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Original Research Article

The Paradox of Existential Agency: Self-Awareness, Psychological Impasse, and the Failure of Transformation in 21st-Century Fiction

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Abstract: This article examines how self-awareness, often treated as a route to personal freedom, can become a source of paralysis in contemporary fiction. Through a comparative reading of Christine Smallwood's The Life of the Mind (2021) and Halle Butler's Banal Nightmare (2024), it asks what remains of agency when the ability to interpret or diagnose the self does not lead to change. The study brings Lauren Berlant's account of impasse into conversation with scholarship on therapeutic culture, contemporary women's fiction, and the formal possibilities of the novel. Its method is primarily close, comparative reading, attentive not only to character and theme but also to narrative voice, tonal register, sentence structure, and the novels' refusal of conventional resolution. The analysis identifies two distinct yet convergent forms of anti-agency: Dorothy's critical self-consciousness in Smallwood's novel, shaped by irony and relentless interpretation, and the therapeutic literalism that structures Moddie's social world in Butler's. Although their idioms differ, both novels expose the gap between understanding one's circumstances and possessing the means to transform them. By reading the novels together, the article offers a comparative account of this gap and argues that their resistance to narrative transformation is not a failure of form, but a deliberate formal expression of contemporary impasse.

Keywords: existential agency; self-awareness; psychological impasse; therapeutic culture; contemporary fiction; anti-bildungsroman

1. Introduction:

We live in an age that has turned knowing ourselves into a virtue, and the novels that matter most right now are the ones that have quietly stopped believing in it. From every direction the twenty-first-century subject hears the same thing: self-knowledge comes first, and change follows. The unexamined life isn't worth living. The feeling you don't process will come back as a symptom. The person who understands her patterns is the person who can break them. And yet the more rigorously the protagonists of recent fiction know themselves, the less they move. That is the paradox this paper sets out to describe. In the novels I consider here, self-awareness is not the cure for the impasse. It is the impasse's most refined instrument.

Two novels stage this with unusual precision, and they come at it from opposite sides. Christine Smallwood's *The Life of the Mind* (2021) gives us Dorothy, an adjunct instructor with a PhD and a book manuscript that will not finish, whose critical intelligence is total, supple, and entirely without issue. She can read her miscarriage, her therapists, her colleagues, and herself with the same interpretive finesse, and the finesse is exactly what holds her in place. Halle Butler's *Banal Nightmare* (2024) gives us Moddie, who has "just returned to her native land in

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the Midwestern town of X, to mingle with the friends of her youth" and finds a social world soaked in the vocabulary of trauma, boundaries, narcissism, and healing (Butler, ch. 1). She can mock that vocabulary, even put it in finger quotes, and she cannot stop using it. Dorothy is trapped by the sophistication of her interpretations; Moddie is trapped inside a milieu whose interpretations are held with total sincerity, and her own irony never quite holds. What they share is an assumption, that understanding your condition is the same as being able to leave it.

The critical conversation around these novels is only now taking shape, and this paper places itself inside it. Neave's recent essay in *Textual Practice* is the most substantial treatment of Smallwood's novel. Her central claim is that crisis and critique in *The Life of the Mind* work as discursive conventions, and that they end in a protagonist who stays suspended, emotionally and economically, rather than moving (Neave, 2025). Tolentino's early review supplied the phrase that has clung to the novel since publication, "depressive realism," and found its abyss in the distance between what we think about and what we actually do (Tolentino, 2021). On the Butler side the situation is different and, for a critic, more interesting: there is still no sustained scholarly treatment of *Banal Nightmare* at all. The sharpest writing on it remains Kelly's review in *The Atlantic*, which names the book's central mechanism economically. Pathologizing others, she suggests, is a way of enforcing unwritten social codes, and pathologizing yourself is a way of exempting your own behaviour from judgment (Kelly, 2024). Alongside it sits Flattery's account in the *New York Review of Books* of the "house of self-worth" these characters live in (Flattery, 2025). The scholarship on Butler is, for now, scholarship on *The New Me*: Musajew on the psychopolitics of affect, Berrington on registration without resolution, Pignagnoli on narrated counter-narratives of work, Sykes on the neoliberal-feminist injunction to lean in and bounce back (Musajew, 2024; Berrington, 2025; Pignagnoli, 2024; Sykes, 2023). That lopsidedness is an opening, and I take it. Nobody has yet read these two novels together, and reading them together yields something neither supports alone, a typology of two distinct but converging forms of anti-agency in contemporary fiction. Critical self-consciousness and therapeutic self-consciousness are not the same thing. They have different objects, different affects, and different relations to the possibility Berlant taught us to look for inside an impasse (Berlant, 2011). But they end up in the same place, and that convergence is the argument. The question isn't whether these novels depict paralysis; they plainly do. It is what kind of agency remains once transformation has been foreclosed, and whether what remains is a defeat or something else. Timms's recent work on the traffic between Berlant's theory and literary form supplies the methodological caution that governs my answer: Berlant's concepts move between theory and fiction in ways that resist clean application, so the analysis has to work at the level of tone and not only theme (Timms, 2026).

The contribution is threefold. The first is a comparative typology, in which Smallwood stages the impasse as critical irony and Butler as therapeutic literalism, a distinction that does real analytical work. The second is a formal argument: the failure of transformation in these books is no flaw of plotting but a thesis, enacted in prose and structure and legible as an intervention into the bildungsroman. The third is a scholarly one, bringing *Banal Nightmare* into a conversation that has so far gone on largely without it, by extending the criticism of Butler's earlier fiction to a novel that transforms her concerns rather than repeating them. What follows is not a survey of twenty-first-century fiction, nor a clinical argument about depression or dissociation, nor a prescription. It is an attempt to describe a structure with some precision, and to suggest that a criticism still inclined to celebrate self-awareness as a political or therapeutic good has not yet reckoned with what these novels are saying about it.

