

Robert Ward

Imprisonment in Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm*

This essay treats the differing paradigms of imprisonment that I argue are prevalent in Nelson Algren's novel *The Man with the Golden Arm*. My argument explores the motifs of confinement through an analysis of the two central characters. I focus on Frankie Machine, whose incarceration functions as a sanctuary, which stimulates his "escape" from morphine addiction, and his wife Sophie Majcinek, whose figurative entrapment in the tenement room shapes her psychological and physical paralysis. I ask if the apparent development of the way prison dealt with prisoners in mid-century America, by focusing more on models of treatment than punishment, informs our understanding of Machine's gradual regeneration and empowerment. I also question whether the sphere of the tenement room also serves as a symbol of absolute enclosure. My argument is that such conflicting representations of confinement reveal the schism underlying the motif of imprisonment within *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

On the opening night of Jack Kirkland's theatrical adaptation of Nelson Algren's *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1949)¹ in 1956, the audience filling Cherry Lane theatre in New York were confronted with a small eighteen foot stage that compressed the landscape[s] of the novel together in "three cell-like sections piled on one another."² With this semiotic of prison cells, the set was reviewed as grounding the unfolding drama upon a narrative of confinement. Judith Crist, for example, wrote that the spectacle articulated "the feeling of being trapped."³ In the same manner, Saul Levin-

1. All parenthesised references are to this edition, Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm: 50th Anniversary Critical Edition*, ed. William J. Savage Jr. and Daniel Simon (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999).

2. Ohio State University, Rare Books and Manuscripts, the Bettina Drew Archive of Nelson Algren, Jack Kirkland, "The Man with the Golden Arm: unpublished playscript," 1956, p. 1.

3. Judith Crist, "Golden Arm to Be a Play," *The New York World-Telegram*, 22 May 1956, p. 1. See also Bettina Drew, *Nelson Algren: A Life on the Wild Side* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990). Drew suggests that "the tiny Cherry Lane, with only 189 seats, gave the audience the feeling of being crowded in by the circumstances trapping Frankie Machine" (p. 276).

son understood the claustrophobic *mise en scène* as establishing “an enormous peephole through which we may view the lot.”⁴ In the course of this essay, I will draw upon such a conceptually loaded “peephole” in order to read the differing paradigms of imprisonment that, I argue, are prevalent in Algren’s novel. My argument explores the motifs of confinement through an analysis of the two central characters. I focus on Frankie Machine, whose incarceration functions as a sanctuary, which stimulates his “escape” from morphine addiction, and his wife Sophie Majcinek, whose figurative entrapment in the tenement room shapes her psychological and physical paralysis.

To begin to locate the theme of imprisonment within the narrative’s construction of character, I have set the following in two parts. The first part considers both the addiction and incarceration of Frankie Machine within a wider historical and penal context of post-Second World War America. The second part evokes the domestic sphere of the tenement room as a symbol of absolute enclosure for the female protagonist Sophie Majcinek. I contend that this experience of enclosure springs from, and is enforced by, the paths of escape and renewal that are available to her husband Frankie Machine. In my view, the conflicting representations of confinement reveal the schism underlying the motif of imprisonment within *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

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I didn’t die with Frankie Machine. I didn’t hang there with him. You made me care about everybody. . . . But what happened to Frankie didn’t make me as mad as what happened to everybody else because everybody else was caught, fixed . . . but Frankie had some loopholes. . . . I ended up blaming him a little and removing some of my profound sympathies from him.

This passage is taken from a letter written by prisoner Bob Lowry to Algren in November 1949.⁵ In my view, the suggestion that “loopholes” are given to Frankie Machine touches the surface of some issues underlying *The Man with the Golden Arm*.⁶

It is worth considering at the outset the “reemphasis” on rehabilitation that pervaded the American prison system at the same historical moment as the incarceration

