

Scarlett Dougherty  
Terzian-Zeitounian  
English 108  
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### You Should've Kept Your Legs Shut

We won't go back to hasty marriages, thrown  
rice barely shucked from the grain,  
dress still trailing price tags behind  
it lest you produce a bastard.

We won't go back to back  
alleys and kitchen tables, buckets  
and knives, hangers from the dry cleaner,  
knitting needles and pennyroyal tea,  
or Drain-O douches.

We won't go back to sepsis, to red  
burning fevers-- a scarlet letter across  
a girl's head marking her a *wench*,  
a *whore*, a *fallen woman* whose death  
must be righteous, must be *god's will*  
for committing murder.

We won't go back to "road trips" and plane rides  
to find a doctor willing enough.  
We won't go back to throwing up  
dollars and dimes for our autonomy.  
What about those landlocked minors--  
no car, no friends, no family?

We will *never* go back to forcing children  
to carry an abuser's spawn, forcing them  
to trade their kitchen playsets for real  
pots and pans.

We shouldn't *want* to force screaming,  
sobbing little girls *or anyone* to know the pain  
of childbirth, with all the spoils of gritted teeth

and husband stitches, and all of the pain  
in this known universe.

We won't go back to waking up unaware  
that our uteruses were removed, that “*unfavorables*”  
and indigenous women just like me  
had them harvested and thrown  
in the trash, no papers signed, never  
knowing it was gone until the ripe  
age of 50, uterus and choices long  
erased and languishing in a landfill  
somewhere outside of Long Island.

Scarlett Dougherty

2,520 words

Professor Angelino

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### The Original Sin

At the beginning of everything, I was diagnosed with constant UTIs. The gravelly and painful feeling they caused was seared into my brain at an early age. There wasn't anything that could really be done about them other than my parents taking me to the bathroom more frequently as I downed antibiotic after antibiotic alongside a medication that turned my urine to a deep sunset orange. As a child it was funny more than anything else, a good excuse to miss school for a few days. Over time though, the UTIs lessened (but never fully went away) as a new problem took their place. When I started having my period, I was prone to heavy and painful cycles, bleeding on average about twelve days out of the month. Of course, at the tender age of fourteen, I was too nervous or embarrassed to consult anyone, let alone the stuffy man that was my pediatrician. He smelled of the wooden popsicle sticks used to look in patients throats and, to be crudely frank, smelled as though a cup of coffee and a cigarette had been wooing, courting, and eventually fucking somewhere deep within the confines of his mouth.

Asking him about something as personal as a period made me self conscious. Should you even *ask* a pediatrician about your period? Isn't that sort of beyond their wheelhouse? Pediatricians are usually concerned with colds, ear infections, and generally, probably, don't deal with many patients who need gynecological help. And my parents, most especially my mother, would never stoop to bring me to a gynecologist at that age. I can still remember the nights I spent curled up on my cold bathroom floor, feeling as though my insides were being scraped

apart by a dull and rusty knife. My mother assured me it was normal, that all women were relegated to pain of such level on their periods. I decided to consult my friend from gym class. She remarked to me coolly that she had never had cramps, that her periods lasted three days and were always there and gone without much notice on her part. I wondered then, if what I was experiencing was normal as other girls around us agreed with her. I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me to know that other girls barely registered their periods. I knew that a heavy flow at the least must be normal, as I had once consulted the box of super tampons my mother kept on her bathroom counter. They looked almost comical to my young eyes, thick and short like those miniature pretzel dogs you can get at the mall. The question around tampons, however, opened a different can of worms.

Any time I tried to use one, It felt like trying to push your hand through cement. Impossible, impenetrable, and unlikely. It felt painful in a new and frightening way, a way that would stay frightening but quickly lose its newness. Any friends I consulted were left scratching their heads; they had never heard of a girl being unable to use a tampon. I felt totally abnormal. Any internet search I made only returned droll advice like “if it hurts, don't push yourself”, or “it shouldn't hurt. If it does, you're doing it wrong or need to consult a doctor.” I grew frustrated at the idea that my body couldn't accommodate something I wanted, *no*, needed it to do. I was sick of bleeding all over myself, and yet all my mother could say about the topic was that she used maxi pads until she lost her virginity. She couldn't use tampons either, so being a virgin was the reason I couldn't use any. This was a woman who tried to convince me that my periods were heavy because the milk I drank probably had too many hormones in it. Over time, I found that I was unable to freely give what any sweaty and overeager high school boy would want. It was simply too painful at each attempt.