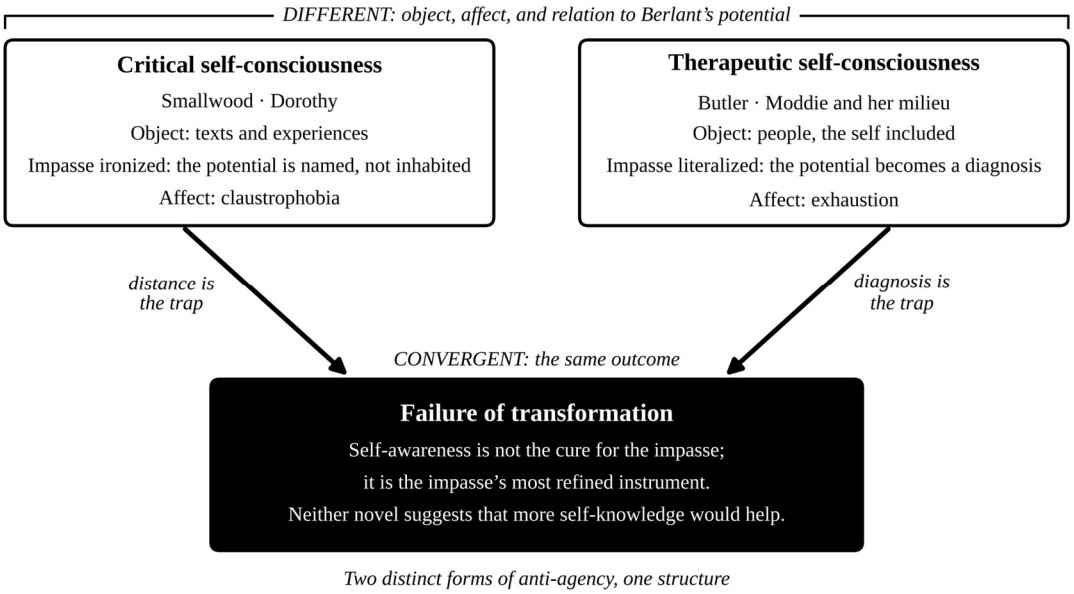


Figure 1. Two registers of self-consciousness, one outcome: the typology and its convergence.

Method and Scope: How This Argument Reads

A paper that claims self-awareness has become an instrument of paralysis had better watch its own procedures, so this section is where I take that care. The method is unfashionable in one respect and promiscuous in another. It is unfashionable because the argument is formalist at its core: I treat the way these novels are written, meaning their sentences, their tonal registers, and their refusal or granting of narrative relief, as claims rather than containers for claims. It is promiscuous because the reading proceeds in the company of theory, cultural criticism, and reviews, and I don't pretend any of those are neutral instruments. What follows explains how the two novels are being read, why certain frames were chosen over others, and where the argument runs out.

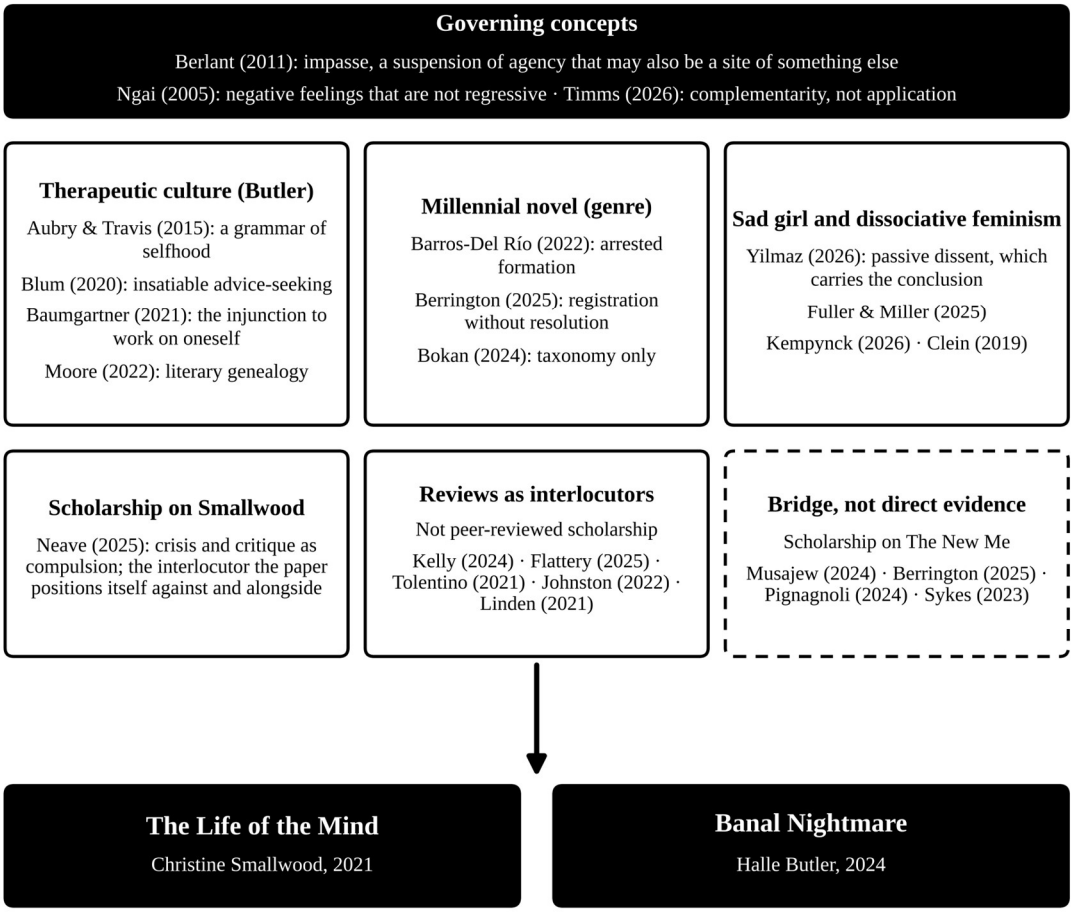
A note on authorship first, since it's better to be explicit than to let a reader stumble on it. *Banal Nightmare* (2024) is by Halle Butler, not Christine Smallwood, and the two novels come from two writers with two different careers. That matters more than a bibliographic footnote would suggest, because it changes what sort of comparison this is. I am not tracing one authorial sensibility across two books. I am comparing two contemporary strategies for staging the same problem: one grows out of the campus-novel tradition and the critical-theoretical culture around it, the other out of the millennial novel and the therapeutic culture that saturates it. The books even differ in shape. Smallwood stays close to a single consciousness; Butler moves through an ensemble, with Moddie at its centre and Pam, Craig, Kimberly, David, and Nick all taking turns at the controls. The novels converge on an impasse, but they get there by different routes, in different idioms, with different formal resources.