4. Saul Levinson, “Golden Arm at Cherry Lane,” *Chicago Daily News*, 22 May 1956, p. 28.

5. Rare Books and Manuscripts, Nelson Algren MSS, fol. 636, Bob Lowry to Nelson Algren, 4 November 1949.

6. Rare Books and Manuscripts, the Bettina Drew Archive of Nelson Algren, Sammy Cahn and James Van Heusen, “The Man with the Golden Arm” score and lyrics. Cahn’s lyrics show that Lowry was not alone in his interpretation of Frankie Machine: “But there’s a chance that he – can shake the mis-er-y. – That’s if he’s strong e-nough, -and fights it long enough” (p. 3).

of Frankie Machine.⁷ The end of World War II on September 2, 1945 is registered in *The Man with the Golden Arm* with “every tavern radio . . . blaring triumphantly” (GA, p. 68) of America’s detonation of atomic bombs upon the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After struggling through both economic depression and military conflict, post-war America was initially seen as an era gradually driven by what Edgardo Rotman calls “a general rehabilitative thrust.”⁸ In *False Starts: A Memoir of San Quentin and Other Prisons* (1976), Malcolm Braly records the nature of this model of rehabilitation through his own experience of imprisonment after the war:

Roughly, Custody was the old way, Care and Treatment the new. Custody was usually represented by a captain or lieutenant of the guards, and Treatment sent an associate warden. One of the Chaplains would be present, as well as a psych, or sociologist, or, later on, a correctional counselor, and, usually, some one from Education came in.⁹

The war had stimulated the influx of many European social scientists and psychologists, many of whom took up positions within institutional settings. These professionals nurtured a penological consensus of the importance in devising models of treatment and cure for individual offenders rather than maintaining custodial programmes *en masse*.¹⁰ This drive to implement therapeutic models in institutional environments also represented an attempt to tackle the increase in narcotic use and the wave of drug-related crimes that swept through American cities. In 1949 over five thousand addicts were imprisoned.¹¹ Yet the number of arrests merely touched the tip of the problem. By 1955 over one million Americans were addicted to narcotics.¹²

7. I use the word “reemphasis” here in order to suggest that the rehabilitative programmes after the Second World War were not new but, rather, existed within the theoretical grain accompanying the history of the penitentiary. For an insightful account of this history in an American context, see Adam Jay Hirsch, *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America* (London: Yale University Press, 1992).

8. Edgardo Rotman, “The Failure of Reform: United States, 1865–1965,” in *The Oxford History of the Prison: The Practice of Punishment in Western Society*, ed. Norval Morris and David J. Rothman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 151–177, p. 169.

9. Malcolm Braly, *False Starts: A Memoir of San Quentin and Other Prisons* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 166.

10. Rotman, p. 169.

11. “Narcotics Arrests Show Sharp Rise,” *The New York Times* (5 March 1950), p. 17.

12. See the estimate in Edwin M. Schur, *Narcotic Addiction in Britain and America: The Impact of Public Policy* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1963), p. 44.

In terms of Frankie Machine, the need for morphine resulted from a medicine administered to numb the pain of “wound fever” (GA, p. 17) received whilst he was a soldier in the war. Arriving back in Chicago, he finds that “a heavily cut grade of morphine” is readily available in his own Division Street neighbourhood from the “pusher” known as Nifty Louie. (GA, p. 26) The fact that the price of a fix steadily increases for the junkie – “That stuff cost me more than the last batch” (GA, p. 61) – shaped Louie’s realisation that Machine will at some stage be forced into crime in order “to steal enough for another fix” (GA, p. 61). Later, caught within the pain of withdrawal and yearning for a fix of morphine, we see Machine taking part in a bungled caper that involves the theft of electric irons from a Chicago department store. The character’s desperate attempt to obtain the price of a fix leads instead to his imprisonment.

Since the creation of the Federal Narcotic Act in 1914, addicts tended to be treated as criminals and as such subject to penal punishment.¹³ However, in the eightieth annual Congress of Correction, which brought penologists together in 1950, President Truman outlined the new “American way of handling social problems.”¹⁴ Within a social context that started to view the figure of the addict as a “dangerous individual,” Truman informed prison administrators that they must “work out the most effective means of rehabilitating men and women so that they might again become useful members of society.”¹⁵ The post-war era defined the addict as a “sick individual,” one who required urgent medical and psychological treatment.