At seventeen I begged my mom to take me to a gynecologist; I was sick of not being able to consummate the gross and sweaty love of my high school boyfriend, who was like if a Radiohead song came to life, living and breathing the brooding that only a disaffected 19 year old could have. It was something that eventually ended for me in a flood of bloody agony, something that didn't even grant me the convenience of tampons, and something that would cause an entirely new set of issues to befall me.

It is estimated that anywhere between five to twenty-six percent of women struggle with chronic pelvic pain worldwide. Most chronic pelvic pain has no known cause or cure-- much of the time it is a misdiagnosis that falls under the umbrella of endometriosis, dysmenorrhea, pelvic inflammatory disease, interstitial cystitis, vulvodynia, vestibulodynia, uterine fibroids, ovarian cysts, vulvar vestibulitis, etc., et al, et al, infinity. Something that is so common with so many of these disorders is that there is no cause and no known cure. Only guesses, suppositions, suggestions, and trials. While all of these are invariably linked to discomfort in daily living, whether it's sharp pain around the clock, or only while menstruating, most of these disorders are linked to sexual dysfunction and pain during intercourse. I would conject that women are bred to expect sexual pain. Growing up, all I ever heard from the media, family, or friends is the fact that sex for women— especially the first time— is not pleasurable, is painful, something to grit your teeth for in order to satisfy your male partner.

You hear so often of bloodshed on the wedding night, of virginal white dresses marred with a rusty brown stain, and how women aren't expected to feel sexual pleasure in the "same way as a man might" that night or maybe ever. So many people link it to the original sin, or the concept that when Eve bit down on that succulent, juicy forbidden fruit, that as the sticky juices dripped down her chin and over her breasts, that God punished all women for that one moment

of unadulterated pleasure. All women from then on would be doomed to pain during childbearing, relegated to a life devoid of the pleasures a man might revel in because just one woman (the first one at that) committed an act so unspeakable as to enjoy something for herself.

It is excruciating to be saddled with a pain that has no cause and no cure. It is excruciating to ask “How long til I’m better doc?” and hear a sharply casual “This will be lifelong,” in response. It is excruciating to hear that the only drugs for these issues are experimental, antidepressants or antipsychotics, or stomach acid inhibitors. It’s agonizing that no doctor or researcher has ever developed medication other than birth control that affects the female reproductive system, and I’m not confident that any of them have even tried. What am I supposed to do for the rest of my life? How am I to live with an excruciating ache that envelops one half of a whole body? It is horrific that men can get a vasectomy fully anesthetized, but a woman must bare her teeth through the pain of an IUD insertion, an abortion, anything. “Take some Tylenol” is not remotely comparable to full anesthesia in terms of analgesic or pain-reducing quality. There is no bare minimum; women are subjugated to pain with no known cause, pain even with known causes because no one cares to discuss the ickiness of vaginas, of periods, of birth and afterbirth, of abortion, of tampons, of anything. No one dares say the words aloud or speak of such personal things in public or in polite company. It is excruciating and agonizing to be relegated to an existence of pain that nobody cares about, or cares to know about. How quickly did a drug like Viagra hit the market, to help the millions of limp penises across the world— which I wouldn’t exactly say is painful? Yet women with sexual dysfunction are told to breathe deep and bare down, have a glass of wine and just relax, babe.

I’ve had my glass of wine, I’ve had my antidepressants, I’ve had a joint, I’ve tried meditation, I’ve tried changing my diet, I’ve changed my laundry detergent, I’ve taken that drug

that Larry the Cable Guy reps at the behest of my doctor, I've tried breathing deep and baring down, and I've tried therapy and above all else, I've tried grinning and bearing it and none of it works. If I am one random woman in a sea of millions, then what about all the millions like me? How many of them have tried all of these things and more and silently relegated themselves to a life of suffering?

How are so many doctors satisfied with telling women that "periods are meant to be painful, but not that painful, take some Motrin, drink some wine, switch to pads, switch to cups, don't use condoms, use a sponge, try another brand of pads, try amitriptyline, yes it's antidepressant but your vagina is depressed. There is beauty in meditation, you don't *have* to *have* penetrative sex, you can be satisfied through other means; just listen to your body even if you don't know what it's telling you. Don't sit in a wet bathing suit, don't use anything but warm water when washing, don't use any fragranced detergent or take bubble baths, don't hold your pee, take birth control, take Tums, take a drug for men with beer gut. They're doing vulvar botox to help people who have vaginas like you; it's expensive but I've heard it works; we don't cover it. There is no gain if there is no pain. Is your husband still suffering from sexual dysfunction? Here's a script for that little blue pill that will give him his life back. We have ways we can help *him* but *you're* shit outta luck, ma'am."