My claims in the sections that follow are claims about technique: that Smallwood ironizes the impasse while Butler literalizes it, that one novel produces claustrophobia and the other exhaustion, that both withhold the arc their genres have trained readers to expect. They can only be supported by attention to technique, and so I quote the novels throughout, briefly and at the points where a claim depends on the wording. With Smallwood, the technique is the long, qualified, self-interrupting sentence; the free indirect style that thickens inside Dorothy instead of hovering above her; the way a subordinate clause so often turns up to undercut the clause it depends on. With Butler, it is the comic ventriloquism of the narration, which takes on each character's idiom and inflates it, and the way a character's self-diagnosis is allowed to stand with no counter-vocabulary to answer it. Neave (2025) reads critique as compulsion at the level

of theme. I want to read compulsion at the level of the sentence, and to show that the diagnosis is enacted in the prose and not just reported by it.

The theoretical frame is Berlant, though not Berlant as a grid. *Cruel Optimism* (2011) gives the paper its governing concept, impasse as a suspension of agency that may also be a site of something else, and I take Timms's (2026) caution about Berlant's concepts travelling between theory and fiction seriously rather than citing it for decoration. I am not claiming that Smallwood and Butler illustrate Berlant. I am claiming that they do Berlant's thinking in narrative form, with a specificity the theory can't supply. That is a relation of complementarity, not application, which is why the analysis keeps going back to particular scenes (the sonogram printout, the therapist's podcast, the grading of the final papers, the sledding hill) instead of resting at the level of concept. Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005) provides the affective vocabulary for states that are negative without being regressive, which is a fair description of what both novels run on.

The therapeutic-culture scholarship enters as a frame for Butler specifically, and the sections divide their labour accordingly. Aubry and Travis (2015) establish the foundational claim that therapeutic culture is a grammar of selfhood, not a clinical practice that leaked into ordinary life. Blum (2020) sharpens the compulsion to seek advice into something structurally insatiable. Baumgartner (2021) supplies the wellness injunction to work on oneself, which turns structural problems into individual projects. Moore (2022) offers the literary-historical genealogy Butler writes within. The millennial-novel scholarship does similar work at the level of genre: Barros-Del Río's (2022) account of arrested formation, Berrington's (2025) description of registration without resolution, and Bokan's (2024) taxonomy, cited for taxonomy only since it is an undergraduate thesis, together mark out the generic field in which both novels can be read. The sad-girl and dissociative-feminism conversation (Yilmaz, 2026; Fuller & Miller, 2025; Kempynck, 2026; Clein, 2019) is where the paper joins the wider contemporary critical conversation and not only the Berlantian one, and Yilmaz's concept of passive dissent does the heaviest lifting in the conclusion.



Solid outline: used directly · Dashed outline: used as a transposed frame

Figure 2. How the argument's frames are used: governing concepts, frames, interlocutors, and the two novels.

A word about reviews, which this paper uses more than a strictly scholarly argument might. Kelly (2024), Flattery (2025), Tolentino (2021), Johnston (2022), and Linden (2021) are not peer-reviewed scholarship, and I don't treat them as if they were. For *Banal Nightmare* in particular, the reviews are currently the most analytically precise writing available. Kelly's formulation about pathologizing others and pathologizing oneself is the sharpest sentence anyone has published on that novel, and a paper that ignored it in the name of scholarly purity would be thinner, not more rigorous. So I use the reviews as interlocutors: I take their formulations seriously, extend them where they can be extended, and mark plainly where the extension is my own move rather than theirs. Musajew (2024), Berrington (2025), Pignagnoli (2024), and Sykes (2023) are all about *The New Me*, not *Banal Nightmare*, and I use them as a bridge rather than as direct evidence about the later novel. That transposition is acknowledged in footnotes throughout, not buried.

Which brings us to the gap. *The Life of the Mind* has drawn sustained scholarly attention, and Neave's (2025) essay is the interlocutor this paper positions itself against and alongside. *Banal Nightmare* has not. There's a real opportunity here, not just a hole to fill but an argument to make, in extending the existing body of Butler criticism to the later novel while respecting how the two books differ.

The scope is deliberately narrow, and a few exclusions are worth naming. This is a study of two novels, not a survey of twenty-first-century fiction, and the reference list holds a good deal of work on Rooney, Moshfegh, and Leilani that serves as context rather than evidence. Nor is this a clinical argument. "Failure of transformation" is a literary-critical category, not a diagnostic one, and I make no claims about depression, dissociation, or therapeutic practice as such, only about how certain contemporary novels represent the relation between self-knowledge and action. Finally, the paper proposes no remedy. It would be gratifying to end on a prescription,

and the temptation is real, but the novels refuse that gratification and the criticism should probably follow them in refusing. The most the argument can honestly claim is that it describes a structure with some precision, and that the description is itself a contribution.

1. *The Life of the Mind* and the Compulsion to Critique

The first thing to notice about Dorothy is how well she reads. She reads her miscarriage the way she'd read a poem, for its figures, its withholdings, its uneasy relation to its own ending. Above all she reads herself, continuously and without mercy, and the novel's comedy (it is a comedy, for a while) belongs to a person who can't stop interpreting long enough to be in the room. Take the door. A fellow graduate student holds one open, and Dorothy "interpreted this action of door-holding, which a stranger would have described, if they noticed it at all, as desultory politeness," as an act of self-advertisement, since the colleague's research is on doors, and then as an unconscious apology, and then as something closer to a summons: *Behold, scholarship!* (Smallwood, "The Next Day"). What makes *The Life of the Mind* so unnerving is that Smallwood never lets us enjoy the joke for long. Dorothy's intelligence is real. It is also the thing that keeps her exactly where she is.

