diet? I wont eat. I/ll lose thirty pounds before Im on television. Then with a girdle Im looking like Spring Boyington” (27). The instant thought of being a celebrity immediately replaces her need to fulfill her former roles of mother and housewife. And, this becomes more explicit as her story continues. After she has started her initial (book) diet and dyed her hair from gray to red, she is lying in bed one night

thinking about Harry and Seymour. As she recalls memories through her extended self, they eventually fade away into thoughts of her upcoming television appearance:

She sighed into her pillow and squirmed into a soothing position and watched the little pellets of light bounce off her eyelids until they finally disappeared and her mind was filled with Seymour and their many years of joy. She breathed and smiled a prayer for Seymour...and Harry. [...] Remember Seymour? The Mardi Gras. My first time in Coney Island. Clowns, and dragons and floats and confetti...the sun...remember the sun that day Seymour? [...] Im going on the television, Seymour. What do you think of that? Your Sara on television. [...] Can you imagine, your Sara on the television? Did you ever think it could be? Maybe I/ll stay a long time. (65).

As the reader can see in this sequence, memories of Sara's loved ones are pushed away by thoughts of Sara's potential stardom. And, it as if this scene represents Sara's transitional phase from where she was once uneasy about being a widow and sonless mother to her new role as television star: "Its like a new life Seymour. Its already a new life" (65). The thought of being a star replaces Sara's immediate need for a husband, and it is through her thoughts of television that she feels the capability of getting her son, and later her husband, back into her life. In a sense, she is a tragic figure: "It [tragedy] concerns in general the effort to exemplify what has called 'the tragic sense of life'; that is, the sense that human beings are inevitably doomed through their own failures or errors or even the ironic action of their virtues" ("Tragedy"). The odds are stacked against Sara, and she is doomed by the ironic action of her virtues. The only thing Sara strives for is happiness, and based on Selby's text, Sara cannot find happiness in America, but rather only in a false sense of it: television, food, and temporary stardom. As she

pleads with Harry about needing someone to cook for (their second and last meeting together), she claims that it is the thought of the television that makes her happy: “I like how I feel this way. I like thinking about the red dress and the television...and your father and you. Now when I get the sun I smile” (143). Sara feels that by going on television she will achieve happiness, but the risks she takes in order to achieve her ideal state of being end up destroying her, rather than helping her. And as a result, she becomes a tragic figure.

At first, Sara begins dieting by obtaining a book at the library. Before she even picks one out, she expresses frustration over having to work too hard at it. Like her heroin addicted son, she wants a quick and easy fix. She tells the librarian, “I think a skinny book is better. I dont have too much time. The time I need to lose weight, not to read a book. I could get muscles lifting books that big” (53). So, she finally picks the “slimmest volume on the shelf” (53). Already, Sara exhibits a lack of self-control. She does not want to go through the rigorous routine of a controlled and healthy diet. Even after she obtains the book, she skims and skips over pages with information that is pertinent to maintaining a healthy lifestyle: “She read the introduction and then skimmed and skipped through the various chapters dealing with the need to be the proper weight, the charts that showed the proper weight for each height[.] [...] She continued to read and started skipping pages, I believe already, but wheres the diet????” (62). Before she even begins the diet, Sara is setting herself up for failure, and after she does begin, she does not even have the self-control to maintain the strict diet plan that the book suggests: “Im not full, Im starving. She rechecked the book again and it assured her that after the first day or two (two! you got to be kidding!!!) you will be feeding off your own fat and wont be hungry” (74).

Drawing parallels to Selby's statement that his characters suffer because of "the lack of love" (Selby, "Interview" 315), Kenneth John Atchity suggests that "Sara's addiction to television and chocolates provides her with her only joy, filling up the vacuum love needs to fill. One habit is visionary, the other has to do with physical nourishment; the equation is clear. [...] Vision draws the lines, defines control, provides joy, insures survival" (403). When Sara decides to give up food in order to pursue her dream of going on television, it is at this moment she gives up nourishment to modify her physical appearance. The feeling of utopia that had previously provided her with at least some feeling of happiness was not killing her per se, although it was keeping her situated in the same social position. It is when she attempts to pursue the utopian dream, sacrificing the things she loves, on the pretense of vanity and fame that she sets herself up for destruction: "A god can justify such sacrifice, offering love to replace the self-destruction resulting from the worship of a false vision. But nothing is more unnatural, more inhuman, than the act of sacrificing a supportive habit for a promise which proves false" (Atchity 403). If we refer back to the Biblical scriptures at the beginning of the novel, then we can see why this promise proves false. Only by giving her love to God can Sara experience a self-fulfilling happiness. Furthermore, when Sara begins her diet, her refrigerator starts to torment her: "But the nights were worse as she sat, alone, in her viewing chair, watching the television, with her back to the refrigerator hearing him murmuring to her[.] [...] *[T]hat growling in your stomach keeps me awake*" (96). Atchity suggests that Sara's refrigerator is talking to her because "[w]hen vision fails, as it must do in the process of swapping one vision for another, all the lines blur. Dreams become hallucinations, fantasies become haunting terrors in the night" (403). At this point in the story, Sara experiences hallucinations before putting any chemicals (weight loss

pills) in her body as result from sacrificing her supportive habits. And, these hallucinations signify the destruction of her most basic self: the “ecological self.”