Otto Preminger’s 1955 film of *The Man with the Golden Arm* reflects such a context of penal treatment.¹⁶ Where Kirkland’s play, mentioned earlier, dramatises the absolute confinement of characters, Preminger’s film constructs a bridge between the penal models of custody and therapy, and it is this that prefigures the hero’s escape from addiction. In the opening scenes we see Machine, played by a young Frank Sinatra, returning from “prison” as a “new man;”¹⁷ his first words are triumphant with

13. Schur, p. 57.

14. Quoted in Lucy Freeman, “Work of Prisons Hailed by Truman,” *The New York Times*, 10 October 1950, p. 45.

15. Freeman, p. 45.

16. *The Man with the Golden Arm*. Dir. Otto Preminger. United Artists. 1955. It should be noted here that Algren’s relation with Preminger and his film was a difficult one. For further reading on this see H. E. F. Donohue, *Conversations with Nelson Algren* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 101–167.

17. The Bettina Drew Archive of Nelson Algren, Walter Newman and Lewis Meltzer, “The Man with the Golden Arm: Screenplay,” 1955, p. 1.

the knowledge that “the monkey’s gone.”¹⁸ In the character’s own words, prison is “more of a hospital” than a penitentiary.¹⁹ Here, the only jailer that we are informed of is Dr. Lennox, who has helped Machine give up drugs, learn a new skill, and plan for a new role as a drummer in a big band. These details are drawn, perhaps with a little gloss here and there, from the novel itself. However, the film does alter the end of the novel quite radically. Where the book ends with Machine’s re-addiction and eventual suicide, the film offers him complete freedom, from his wife and from his narcotic habit. Preminger’s celebration of treatment and cure, which underpins the film’s reference to the penal system, certainly evokes and affirms Truman’s demand for an effective policy that productively engages with the “deviant individual.” In doing so, the film effectively ignores Algren’s aesthetic position: to critique political systems that, he believed, promise a great deal to help people out of poverty and apathy, but actually deliver very little.

If the sentiments espoused by politicians like Truman were to be believed, the emphasis on the criminal as a sick individual to be treated and cured, rather than the “traditional” method that defined the criminal as sinful and punishable, situates the prison within the guiding principle of the hospital. Perhaps in order to augment these credentials of reform during this period, the American Prison Association commenced with what they saw as a radical overhaul of the penal system. Therefore, the architecture of new institutions, such as California Treatment Facility (known as Soledad Prison to its critics) was designed and built with the idea of rehabilitation in mind. Set in relatively pleasant surroundings, Soledad contained libraries, gymnasiums, and bigger cells, together with spaces to facilitate the practice of psychologists and social workers. But the problem of providing individual therapy for a growing body of convicted felons was exacerbated overall by a lack of investment and long-term political commitment.²⁰ In *The Prison: Policy and Practice*, Gordon Hawkins studied a number of investigations into the prison system and programmes of rehabilitation during this post-war era. His conclusions show that, apart from a small number of “model” institutions, “there is a consensus to the effect that rehabilitative treatment has not been shown to be effective.”²¹

Indeed, many prisoners themselves drew on a direct experience of this problem in order to expose the hidden world existing behind the official narrative, or what

18. Preminger, I have taken this quotation directly from the film itself.

19. Preminger, I have taken this quotation directly from the film itself.

20. For further discussion see Rotman, 168–74.

21. Gordon Hawkins, *The Prison: Policy and Practice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 48.

Eric Cummings calls “rhetoric,” of reform.²² The publication of *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970), for example, undercuts the utopian model of the new penological era and its so-called model institutions. In these letters, Jackson paints a picture of a nightmare world where a “maddening intensity” underpins all aspects of life.²³ The total isolation that Jackson experiences, often being locked in his cell for twenty three hours a day, reminds us of “the regular abnormal monotony of jailhouse days and nights” (GA, p. 206) within which Frankie Machine experiences “sheer boredom” (GA, p. 202). The impression we are left with is of the concept of rehabilitation as, according to the prison film *The Shawshank Redemption* (1996), “a made-up word, a politician’s word.”²⁴ But Machine does experience prison as a sanctuary of sorts, because it allows him to free himself from his narcotic habit and, also, from his wife Sophie. This said, “where,” as George Bluestone asks for Frankie Machine, “does redemption lie?”²⁵