That is the novel's wager, and it's worth stating plainly, because most readings of Smallwood's book treat Dorothy's intellect as an admirable quality the world fails to reward. Here is a woman with a doctorate, a sharp eye, and no salary to speak of, worn down by institutions with no use for her subtlety, and the temptation is to read her as a casualty of the academic job market and leave it there. But the novel is more interesting than that, and crueler. Dorothy's problem isn't that nobody appreciates her mind. Her problem is that her mind has become the medium of her stuckness. The way she processes experience has quietly taken the place of having any.

Neave's is the one piece of scholarship to take this seriously, and her formulation is the one to build from. In Smallwood's novel, critique is represented as a compulsion that spills out of the seminar room into the most ordinary nonliterary objects (a miscarriage, a paycheck, a date) and conspicuously fails to produce action (Neave, 2025). She is right, and I want to push her claim a little further, from theme into prose. The compulsion isn't only something Dorothy does; it is something the novel's sentences enact. Smallwood's free indirect style does not hover over her protagonist, adjudicating with irony. It thickens inside her. The narration is long-breathed and qualified and keeps interrupting itself, forever adding a clause that undercuts the one before, and the cumulative effect is a claustrophobia of fluency. Even her body gets the treatment. Standing in a restaurant bathroom, looking for blood that has stopped, she wonders whether the earlier clot "had been a hysterical symptom," eager "to assign some signification to what on another level she knew was brute and meaningless physiology" (Smallwood, "A Few Weeks Later"). We are never outside Dorothy's interpretive machinery. We are caught in it with her, and the trap is built from perfectly formed sentences.

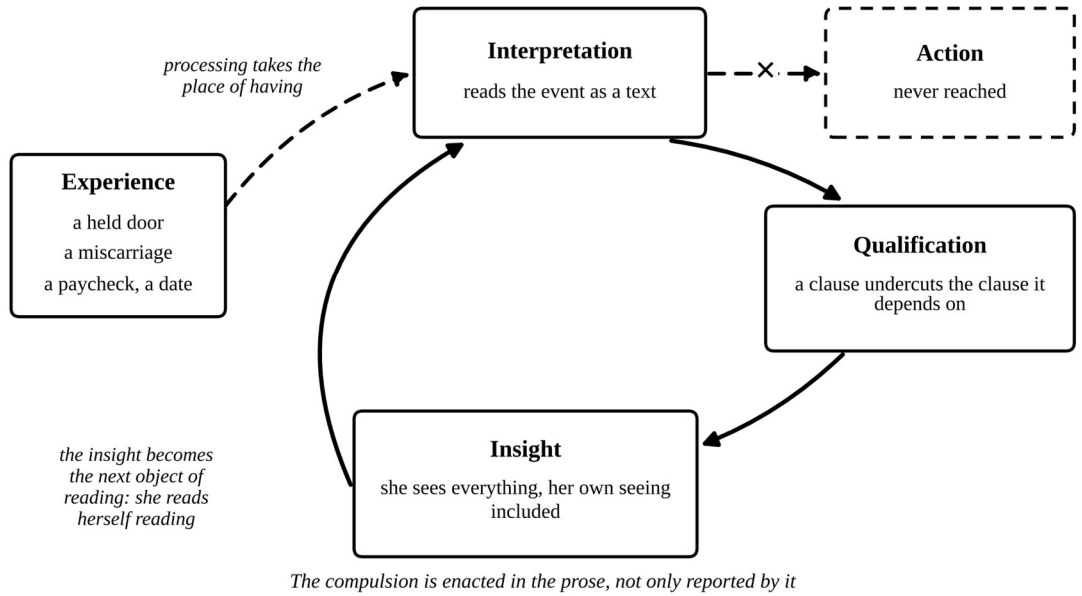


Figure 3. Dorothy's interpretive loop: interpretation takes the place of experience, and action is never reached.

Tolentino's phrase, depressive realism, earns its keep because it catches this tonal peculiarity: a realism that declines consolation and won't convert suffering into meaning (Tolentino, 2021). Dorothy isn't depressed in the clinical sense, or not only. She is depressed in the sense that her realism has become total. She sees everything, her own seeing included, and the completeness of the view is exactly what stops her moving. But the abyss Tolentino finds isn't a gap in Dorothy's character, some missing willpower she might acquire with effort. It is a structural feature of a consciousness trained to treat every impulse as a text to be interpreted instead of a motion to be followed. Dorothy's colleagues are organizing a journal issue on Berlant's "cruel optimism," which the narration glosses as the theory of why people stay attached to the fantasy of the good life, and of "the resulting affect—something she called 'stuckness.'" The verdict on Dorothy is immediate and unsparing: "'Cruel optimism' was Dorothy's entire life." She isn't invited to contribute, kindly, because everyone knows she is behind on her manuscript, her "only chance of escaping" what her friend calls "adjunct hell" (Smallwood, "A Few Weeks Later"). Ngai's account of ugly feelings helps here, less for any single affect than for the way she describes states that are negative without being regressive, feelings that don't lead anywhere, where the refusal to lead anywhere is the point (Ngai, 2005). Dorothy's irony belongs to that family. It is not a stage she'll pass through.

The material grounding matters, and it is where Smallwood parts company with the therapeutic novelists she's sometimes grouped with. Dorothy teaches at "a private university whose list-price tuition was twice her annual earnings," and she spends her minimum effort on classes so that she can write the chapter "that would get her the contract that would get her the job that didn't exist" (Smallwood, "Updates Available"). She also pays for a second therapist out of an adjunct's income, and her boyfriend Rog insists with elaborate good humour that their finances are all "joint," because his salary "dwarfed Dorothy's" and he will not count pennies (Smallwood, "The Next Day"). Linden's essay on the adjunct gaze and Thurman's on the adjunct complaint both help situate this, though their real value is in reminding us that Dorothy's impasse is paid for, by her, in installments (Linden, 2021; Thurman, 2022). Read next to recent work on precarity as an affective and even thermo-economic condition, the novel starts to look less like a study of one woman's temperament and more like the registration of a structural bind (Ashbridge, 2024; Resano, 2025). Her critical distance from her own circumstances is no luxury she indulges. It is the only form of ownership she has left.