The worst part of it all is all of the misdiagnoses. I never *had* chronic UTIs, only chronic pain. I never was just a virgin, I had chronic pain, and still do. I never had painful periods, I had endometriosis, and I never had drunk too much milk, I was just a girl with no resources and no one to turn to except Google and a mother who had suffered through the same. Today, I talk with her about these things and she admits to sharing nearly every symptom I endure, but she'd never see a gynecologist because aren't they painful? Aren't they invasive? The answer is yes, it's

painful and invasive in a way that might prey on a woman's deepest traumas, deepest shames and deepest insecurities. We are taught to never say the word *vagina*, not to touch your *no-no*, your *privates*, your *down there*, your *thing*, lest we even look at it. Meanwhile men can say *dick*, *cock*, *wang*, *penis*, *E.D.*, and so much more in daily conversation. Men are just being men when they scratch their *dicks* in public, and when they send unannounced photos of it through the internet. They're just being guys when they want to get off, and are expected to touch themselves until the cows come home and to take what is theirs even if it takes violating and stepping on a woman to get it. I am no stranger to men violating and stepping on me to get what they want. Sometimes what it is that they want is relatively benign, other times it's life changing in a way that can hardly be conveyed through writing.

If you have sisters, mothers, friends, aunts, or grandmothers, I can guarantee you that there has been a time they were violated by a man trying to get off in some way. Anecdotal evidence is really only just that-- but when every woman I have ever spoken to, befriended or been related to has one or many stories of violation, it ceases being anecdotal and becomes evidence of a larger problem. Gritting your teeth through pain might be one aspect of how male and female sexuality diverge, but the fact that many men are sexual conquistadors is another. I shouldn't have to expose every painful, and frankly, traumatic scar I have had foisted upon me in order to convince anyone of this idea, however suffice it to say that I have lived this experience, time and time again. Grocery shopping shouldn't come with stares at my ass or belly that make me feel as though I'm being undressed next to a bag of wilting green beans. Working should not come with the fear of knowing a patron is following me around the store, then the sheer terror of being cornered in the dark and begged for a date. Dating should not come with the idea that my body is for free use, publicly or privately and that I'm nothing more than a set of holes, like a



cheap bowling ball. The year long relationship with that living Radiohead song should not have come with the accusation that my vagina was broken and that it was my fault we couldn't consummate something as lame as prom night. Walking down the street should not come with the threat of having nickels and dimes tossed out a window at me, fifteen and knock-kneed, called a slut for the petty crime of wearing shorts in the summertime. Being a woman is to be constantly invaded in ways that are so painful that to list them all would be to write a hundred pages or more. Being a woman is to even endure these little violations at our yearly pap smears.

I won't say that something like a prostate exam isn't invasive, weird, or painful, it's just that there exists this dichotomy where vaginal healthcare is *all* painful, childbirth is painful, abortions are painful, transvaginal ultrasounds are painful, pap smears and pelvic exams are painful, hell, periods are painful and those are on a monthly basis. They affect women for an average of 23.08% percent of a year, or 12 weeks out of 52 weeks a year. Sex is painful and it's apparently supposed to be, and sometimes sitting and walking and living are painful every single day and apparently that is normal and not a pressing cause for more research and more studies because the medical profession is a business, and if we've learned anything as a society, it's that there is no money in vaginas unless you're selling yours to men on the street.

At the end of the day myself and millions of others will have to live with the dissatisfaction and total rage of never having a reason for our pain, never having a concrete treatment for it until women are not treated like chattel with one purpose: to be fucked and bred like a blue-ribbon prize winning heifer, wants and aspirations and pleasure be damned. And I'm not entirely confident that will ever, *ever* happen.

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### What Does *The L Word*'s Jenny Schecter Reveal About Female Trauma?

“Which character do you think you’re the most like?” is an icebreaker that fans of television shows have used since television’s major boom in the early fifties. This icebreaker has endured the annals of history and still takes place to this day. If you somehow find yourself in a room of Gen Xers or millennials, you might be asked which character from *Friends* you are most like. In a room full of queer women, this question will almost assuredly be asked about a show called *The L Word*. *The L Word* was a television show that premiered in 2004 and ran for six seasons, ending in 2009. Though it premiered over twenty years ago, the show is still culturally relevant in many ways. It was the first television show ever created exclusively for queer women without mocking or otherizing them. It has been hailed as a cultural touchstone and as the only show of its kind. Though similar shows have aired, there haven’t been many that mainly depict solely queer women. The show follows the lives of an ensemble cast of lesbian and bisexual women--it follows their loves, losses, ambitions and intricacies. Several topics are touched on--menopause, family planning, religious guilt, drug addiction, and even childhood trauma. The character of Jenny Schecter is the show’s main avenue of exploring trauma, its effects, and its many faces. Although she is complex and sometimes inconsistent, her character reveals a lot about the way that female/female-coded trauma victims are portrayed in the media. Despite being a trailblazing show created by women, *The L Word* perpetuates misogynistic double-standards-- Jenny’s behavior and persona is invariably disparaged, while a male-coded


character who suffers from trauma on the same show is lauded, even through callous behavior. When traumatized female characters are contrasted with traumatized male-coded characters, there is a clear difference in the way that they are received and written, which is largely rooted in misogyny.