In Algren’s earlier books, *Somebody in Boots* (1935) and *Never Come Morning* (1942), the actuality of the pains of incarceration is punctuated by the symbolism of rejuvenation and empowerment. In both these narratives the metaphor of the prison cell as a chrysalis, where we view the captive “like a butterfly, emerging to try the brand new wings,” to extend Erving Goffman’s analogy, is somewhat prevalent.²⁶ In terms of *The Man with the Golden Arm*, the imaginative possibilities encoded into this landscape of confinement offers a means to interpret the individual empowerment of Frankie Machine, which I now wish to address.

A fundamental aspect of imprisonment, even in a context shaped by an idea of treatment, was the removal of the individual from a relatively open society into a closed world. Consequently, as the prison writer Jack Henry Abbott knows, the nature of immured existence represents a “truly living death.”²⁷ This death-like state underpins Machine’s initial impression of his surroundings. Here, the image of the tomb shapes the perception of the cell, the walls of which “were closer now than they

22. Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 12.

23. *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971), p. 78.

24. Frank Darabont, *The Shooting Script: The Shawshank Redemption* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1996), p. 111.

25. George Bluestone, “Nelson Algren,” *Western Review* 22 (1957) 27–44, p. 38.

26. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 79–80.

27. Jack Henry Abbott, *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 44.

had ever been; they bent together above him till the door seemed a part of the walls" (GA, p. 181). The structure reminds Machine that the "loopholes" that had previously been available to him, which worked to anaesthetise the self from the figurative imprisonment of his personal and social worlds, are closed down. There is no longer any "long orgasmic sigh of relief" (GA, p. 59) received through an injection of - "God's medicine" (GA, p. 26) - morphine. Also gone is the solace of being in the arms of his lover Molly Novotny, which, like the all-night company of cards and card players, "kept the everlasting darkness off" (GA, p. 118). In "San Quentin's Stranger" (1968), the poet William Wantling remembers such a feeling as "the last bond with life," which, like the memories of Machine, fades into the myriad of unceasing routine and regulation.²⁸ However, this sense of symbolic "death" does not allow us to write off the character in a final analysis. Rather, the total isolation that the prison environment represents is seen by Machine as an "iron sanctuary" (GA, p. 185), within which the self can be "resurrected."²⁹ This facet is made explicit in an earlier unpublished story by Algren entitled "An American Diary." After spending only one week confined within the cell, the imprisoned character of this story writes his metamorphosis: "I am not the same man who was arrested last week. I have been reborn. I am cleaner, finer, nobler."³⁰ Within such terms, we notice the relevance of Goffman's reference to the experiences endemic to the prison:

Mortification or curtailment of the self is very likely to involve acute psychological stress for the individual; but for an individual sick with his world or guilt-ridden in it, mortification may bring psychological relief.³¹

This equation unites punishment, and not treatment, with "psychological relief." In light of Machine's perpetual feelings of guilt regarding the sickness of his wife, together with his own illness associated with being a junkie, we see how Algren reconfigures the prison as a sanctuary: "Frankie Machine wasn't happy; yet Frankie wasn't too sad. He felt oddly relieved now that, for a while at least, all things would

28. William Wantling, *The Awakening* (London: Rapp and Whiting, 1968), p. 54.

29. See Maxwell Geismar, *American Moderns: From Rebellion to Conformity* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1958). Here, Geismar states, but does not develop, the idea that "prison is the safest place for Nelson Algren's people to be. It is the "iron sanctuary" which puts at rest their fevered and distorted hopes." p. 187.

30. Rare Books and Manuscripts, Nelson Algren MSS, fol. 395, "An American Diary," p. 6.

31. Erving Goffman, "On the Characteristics of Total Institutions: The Inmate World," in *The Prison: Studies in Institutional Organization and Change*, ed. Donald R. Cressey (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), 15-67, p. 48.

be solved for him" (GA, p. 185). The fact that the inmate feels "oddly relieved" touches the paradox of the prison as holding out imaginative possibilities. The separation or "death" of the captive from the external associations of "psychological stress" imbues Machine with the strength needed to activate these possibilities and direct them into the self-realisation that "I'm gonna shine again" (GA, p. 210).