That leads to genre, and to the question of what kind of novel this is. *The Life of the Mind* is legible within the campus-novel tradition, and Anténe's taxonomy is useful for placing it: the academic setting, the seminar-room satire, the familiar friction between intellectual ambition and institutional squalor (Anténe, 2015). But Smallwood does something the campus novel has rarely done. She turns the genre's characteristic intellectualism into a symptom. In the classic campus novel the intellectual is the hero, however compromised. Here the intellectual is the patient, and the diagnosis is that thinking has become a way of not living. The novel lets Dorothy's brilliance do its work until the reader notices that the brilliance is the problem. It helps, too, that Dorothy isn't especially likeable and Smallwood never asks us to like her. Szołtysek's argument, that unlikeability in recent fiction by women works as a formal strategy rather than a character flaw, is directly relevant: refusing charm also refuses the readerly investment that would make Dorothy's transformation feel narratively owed (Szołtysek, 2025). Johnston's review in the *London Review of Books*, titled "Less than a trauma," points to a formal decision that turns out to be crucial to the paradox at the heart of this study (Johnston, 2022). The title comes straight from the novel's first page, where Dorothy, mid-miscarriage, wonders about the "trauma in other women's accounts" and concludes that in her case "the result was less than a trauma and more than an inconvenience" (Smallwood, "The End of March"). The novel withholds trauma as an organizing device. The miscarriage, the stalled manuscript, the romantic disappointments are never converted into the legible architecture of a wound with a before and an after. That matters because the therapeutic memoir, the genre Dorothy's culture has trained her to want, depends on exactly that conversion; as Aubry and Travis argue, therapeutic culture supplies the very grammar in which contemporary subjects are expected to narrate a self (Aubry & Travis, 2015). When her therapist calls Rog "a keeper," Dorothy sees that the language of keeping will now attach itself to the pregnancy she hasn't mentioned, and she is "driven into a cul-de-sac by a linguistic overdetermination that would have been rich material if she only could have borne it" (Smallwood, "The End of March"). She says nothing. By refusing that grammar, Smallwood refuses the redemptive arc that would let Dorothy, and us, feel that the suffering had been for something. The novel ends more or less where it began, and the refusal isn't nihilism but a formal argument: some impasses can't be resolved by narrative, and the demand that they be resolved is itself part of the machinery that keeps them in place.

Appleton's work on stuckness in contemporary women's fiction, and on the fraying promise of postfeminism, provides the frame (Appleton, 2023). Dorothy was promised, as her generation was promised, that competence plus self-knowledge would add up to a life. Sykes's reading of neoliberal feminism's injunction to lean in and bounce back, in Butler's *The New Me*, describes the ideological weather Dorothy is also standing in, even if she'd be the first to ironize it (Sykes, 2023). Her critical intelligence was supposed to be what delivered her, and the novel's quiet cruelty is to show that faculty turned back on itself, chewing over the failure without ever producing an exit. What Appleton calls stuckness is less a theme here than a formal inheritance: the novel takes the postfeminist bildungsroman's promise of self-actualization and stops it mid-sentence.

So we reach the paradox in its sharpest form. Dorothy's self-awareness is not the antidote to her impasse; it is the impasse's most refined instrument. The novel doesn't ask us to pity her for this, and it certainly doesn't ask us to feel superior. It asks us to recognize the structure, the way a certain kind of intelligence, cultivated for exactly the reasons Dorothy cultivated hers, can become indistinguishable from whatever holds a life in place. Neave observes that *The Life of the Mind* regards Berlant's hopeful sense of impasse ironically, as a state of potential the novel can't bring itself to believe in, and that observation identifies the tone that makes Smallwood's book so hard to shake (Neave, 2025). The irony isn't detachment. It is the sound a person makes once she has understood everything about her situation except how to leave it.

That is where Smallwood leaves us, and it's where the comparison with Halle Butler becomes unavoidable. Dorothy is trapped by knowing too much, and knowing it too well. Butler's people

are trapped differently, not by the sophistication of their interpretations but by their sincerity, by a therapeutic vocabulary they hold so completely that it has become the walls of the room. If Smallwood stages the impasse as critical irony, Butler stages it as therapeutic literalism. The two novels reach the same paralysis from opposite directions, and the space between them is where this paper's argument lives.

2. Banal Nightmare and the Therapeutic Impasses of Millennial Selfhood

Butler's people don't read; they diagnose. That is the first thing to notice about the world of *Banal Nightmare*, and it's also the structural contrast that makes the comparison with Smallwood worth pursuing. Moddie comes home, to the Midwestern town where she grew up, "to get back in touch with her roots, and to recover from a stressful decade" with a man she "now believed to be a megalomaniac or perhaps a covert narcissist" (Butler, ch. 1). Around her is a social world in which everyone, herself included, speaks the language of damage with total fluency. Narcissism, boundaries, attachment styles, trauma responses, emotional labour: this vocabulary isn't incidental to how the characters understand themselves. Butler's narration doesn't stand above the idiom and correct it. It moves through it, inflating it, letting the words do their work until the reader notices what that work is, which is keeping everyone exactly where they are.

The temptation, reading Butler, is to call it satire and be done. Yes, the novel is funny, and yes, it invites us to enjoy the spectacle of educated people pathologizing one another in the register of care. The memories of Moddie's breakup return "vivid, cinematic, relentless, like a brainwashing clip reel for a cult with an unclear mission statement" (Butler, ch. 1). But satire usually implies a vantage point, a place outside the idiom from which the novelist can judge it, and *Banal Nightmare* offers none that the characters could use. Every joke is made in a vocabulary the book then hands back to someone who means it. What makes the book so uncomfortable is its refusal to give the reader that exit. We're listening from inside the room, and the room has no door.

Kelly's review in *The Atlantic* gets at this more sharply than any other commentary on the novel, and her formulation is the one to build from. Pathologizing others, she suggests, tends to work as a way of enforcing unwritten social codes, while pathologizing yourself can work as a way of exempting your own behaviour from judgment (Kelly, 2024). That double function is the engine of the book, and the novel supplies both halves in the same dinner scene. When Moddie mentions Nick, her friend Pam rules at once that "frankly he's toxic, and I would venture to say slightly emotionally abusive," and later, with satisfaction, that Moddie was "taken advantage of, and now you're healing" (Butler, ch. 6). Pam's boyfriend Craig, meanwhile, offers an extended metaphor about shit and anger that ends in "the turd is not your ex, the turd is your anger" and then in a joke about action painting. The diagnosis is both a weapon aimed at Nick and a permission slip for Moddie: it makes her behaviour legible, therefore forgivable, therefore not something she has to change. Kelly's headline, that these millennials can't get out of their heads, is a good description, but the novel's real claim is stronger. They can't get out of their heads because getting out has been reformatted as one more thing to do in there.