As stated earlier, the “ecological self” is “the self as perceived with respect to the physical environment” (Neisser 36). This self is experienced in infancy and is not culturally informed. Neisser notes that “[c]ertainly by 3 months of age (and probably from birth), the infant perceives much the same sort of world that we do: a world of distinct, solid, and permanent objects of which she herself (or he himself) is one. The information that specifies the ecological self is omnipresent” (36). When Sara starts hallucinating that her refrigerator is talking to her or that the announcer is coming out of the television and walking around her apartment, Selby is displaying Sara’s “ecological self” breaking down. She is confusing the “world of distinct, solid, and permanent objects” with imaginary, unreal, and temporary visions.

Yet, Sara’s hallucinations affect more than just her ecological self. Her extended, private, and conceptual selves are affected too. According to Kenneth John Atchity, there is more to the hallucinations than just Sara’s immediate perception of the physical environment falling apart: “Selby’s novel teaches us what vision is by showing what happens when it fails. The image factory, or dreamworks, from which our vision comes, is the key to what we are, what we think we are, what world we imagine we exist in” (399). When Sara sees herself on television interacting with the announcer and the audience and hears the chants of “WE LOVE SARA, WE LOVE SARA, WE LOVE SARA” (211), she consciously (private self) experiences herself outside of the present moment (extended self) being a television star (conceptual self). Yet, none of this is real. When these same hallucinations turn into nightmares, as they do earlier when the announcer and Sara come out of the television and into her apartment, there is a disruption in her fluidity of selves and the internal destruction is in the process of becoming

complete as her physical body grows thinner and thinner: “Sara’s ultimate failure to distinguish between the internal screen, the mirroring effect by which human beings develop a self-image, from the flat TV screen leads, naturally and horribly, to the destruction of all wholesome internal visions: her imagination, her dreams, her memory” (Atchity 405). For Sara, everything is growing increasingly confusing: “Things are all funny. Mixed up. Confused like” (168). Her selves are breaking down; her vision is breaking down; and her identity is about to be destroyed.

At the end of Requiem for a Dream, Selby depicts Sara Goldfarb as no longer having any sense of self. She is no longer a thinking individual possessing an awareness of reality, and the author portrays this through the last passage: a short description of Sara in her new governmentally constructed home. From the beginning of this study, I have argued that Sara’s destruction is the result of her obsession over changing her physical body for her appearance on television, which in her mind will provide her with happiness. At the same time, I also have been (re)emphasizing Giles’ assertion that capitalism has “unifying structures that are ultimately antagonistic to the welfare of its individual citizens” (Understanding 110). Besides television, another one of these structures is the healthcare system. When Sara explains to the doctor that things are all “[m]ixed up,” he tells her that “that’s nothing to worry about” (168). He writes down a prescription for valium and sends her on her way. Since the doctor has it arranged “so that Medicare will take care of the bill” (122), he really does not care about her well being. He simply wants money. At the beginning of the novel, Sara assures the female character on the soap opera that the doctor is “a good doctor. [...] A crackerjack” (14). Echoing her comment about the doctor on the soap opera, Sara states that her doctor is “[s]uch a good doctor. A real crackerjack” (134). Once again, Sara’s reality has been mediated by television, and in this sense, she has confused television with “real” life. Her real doctor never cures her, and she keeps

taking the pills, until she ends up in a psychiatric hospital. While she is there, her fate is in the hands of her doctors. Like the physician who prescribed her diet pills, the head doctor at the psychiatric hospital does not care about Sara's well-being, and in this scene, it is almost as if Selby has placed Sara into a real-life soap opera, where the lines between good and bad are clear-cut. When Dr. Spencer (the "good" doctor) notices that Sara has been misdiagnosed by Doctor Reynolds (the "bad" doctor) and has been prescribed shock therapy, he goes to the head doctor, Dr. Harwood (the patriarchal antagonistic force), and confronts him. Dr. Harwood tells him that his job at the hospital is to make sure "that this department functions smoothly, with the least amount of trouble and conflict. [...] I have told you I don't care about that woman. Even if you are correct in your diagnosis and assumptions, the worst that can happen is that she will have a few unnecessary shock treatments" (225). Selby portrays the health care system (a governmental structure purportedly intended to benefit the good of the people) like his horrifically caricatured depiction of commercial television.