As the days of his sentence count down towards release, we see a marked transformation in the character:

For now all things healed strangely well within him, as though by grace of his punishment. He was paying off for smashing up Sophie, the irons had only been God's means to let him, a Priest told him; so that when he was released everything he'd done would be paid for and he'd be truly free at last.

(GA, p. 209)

At this point in the narrative, Machine is no longer an addict, but an individual who, even though confined to prison, is "truly free at last." For the first time, he is able to find absolute redemption from the guilt associated with his wife's debilitating sickness. The juxtaposition of terms such as "healed" and "strangely . . . grace . . . God . . . [and] Priest" invests the cure with an almost supernatural essence that echoes Victor Brombert's conception of "salvation through enclosure."³² It would certainly be a mistake to read the prison setting in *The Man with the Golden Arm* as, in the words of Frank Sinatra's character in Preminger's film, "the greatest place you've ever seen."³³ Nevertheless, I have illustrated the importance underlying the role of the prison in serving to regenerate the once flailing figure of Frankie Machine. But this configuration of escape ("loopholes") and empowerment represents only one side of a prison motif in the novel; the other side, as Brombert observes, "gives birth to the opposite: to the perverse, the illicit, the absurd."³⁴ In my view, this antithesis is present in the depiction of Sophie Majcinek, figuratively imprisoned in the austere setting of her tenement room, and it is to this that the next section will turn.

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In a short story entitled "Escape – or the Woman?" (c. 1931), Nelson Algren writes: "Women do not attempt escape – they resign themselves. In all the history of the

32. Victor Brombert, *The Romantic Prison: The French Tradition*, trans. the author (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 17.

33. Preminger, I have taken this quotation directly from the film itself.

34. Brombert, p. 176.

penitentiary never has a woman attempted escape.”³⁵ Algren’s comments here upon the apparent resignation of female prisoners offers a telling insight into the construction of the female protagonist Sophie Majcinek. In contrast to her husband Frankie Machine, whose imprisonment, as we have seen, promotes his temporary experience of liberation and empowerment, Sophie is caught within what Judith A. Scheffler would call a “virtual” web of imprisonment that “does not share the luxury of verbal play with the word *freedom*.”³⁶ The following analysis will show how the narrative reconfigures the “domestic” sphere of the tenement room that Sophie inhabits into an absolute space of enclosure. It is my argument that this narrative focus represents one of the most potent and terrifying aspects of a prison motif in Algren’s work.

I want to start with a brief overview of a specific event that shapes the development of the character, because it is here that we locate the genesis of, in Michel Foucault’s words, “the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation.”³⁷ The event I refer to is the car accident that traps both Machine and his wife within a debilitating experience of guilt and paralysis. The narrative returns us in time to an evening in the Tug and Maul bar where the end of the war with Japan is celebrated. Driving home that night, the inebriated Machine crashes the car. Although both characters are treated with only minor injuries and discharged from hospital, Machine notices “that something had gone wrong with his Zosh” (*GA*, p. 72).

In search of a diagnosis, they visit a clinic where the doctor, after sitting Sophie in a wheelchair, “had immediately taken her by surprise with a needle jabbed into the tender back of her calf” (*GA*, p. 75). Having returned home, Sophie has a nightmare that enacts the end of her physical and psychological sense of freedom:

That night she had dreamed that she was about to be jabbed by a flaming needle in Frankie’s hand: she’d gotten out of bed, turned on the light and wakened screaming. Frankie had carried her back to the bed and she hadn’t gotten out of bed unaided since. Living between the bed and the wheelchair, her arms had grown flabby while her legs had lost flesh from disuse. The

35. Rare Books and Manuscripts, Nelson Algren MSS, “Escape – or the Woman?” fol. 429. It is not my intention to engage with the problematic nature of Algren’s statement. Rather, I quote the passage as offering an insight into the way Algren constructed the character of Sophie Majcinek.