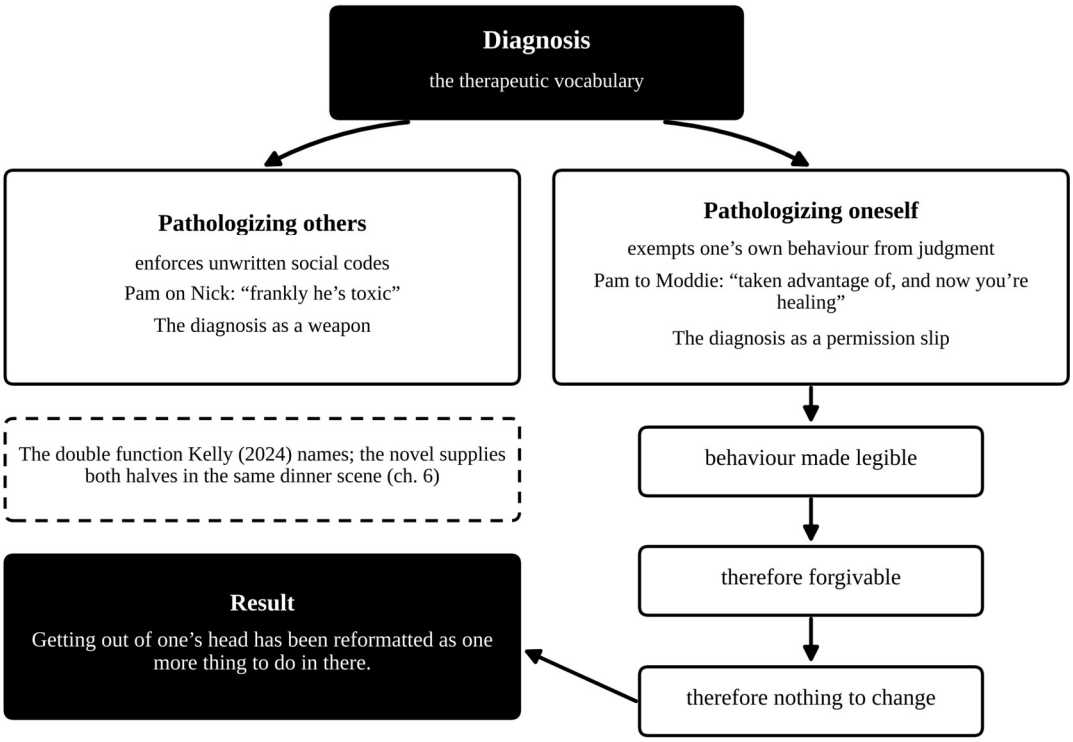


Figure 4. The double function of diagnosis in Banal Nightmare, after Kelly (2024).

The pathologizing runs in every direction, and the novel is careful to show that it is communal. Kimberly, watching her friend Bethany at a gathering, asks herself, "Was Bethany's jocular attitude a screen for some deep well of pain?", while the group, having discussed a humiliating article about themselves, shares "a good, healing laugh" (Butler, ch. 3). Bethany, for her part, hears Moddie describe her outbursts and informs her, in a "soothing and rich" voice, that "you were having a response to unprocessed trauma, and you most likely have complex PTSD" (Butler, ch. 8). Even the divorce rhetoric is borrowed: a woman at a party explains that her husband "wouldn't make space for my growth and healing" (Butler, ch. 11).

Flattery's review in the *New York Review of Books*, with its title about the house of self-worth, supplies the architectural metaphor the novel itself seems to be reaching for (Flattery, 2025). The therapeutic vocabulary is the structure these characters live inside, and Butler is meticulous about how it shapes narrative itself: how her characters narrate their pasts as a sequence of injuries with identifiable causes, read their presents as ongoing evidence of those causes, and imagine their futures as a project of management rather than change. One family's legend, retold approvingly across generations, is the day Cindy, "triggered" by watching her own daughter on her mother's lap, "decided to go no contact" and gave the grandmother "one more chance to atone within one week" (Butler, ch. 4). The result is a novel in which an enormous amount of interpretive activity takes place and almost nothing happens. That is not a failure of plotting. It is the plot.

Here the scholarship on Butler's earlier work becomes indispensable, not because *Banal Nightmare* simply repeats *The New Me*, but because the earlier novel built the analytical vocabulary the later one carries into a new register. Musajew's account of the psychopolitics of affect in Butler's fiction is the most substantial criticism we have. Its central claim, that Butler stages emotional life as something administered rather than expressed, a site of management instead of spontaneity, travels almost unchanged from Millie's temp jobs to Moddie's homecoming (Musajew, 2024). What changes is the apparatus of administration. In *The New Me* the therapeutic idiom is still partly institutional: it arrives through HR, through wellness initiatives, through the soft coercion of the workplace. In *Banal Nightmare* it has been fully internalized. Nobody is making Moddie talk this way. She and her friends do it to each other,

and to themselves, unprompted, and that is what makes it a culture rather than a management technique.

Berrington's chapter on *The New Me* and *Luster* supplies the economic frame, arguing that the millennial novel's characteristic mode is registration without resolution, the long downturn rendered as weather instead of event, something the characters endure rather than confront (Berrington, 2025). Pignagnoli's work on narrated counter-narratives about contemporary work helps explain how Butler's characters talk back to the scripts they've been handed, and, crucially, why talking back isn't the same as getting free (Pignagnoli, 2024). The counter-narrative and the master narrative share a vocabulary. That is the trap.