Over the course of the show, Jenny's trauma is portrayed in a sometimes unsympathetic way, often the catalyst for some kind of destructive behavior. In *The L Word*, Jenny Schecter begins to have flashbacks of a horrific childhood event: a gang rape at the age of eight at the hands of numerous boys from her temple. This is all exacerbated by a new male roommate moving into her house and setting up secret cameras in bedrooms and common areas in order to spy on her and her roommates' sexual escapades. After discovering this, she turns to self harm in the throes of her anguish, and is eventually sent away to an inpatient psychiatric ward, where she stays for six months. Upon arrival, she descends into chaos-- she writes and publishes a commercially panned book, destroys the life of a journalist who gives it a negative review, then writes a fiction piece exposing her friends' private lives. Eventually she lashes out and wrongs everyone around her: she destroys the negatives of a film she directs which puts a friend's job into jeopardy, accuses another friend wrongly of cheating on their partner, steals another friend's idea for a screenplay and makes a cool million off the sale, and manipulates her best friend into dating her. Eventually she is either murdered or commits suicide-- it is never revealed which, and the popular opinion is that she deserved this fate. Though most of her behavior is deplorable at best, when we consider the way she was received by other characters and audiences alike, we may notice that most of the slander has an inherent misogynistic bent.

In the Guardian article, *Lez Girls and dead dogs: how Jenny wrecked The L Word*, its tagline unapologetically boasts, "The lesbian drama was the first of its kind – shame its most

irritating character ruined the show”. The article goes on to describe Jenny as “a character so annoying she eventually... became the undoing of the whole show.” In fan communities for the show, one is inundated with thousands of original posts claiming the same idea in different ways. One text search for “Jenny” in *The L Word*’s subreddit will produce results such as “I hate Jenny so much can anyone relate?”, “I hate jenny in season 6”, “Do we hate Jenny?” “i hate jenny”, “Are we supposed to like Jenny??”, “Does anyone else find Jenny insufferable?”, “Jenny is so irritating”, “Does Jenny cry every episode”, “Struggling to rewatch because of Jenny”, and finally, “Jenny Schecter is the biggest proof that you can be the hottest person alive but become 0% attractive if you have a shit personality & behavior”(r/TheLWord). Characters within the show espouse views of her such as “...I think she’s just misplaced her meds”(Chaiken, 25:55) “No, she’s not [malicious] at all, just completely and totally evil” (Ziff, 6:43) Though Jenny’s behavior is indeed destructive and warrants criticism, her trauma explains and informs her actions. It doesn’t justify them, negate them, nor does it act as an excusal for them. It is without a doubt that this character is poorly received due in part to the harmful behavior she portrays at times, but when we contrast this to the character of Shane, we can easily see that male-coded characters are not treated with the same disgust.

When we think about the way Jenny’s actions are received by an audience and other characters around her and contrast this with male-coded characters, we can see several key differences that fit into the larger idea that traumatized or anti-hero female characters are reviled due to misogyny. Within *The L Word*, Jenny is not the only character affected by childhood trauma. The character of Shane McCutcheon is a rare female portrayal of the “lothario” trope seen within a lot of media. She unapologetically sleeps around and is the dominant/aggressor role, is incredibly charismatic, and the closest thing to a butch main character on the show. She