36. Judith A. Scheffler, *Wall Tappings: An Anthology of Writings by Women Prisoners* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 18.

37. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991) (1977), p. 304.

skin had crowded pendulously upon itself beneath her chin to make her eyes mere pale gray slits reflecting her sick despair. (GA, p. 75)

This nightmare builds the foundations of an imprisoned world (a world without the possibilities of reform or cure), which works to define the character and her pattern of behaviour within the mind of the reader. I now want to identify and examine this passage in order to bring out the room's virtual identification as a prison cell.

One of the most powerful symbols here is the needle that is administered by the doctor and, in the nightmare, by her husband. In both cases, the injection constructs, symbolically, an image of Sophie as an addict and, by extension, a prisoner of her male counterparts. Such an image is achieved through the archetype of women as "docile and compliant companions of men," to borrow Sandra Lee Bartky words.³⁸ This "docility" is articulated in terms that echo the addictive behaviour and vernacular associated with the junkie. In a similar manner to her addicted husband, who after morphine feels that "all he had to do the rest of his life was to lie right here" (GA, p. 59), Sophie is paralysed by the injection. By claiming that "he's fixed me" (GA, p. 121), Sophie reinforces this connection between her own body – punctuated with actual or imagined needle marks, her "flabby" arms shrinking the vein from view – and the anatomy of the junkie. As Frankie is imprisoned within the very yearning for morphine, the agoraphobic Sophie becomes habituated to the place "between the bed and the wheelchair."

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir offers such a model of a "closed cell"³⁹ in order to define the female figure "Consumed in her solitude and sterility."⁴⁰ I have drawn upon this model because it illuminates certain tropes of the "small and close" (GA, p. 32) room where Sophie, as her husband says, "got banged up" (GA, p. 67). Indeed, a register of the level of confinement that underpins our reading of the room is established through Machine's belief that it represented an even "narrower freedom" than the police holding cell (GA, p. 27). In this "narrower freedom," Sophie,

38. Quoted in Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 90.

39. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1972) (1949), p. 497. At the time of publication of *The Man with the Golden Arm* and *The Second Sex* in 1949, Algren and de Beauvoir were lovers. Perhaps more importantly, though, de Beauvoir was a reader and translator of Algren's work, and Algren, in turn, discussed issues pertinent to de Beauvoir's feminism. There is certainly useful research to be done in the influence exerted by both writers on each other's work.

40. De Beauvoir, p. 495.

“who had so loved to dance and be with dancing people” (GA, p. 67). is “fixed” by a “sick despair.” The culture of “the whole vast frame rooming house” (GA, p. 32), an echo perhaps to the so-called “Big House” prisons of the 1940s,⁴¹ works to maintain both these themes of restriction and sickness. One of the ways in which this is achieved can be seen through the brief depictions given to the landlord of the tenement. Like the “turnkey” who inhabits the jail scenes of *Somebody in Boots* or *Never Come Morning*, landlord Schabatawski is referred to as “the jailer” (GA, p. 32). His role is one of “door-shutter and key-turner” (GA, p. 32), and his perpetual demand of his tenants is to keep “door always closed” (GA, p. 32). The closure of exits serves metaphorically to transform the domestic associations of the home into the solitude of the prison cell. As I mentioned before, this is not the same type of cell as inhabited by Machine, which seems to promote the character’s self-esteem, but, rather, the opposite.

The fact that the hallway of this tenement is lit “the same as that over the visitors’ cage” (GA, p. 225) in the prison further augments the connection between the room and a cell. Within this light, Machine’s arrival in, and departure from, the room becomes comparable to the trajectories available to the prison visitor. Working through the night as a card dealer in Schwiefka’s gambling house, he reluctantly returns to the room only in order to sleep. In theory, Machine’s arrival into the room offers a disruption to the loneliness experienced by his wife, in a similar way to the presence of the prison visitor punctuates the alienation felt by the inmate. But there are problems with this idea. Sophie appears aware of the possibility of disruption to her situation and pleads with her husband to wheel her, as this “could arrest that endless plunge into nowhere” (GA, p. 36). However, in practice, Machine feels confined by the realisation that “there was no end to the wheeling at all” (GA, p. 36). Consequently, he attempts to escape his condition by playing his “homemade drummer’s practice board” (GA, p. 36), which, as Bruce Bassoff suggests, “represent his hope for freedom and respectability.”⁴² Rather than disrupt the isolation experienced by Sophie, then, the timed movements of her husband function to reinforce her sense of imprisonment.