This is where the therapeutic-culture scholarship earns its place in the argument, and where the difference between Butler's register and Smallwood's comes into focus. Aubry and Travis's collection established the foundational claim that therapeutic culture isn't a clinical phenomenon that leaked into everyday life but a grammar through which contemporary subjects learn to narrate selfhood at all (Aubry & Travis, 2015). Blum's work on the self-help compulsion sharpens this into something almost formal: the compulsion to seek advice is structurally insatiable, since the seeking is the point and the advice only its occasion (Blum, 2020). Butler's characters are compulsive in just this sense. They seek diagnosis constantly, the diagnoses never satisfy, and the dissatisfaction becomes a reason to seek more. Baumgartner's work on literature in the age of wellness adds the crucial injunction, that one must work on oneself, which turns every structural problem into an individual project of optimization (Baumgartner, 2021). Moddie's paralysis can be read as a failure of wellness. The novel's harder suggestion is that the failure is structural, and that wellness is the name the structure gives to its own reproduction.

Moore's dissertation on self-help in contemporary US fiction is useful for placing all this historically, since it shows that Butler is writing within a genealogy instead of inventing from scratch (Moore, 2022). Earlier self-help novels tended to stage the encounter between literary interiority and advice culture as a conflict, the novel's depth against the manual's surface. Butler's novels stage it as a fusion. The interior is already made of the manual's language, and the novel's form has to find some other way of registering the loss.

That is why the sincerity of the milieu matters so much, and why the satire reading finally falls short. Dorothy's irony in Smallwood is a relation to her own vocabulary: she knows the words are inadequate, and the knowing is part of what keeps her stuck. Moddie does flicker with something like it. She says she is still struggling with her "anger issues," "putting those words in finger quotes" (Butler, ch. 1), and she calls a bad afternoon in a big-box store "what one might call 'triggering,'" which the narration says had produced "multidirectional suffering" (Butler, ch. 5). But the irony never accumulates into a position. The finger quotes arrive and are absorbed: her friend Nina agrees she's struggling too, then observes that it's "really hard to set boundaries" and "really good for you" to be apart from Nick, and the conversation moves on inside the vocabulary. Everyone around Moddie believes. Their therapy-speak isn't a mask they could take off; it's the shape of their faces, and the novel's formal choices become arguments in their own right. We can't condescend to Moddie, because the novel won't give us a language to condescend in that isn't also hers.

Dorothy is trapped by the sophistication of her interpretations; Moddie by a vocabulary whose sincerity she can mock and never escape. Dorothy's critical distance from her own circumstances is the only property she owns. Moddie's therapeutic fluency is the only property she has, too, but she doesn't experience it as property; she experiences it as truth. Both novels are studies in the failure of transformation, and both locate that failure in the very faculty that was supposed to make transformation possible. The difference is the register in which the failure is lived, irony in one case, literalism in the other. That difference is the subject of the next section, and it's what makes the two novels more useful read together than apart.

3. Two Registers of Impasse: Critical Irony and Therapeutic Literalism

Put the two novels side by side and something odd happens. They share a diagnosis and disagree about the patient. Both are studies in suspension, lives held in place by the very faculty that was meant to move them forward, and both refuse the redemptive arc that would turn that suspension into a story with a lesson. But the register in which the suspension is lived could hardly differ more. Dorothy knows too much about her situation and can't act on what she knows. Moddie's world knows exactly as much as its culture has taught it to know, believes every word, and can't act either. One novel stages the impasse as critical irony, the other as therapeutic literalism. My argument in this section is that these aren't two temperaments but two historical forms of the same anti-agency, and that reading them together tells us something about the present that neither novel can tell us alone.

Berlant is the obvious place to begin, and also where the comparison is likeliest to go wrong. *Cruel Optimism* gives us the concept the whole paper depends on: impasse as a stretch of time in which agency is suspended, but suspended in a way that isn't simply passive, a holding pattern that is also, potentially, a place something might emerge from (Berlant, 2011). It lets us describe people who aren't merely victims of their circumstances but attached to them, and attached in ways that feel like hope even when they are the mechanism of the trap. The danger is that impasse becomes a grid dropped over two very different books, flattening their distinctiveness into a single Berlantian mood. The question isn't whether both novels depict impasse. It's what each does with the potential Berlant locates inside it.

Smallwood ironizes that potential. This is Neave's insight, and it is the sharpest thing in the existing criticism of the novel: despite Berlant's guarded sense of impasse as a state of potential, *The Life of the Mind* regards that potential ironically, as something Dorothy can name but can't inhabit (Neave, 2025). The novel's own wording is the best evidence. Berlant's theory appears in it as a topic for other people's articles, and Dorothy's relation to it is that of an expert barred by expertise: "Dorothy knew too much about cruel optimism to write about it" (Smallwood, "A Few Weeks Later"). The irony isn't detachment. It is closer to the opposite, a form of involvement so total that it closes off the distance from which action might be taken. The insight and the paralysis are the same event, which is why her habit of mind is summed up in a throwaway line about her own body: "How typical of her not to know something was over when it was over" (Smallwood, "The End of March"). Nothing has been refused, exactly, because nothing was ever quite offered. The potential Berlant describes is present in the book as a phrase Dorothy knows, not as a possibility she can occupy.

Butler forecloses the potential instead of ironizing it. Moddie and her friends don't hold their situation at arm's length; they live inside a vocabulary that has already explained it to them, and the explanation is so complete that the future has nothing left to do. Where Dorothy's irony preserves a gap between what she thinks and what she does, Butler's therapy-speak closes the gap by letting the thinking do the work of the doing. Diagnosis becomes the substitute for action rather than its preface. Pam's sentence to Moddie, "now you're healing," is the clearest case: it names a process as a completed state, in the present tense, in the middle of a dinner, and the behaviour it describes never has to arrive (Butler, ch. 6). And the vocabulary is mutual, a shared currency that can be turned on its own users: Craig, cut off mid-sentence in a fight with Pam, announces, "Now I feel gaslit since you don't seem to think you're being rude" (Butler, ch. 4), borrowing the accusation he'll later complain about. Dorothy's problem is that she can't stop interpreting; Moddie's is that the interpretation is already finished and she is living in its aftermath.