By the time we get to the final scene, Sara has had a number of shock treatments and has been continuously pumped with so much medication that her life is reduced to mere physical exertions: "Sara shuffled along the medication line with the others. She stood still for a moment, then shuffled forward again until she stood in front of the attendant who put the Thorazine in her mouth and watched her swallow it before letting her leave" (273). Her existence is like the area around her: "Empty" (273). From the start of the novel, Selby has been advocating that television negatively shapes the life of Sara by contributing to her warped perceptions of the world: "This is like a commercial break. Soon the program will be back on and you'll see, they'll make it nice Seymour. It'll all work out. You'll see already. In the end it's all nice" (4). Looking at an identity "marker," her language is even bound to the terminology used

to describe programming, such as “commercial break” or “the program will be back” after a few messages. Selby’s form has kept the reader in the interior mindset of the elderly character from the beginning of his work, where we constantly know what Sara is thinking. At the end of the novel, we merely observe her from a distance like a television program. In the last scene, Selby uses the narrator (once a conflation with the character) only to state Sara’s physical actions, rather than giving us any details into her interiority. In a sense, it is almost as if Selby pulls the plug on the character.

The physical television itself is a frame that projects intangible images on a screen. When the television is turned off, the projection disappears. Likewise, Sara has become a physical mass of flesh that is framing a blank identity. She has no intangible self to project anymore. Therefore, Selby only allows the reader, through the use of the narrator, to see her physical actions and movements because there is no thinking-speaking self that can be referred to: “She continued to stare in front of her, then slowly turned her head and looked in various directions, then she, too, left. She kept her arms wrapped around herself as she shuffled, in her paper slippers, into the television room” (273). Sara has been reduced, through shock treatments and psychological drugs administered by the government facility, to an automaton-like state where she can passively live out the rest of her life sitting in front of the television. Sara never reaches her goal of being on a game show, and like the beginning of the novel where she is sitting around her apartment waiting to die, she once again is sitting in front of a television. Yet, now she is able to spend as much time watching it as she wants. The only thing she has to do is mindlessly stare ahead: “Some of the others were sitting with their chin on their chest, already feeling the effects of the medication. Some were laughing, some were crying. Sara stared at the screen” (273). Selby leaves the reader with this last image of Sara.

As I have tried to display throughout this study, Requiem for a Dream displays how American culture constructs our identities, and how the cultural medium of television and the ideologies communicated through that particular medium mediates Sara Goldfarb's subjectivity. It seems that without Selby's experimental style (first and third person narration, stream of consciousness, and the conflation of the narrator with the characters) this type of cultural reading may have not been possible to perform. By drawing upon Ulric Neisser's model of five selves, we can see how each self is present in Sara's character, thus, allowing the reader to see how Sara's last three selves (extended, private, and conceptual) are mediated by culture. While this idea of cultural mediation may be nothing new, Selby's novel seems to intentionally present a hyperbolic example of how culture simultaneously makes and destroys an individual's sense of self, but unlike naturalistic fiction there are more than *just* environmental factors that cause Selby's characters to fail. Sara has a sense of agency (viewer to participant), but she only has two options that America will provide her as a television addict. She can remain in a static social position (viewer) or she can achieve "happiness" by moving upward (participant/celebrity).

Sara loses her identity because television has informed her that being thin and of celebrity status equals happiness, success, and love. Instead of having faith and unconditional love for God (which is out of the scope of this paper whether or not this *really* is an answer for Selby's characters and not just another distraction from their lives: an "opiate of the masses"), Sara follows her own path of self-gratification by pursuing a false dream to be celebrated and loved, and by the end of the novel her character is stripped of her identity as she sits among other "insane" patients in a government institution that should be providing her help.

Over the course of the novel, television and Sara's "vision" of fame affects her like the heroin affects the other characters in Selby's story: it destroys them. She becomes "hooked" on

the feeling of utopia, and while immersed in the televisual utopia, she is able to imagine a better life than her own and (re)experience her roles as a nurturing mother and housewife. While this utopia is not necessarily destructive, she is kept in an immobile social position. It is not until Sara receives the phone call from the McDick Corporation that her destruction ultimately begins. But whether she is distracted by television or pursuing a “false” promise for fame, Selby portrays his tragic character as the American consumer gone awry.

At the beginning of the novel, she consumes commercialized mass media and internalizes the ideologies conveyed to her through the programs she watches, while also overindulging in the consumption of food as a result of which she has become overweight and, in her eyes, no longer attractive in comparison to the actresses she sees on television. When she is presented with the opportunity to be on a show, she begins consuming weight-loss pills and eventually her body begins consuming itself; losing too much weight, as opposed to a healthy amount, in an ultimately futile attempt to achieve the ideal state of being “zophtic.” As stated earlier, Requiem for a Dream is Selby’s last novel that solely deals with the problem of “disease”/dis-ease. For Sara, this disease/dis-ease is the lack of love and happiness in her life. When she obsessively chases her capitalistic dream of being on a game show to make up for the lack in her life, she destroys her interior sense of being, and nearly loses her physical life, all at the cost of pursuing happiness in American society. As Selby states regarding his position on life, “I have always been an incorrigible optimist. But I see the potential of what can be and then I see what is. The conflict is incredible. That is what causes me to write in what you call a pessimistic way. I think of it more as pathology” (“Interview” 315).

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