We find similar trajectories of the visiting husband in Mary Jane Ward’s almost-forgotten novel, *The Snake Pit* (1947).⁴³ This text offers a perspective of life as seen

41. Rotman, p. 169.

42. Bruce Bassoff, “Algren’s Poetics in *The Man with the Golden Arm*,” *Études Anglaises* 4 (1987) 413–420, p. 414.

43. All parenthesised references are to this edition: Mary Jane Ward, *The Snake Pit* (London: Cassell and Company, 1947).

through the eyes of a female inmate of a mental hospital. The character Virginia Stuart Cunningham is placed into this institution by her husband Robert. Like Sophie, the female patient understands her illness as the central reason behind her being “shut up like a criminal” (*SP*, p. 86). Indeed, the regular visits by Robert appear to accentuate the sense of confinement that the hospital represents, as we have seen between Machine and Sophie, because they map the paths that travel between “inside” and “outside” that liberate him but imprison her. The language employed by Ward in order to catch the connection between this sense of confinement and the deterioration of Virginia’s psychological state echoes the details we see associated with Sophie. Both characters share a claustrophobic setting, where the “little room” (*SP*, p. 174), “narrow yellow door” (*GA*, p. 226), and “narrow bed” (*SP*, p. 162) define the nature of their existence.

Here, the experience of figurative (as in Sophie’s case) or literal (as in Virginia’s) imprisonment for the female protagonist becomes conceptually fused. In both texts, we receive a view of both husbands carrying their wives towards a bed that is defined by illness and stagnation. For both female characters, such an act symbolises the docility and compliance, to paraphrase Bartky, which underscores the acute level of imprisonment surrounding, paralysing, and “fixing” their bodies in place.

These female figures share a degree of personal entrapment that reconfigures the world as an alien and remote landscape. The domestic locus, together with the very thought of travel from it, imbues all with an anxiety that translates the external environment, in Elizabeth Grosz’s words, “into the simulacrum of the body.”⁴⁴ In terms of Sophie, we see the extent to which her psychological and physical paralysis informs her view of the city from the room’s only window:

Moonlight that had once revealed so many stars now showed her only how the city was bound, from southeast to the unknown west, steel upon steel upon steel: how all its rails held the city too tightly to the thousand-girdered El For the city too was somehow crippled of late. The city too seemed a little insane. (*GA*, pp. 95–96)

The passage evokes an inter-connection between the mental and physical stagnation of the perceiving character and the structures that are seen to circumscribe the urban landscape. The symbolic associations loaded onto the iconography of the train, for instance, which offers Machine an escape from Captain Bednar, work in-

44. Elizabeth Grosz, “Bodies-Cities,” in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. Beatriz Colomina (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 241–253, p. 242.

stead to mirror and reinforce the immobility that overwhelms and invests the very being of Sophie. The one small tenement window that frames the picture of the “bound” city, Sophie’s only view of the outside world, is directly akin to “the slotlike opening” (*SP*, p. 62) that directs the gaze of Virginia onto the austere architecture of the asylum that imprisons her. The criss-crossing of “steel upon steel upon steel” that forms the elevated train network, as Mary Ellen Pitts observes, “reflect[s] the barred images of the jail cells.”⁴⁵

This visual drama of enclosure is heightened by the soundscape that surrounds the senses of Sophie. We have already noted the extent to which Machine uses the drums to drown out his wife’s appeal for companionship and also to envisage a new and ideal life. But Sophie does not share this attempt at liberation. Instead, the repetitious beat is translated into the construction of a prison:

Listening to the light mechanical beat, it began to sound for the first time, to Sophie, like a hammer’s rapid tapping. When she’d closed her eyes his hammer went tap-tap-tapping down a thousand little bent rusty nails. She had had to clench her palms tightly to fight off the panic rising within her and when he’d looked up at her eyes had had the same immovable stare they’d had on the receiving-room table. (GA, p. 72)