displays several traditionally masculine traits, “with her typically masculine name, androgynous, rail-thin body, and husky voice... [her] predatory womanising seem meant to position [her] as a confident, somewhat masculine identified dyke” (Akass and McCabe 160). It is clear that she has suffered some kind of trauma. She was abandoned by her drug addicted mother in early childhood, surrendered to foster care, then eventually ran away and became a prostitute while posing as a male in order to turn tricks. The traits she displays due to this trauma, such as emotional unavailability, severe commitment issues, drug abuse, and self harm through self destruction are seen by both viewers and characters as sexy, cool, and something to behold. Though she cheats on several partners, is largely dysfunctional, and is sometimes cruel to romantic conquests (even leaving a woman at the altar), she is usually hailed by viewers as a fan favorite. A cursory search for “Shane” in the aforementioned subreddit returns results such as, “shane is so attractive”, “Me and Shane are getting Married”, “Shane style”, “Shane the legend you are”, “Shane is a bad girlfriend, but an amazing friend”, “shane ”, “I LOVE SHANE!”, “Obsessed with Shane and here's why...” (r/TheLWord). Characters within the show make remarks about her such as “it's really unbelievable...that chick must have some kind of power or something. I've never seen a girl have that kind of effect on other girls” (Turner, 32:07). Why is she received so differently than Jenny when she has also committed just as many destructive acts? I'd conject that the issue has a lot to do with internalized misogyny. Internalized misogyny is defined as “a... way of saying that women can be sexist against women too. If you didn't know, misogyny is the term described as the “hatred of women.” So if female-identifying people internalize that, they begin to hate others of their own gender. ” (Dameron). I think that it's more than fair to argue that viewers are participating in misogynistic behavior when praising a character like Shane while disparaging Jenny.

This begs the question: why are viewers subconsciously drawn to internalized misogyny? According to the *Vox* article, “Internalized Misogyny: ‘Pick-Me girls’ and Introspection”,

“What actually causes the internalization of misogyny is that girls adapt to a vague and kind of abstract standard created by social expectations and men. These standards normally show how we should behave and react, and often portray women as emotional, manipulative, weak or unintelligent...unfortunately, women end up unconsciously projecting those ideas onto other women, and even themselves” (Dameron).

The article goes on to discuss the idea that these subconscious signals are part of our everyday life, and I would have to agree.

To further the point, when we look at another male-coded character, such as Don Draper from *Mad Men*, we can easily see how a character's gender can impact the way that they're received. To quote at length from the *autostraddle* article, “Don Draper vs Jenny Schecter: The Sexist Battle of the TV Anti-Heroes”,

“Jenny and Don were both survivors of abuse and trauma inflicted on them in childhood, adults who’d settled into idyllic lives with adoring partners, and then burned it all down. They were both selfish, petulant, erratic narcissists; both constantly promising themselves and other people they’d get better, do better; and failing in the face of perpetual existential crisis and a self-destructive lack of impulse control. They self-harmed. They were endlessly petty with their critics. They were great observers of the human condition with the ironic inability to parse out their own motivations. They pushed and pushed away the people who saw them for who they really were, the people who really loved them. They demolished their lives, the things they claimed were important to them, systematically, in perpetuity” (Hogan).

This to me speaks so much to how similar their characters really are. According to the article, male characters are “fascinating, sly, cheeky, sexy, charming, compelling, [and] riveting” while female characters of similar caliber are labeled as “psychotic”, “a bitch”, or “ruthless”. The fact that these two characters are so similar, and yet regarded in different ways by their fan bases speaks to the inherent misogyny within this debate. If Don Draper and Shane McCutcheon can retain their charm despite their deplorable behavior, what does this mean for Jenny? I would argue that the media has by-and-large conditioned us as viewers to see male self-destruction as empowering (as in *Fight Club*), and female self-destruction as irredeemable, or a death-sentence (such as in *Black Swan*). The reason that characters such as Shane or Don are granted more leniency is due largely to this discrepancy in perception which originates in misogyny.

The implications of the way that we handle the discussions around traumatized female characters has a scope and reach far more powerful than any ordinary person might imagine. When we discuss characterizations of female victims in this way, it opens the door to discussing real female victims in this way. When reviewers, fandoms, and op-eds perpetuate harmful and sexist ideas surrounding female trauma, they are unknowingly speaking to and about a very real population. When we perpetuate negative conversations surrounding female characters that are survivors, we are shaping the way that real female survivors are perceived. There is great harm in the way that sexism permeates the media landscape surrounding female-trauma, and *The L Word*'s Jenny Schecter is only one avenue out of hundreds that might be explored regarding this concept. I feel that I have an authority on the subject as a real-life trauma survivor who is female, and have felt the damage that the circulation of such ideas can have on real-life people. To be part of the fandom for *The L Word* and to see daily posts on different fansites lambasting Jenny is hurtful. To be asked the question “Which *L Word* character are you most like?” and

having to bite my tongue and stop short of pushing out “Jenny,” as a truthful response makes me feel like a pariah for being a complex and damaged woman. When I lie and say “Well... I think I’m an Alice,” through gritted teeth, and the questioner sighs and says “Oh good. Thank God it isn’t Jenny, that total nutcase... Remember when she carved up her legs like a Christmas ham?”, I always subconsciously pull down my skirt to hide the many purple scars that mark on my own legs.



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