Here, the “light mechanical beat” of the drums and the noise of “a hammer’s rapid tapping” are riveted together with “a thousand little bent rusty nails” to form an enclosing architecture within the mind of Sophie. The sight of the character “clench[ing] her palms tightly” at the thought of the “rusty nails” once again tacks the experience and anatomy of the junkie onto the image of Sophie. This image is reinforced by the belief that it was Machine “who drove in the nails” (*GA*, p. 66). Left alone in the solitude of the room, Sophie sees their marriage as offering a similar relationship in principal to the one between the hustler and the addict. Consequently, she sees the nails in the same way as the addict sees the needle, as being driven into “her own palms” (*GA*, p. 66) which were “already bleeding” (*GA*, p. 67).

Using this model of a conceptually loaded soundscape is also valuable in identifying “the stranger’s step,” which Sophie hears “coming on heavily, like one almost too tired to mount one more flight” (*GA*, p. 304). Again, the narrative evokes the construction of the paralysed and “weighed down” (*GA*, p. 94) condition that imprisons Sophie, using a similar method to the poet Ericka Huggins:

45. Mary Ellen Pitts, “Algren’s El: Internalized Machine and Displaced Nature,” *South Atlantic Review* 52.4 (1987), 61–74, p. 70.

I sense the great weight of the prison
pressing down on the little box of room I lie in
alone forgotten.⁴⁶

The premise “I sense” establishes a felt connection between “the great weight of the prison” and “the little box room I lie in,” thus bridging the boundaries between figurative and literal forms of absolute incarceration. Caught within such a context, Sophie strains to hear “a light step on the long dark stair” (*GA*, p. 120) that symbolises the freedom of her youth where she longed to be a dancer. But where the escape attempt of Machine is realised, Sophie’s desperation to find amelioration from the enclosed surroundings is mocked by the “light step” transforming itself into the “tapping, tapping . . . tapping, tapping” of Blind Pig’s cane as he navigates the stairs towards his room. (*GA*, p. 92) The repetitious beat of the cane slips easily into the whole crescendo of sounds that range from the banging of drums, the chimes of clocks, the “tap-tapped” (*GA*, p. 210) patter of Molly Novotny, and the “rapping of jailer’s hammer” (*GA*, p. 304). A large proportion of this soundscape forms a dynamic of escape for Machine. However, for Sophie, it reinforces the metaphoric edifice of her own prison, circumscribed by “the vast web of backstreet and alleyway” (*GA*, p. 228).

The tenement room draws and holds these sounds in the same way as the prison cell reverberates with, what *Never Come Morning* calls, “the sounds of human trouble” (*NCM*, p. 153). Like the slow drowning of a cockroach in the prison’s “water bucket” (*GA*, p. 22), which temporarily reminds Machine “just how that felt” (*GA*, p. 22), the noises of the room reflect and enforce the permanent debilitating condition suffered by his wife:

The mousetrap in the closet clicked. She felt it close as if it had shut within herself, hard and fast forever. Heard the tiny caught thing struggling, slowly tiring, and at last becoming still. (GA, p. 99)

The audibility of the working trap is accentuated by the silence that normally pervades the tenement house. Therefore, the sharp quality of the noise itself – the click – is emphasised in order to reveal the penal metaphor underpinning it. The deathly representation of the trap is channelled into an echo of the human equivalent, the opening of the gallows’s platform that hangs the body of the condemned prisoner. The noise of the mousetrap closing “hard and fast forever” enacts a pro-

46. Ericka Huggins, “[untitled],” in Scheffler, 298–99, p. 298.

phetic vision of the character's committal to an asylum, where the door closes "for keeps" (*GA*, p. 307).

As we have already noted, and by way of a conclusion, the "click" of the prison door denotes a sanctuary for Machine, within which he can escape from the pains associated with morphine addiction and anticipate a new life. The reverse is true for Sophie, as the noise defines the very terminus that "had shut within herself," catching the full horror that confinement can impose upon the mind of the female captive.