The comparison sharpens once you notice that the two registers have different objects. Dorothy's critical irony is trained on texts and experiences, a poem, a miscarriage, a colleague holding a door, and its characteristic move is to find the experience more complicated than it first appeared. Moddie's therapeutic literalism is trained on people, herself included, and its characteristic move is to find them more legible than they first appeared. Complexity versus legibility: that is the real difference, and it maps onto a broader cultural shift, the displacement of the interpretive authority once held by the humanities by the diagnostic authority now held

by therapeutic culture. Smallwood's novel is full of people who still believe that careful reading will get them somewhere. Butler's is full of people who believe that naming the pattern will. Both beliefs are sincere. Neither pays off. The two cultures are not even fully separate. In Smallwood the doctor who tells Dorothy that her bleeding will last longer than expected speaks "in a tone that was not condescending but matter-of-fact, free of condemnation, totally forgiving, absolutely accepting," and Dorothy recognizes it at once: "It was the voice of her therapist" (Smallwood, "Five Days Later"). The humanities have, in Butler's book, been reduced to an echo, and in a small, telling moment the phrase Smallwood took as her title turns up in Moddie's resentful arithmetic about Nick's idle hours: "what great life of the mind was she aiding by giving him all of these hours?" (Butler, ch. 1). The phrase has become a joke about who gets to have one.

Appleton's work on stuckness gives this a gendered genealogy that neither novel states outright but both depend on (Appleton, 2023). Her argument about the fraying promise of postfeminism, that the bargain offered to a certain generation of women, competence and self-knowledge in exchange for a life, has come apart, describes both Dorothy and Moddie, though they stand on different sides of the wreckage. Dorothy is still holding the receipt. She did the reading, she acquired the competence, the promised life didn't arrive, and her irony is the tone of someone who has noticed the non-arrival but can't stop waiting. Moddie inherited the disappointment without the promise, and her therapeutic fluency is what a generation does with a bargain it never quite believed in. Sykes's reading of the lean-in-and-bounce-back injunction in Butler's earlier fiction bears on this, because it names the ideological demand both novels quietly refuse: that women convert structural failure into personal resilience and call the conversion growth (Sykes, 2023). Dorothy's irony refuses that conversion, but the refusal costs her everything. Moddie's literalism is a failed performance of it; she has all the vocabulary of resilience and none of the trajectory.

Berrington's account of the millennial novel as a mode of registration without resolution helps explain why this comparison matters beyond the two books (Berrington, 2025). Smallwood registers through a consciousness too finely calibrated to be consoled. Butler registers through a discourse too complete to leave an opening. Smallwood invites us into Dorothy's mind and trusts us to feel the walls close in. Butler keeps us moving between minds and trusts us to hear the language failing, not because it's wrong but because it is doing too much. One novel makes us claustrophobic. The other makes us tired. Both effects are arguments.

	The Life of the Mind *Critical irony*	**Banal Nightmare** *Therapeutic literalism*
Protagonist	Dorothy knows too much about her situation to act on what she knows	Moddie's milieu believes every word; her own irony flickers and never holds
Object	Texts and experiences: a poem, a miscarriage, a held door	People, the self included
Characteristic move	Finds the experience more complicated than it first appeared	Finds people more legible than they first appeared
Berlant's potential	Ironized: named, not inhabited	Foreclosed: converted into a diagnosis
Thinking and doing	A gap is preserved, and the gap is the trap	The gap is closed: diagnosis substitutes for action
Postfeminist bargain	Still holding the receipt	Disappointment inherited without the promise
Form	A single consciousness; free indirect style thickens inside Dorothy	An ensemble; comic ventriloquism inflates each idiom
Effect on the reader	Claustrophobia	Exhaustion
Shared outcome	Suspension without a redemptive arc; neither novel suggests that more self-knowledge would help	

Figure 5. Critical irony and therapeutic literalism compared across the two novels.

What emerges is a typology the rest of the paper can work with. Critical self-consciousness and therapeutic self-consciousness are two distinct but convergent forms of anti-agency in contemporary fiction, distinct in their objects, their affects, and their relations to Berlant's potential, and convergent in their outcome. Dorothy's impasse is ironized: she holds the potential at a distance, and the distance is the trap. Moddie's is literalized: the potential has been converted into a diagnosis, and the diagnosis is the trap. Neither novel suggests that more self-knowledge would help. Both suggest, in their different registers, that the available vocabularies of selfhood, critical and therapeutic alike, have become part of the apparatus that holds a life in place. That's a bleak conclusion, and neither novel softens it. But it is also a precise one, and precision is what these books have instead of consolation.

4. The Failure of Transformation: Narrative Form and the Anti-Bildungsroman

Novels about people who don't change have a formal problem, and it's worth being explicit about it, because the problem is where the interest lies. The bildungsroman is a machine for converting experience into development: the protagonist suffers, misrecognizes, learns, and arrives, not necessarily happy, but formed. Even its modern, disillusioned variants tend to keep the shape while emptying out the content, so that the arrival is ironic but still an arrival. What Smallwood and Butler do is harder and stranger. They write novels in which the machinery is visibly there and conspicuously fails to turn. The protagonist suffers, misrecognizes, learns, and nothing follows. The learning is real. So is the non-arrival. And the novels refuse to treat the gap between them as a tragedy, a lesson, or a joke.

This is why both books are so hard to end, and why their endings are the most argumentative thing about them. Neither concludes in rupture, conversion, or even decisive resignation. Smallwood's closes in a stack of ungraded final exams. Dorothy has told her Apocalypse students to write about any ending they like, "so long as it has something to do with the end," and has retracted her own old rule that an ending gives what precedes it meaning: "The idea

that an ending gives what preceded it meaning was old. Time didn't work that way anymore." Then she grades the whole pile, and in the end "she graded them all the same, all nearly perfect, before dumping each one carefully, respectfully, into the trash" (Smallwood, "Ten Days Later"). Butler's novel ends differently, and more mercilessly. Moddie's material situation does shift (a sale of the family farm leaves her with a "dazzling post-tax total," and her father's email promises that it "will make a substantial difference in how you are able to spend your days"), but the change arrives as an email, not an act. She is left alone in the snow with a private vision she knows "would be indecent to ever try to describe" (Butler, ch. 12). Then comes a letter from Nick, and then the closing scene belongs to someone else entirely. In both cases the reader is left with the odd sensation of having finished a novel in which the protagonist hasn't. That sensation is no accident of craft. It is the thesis.

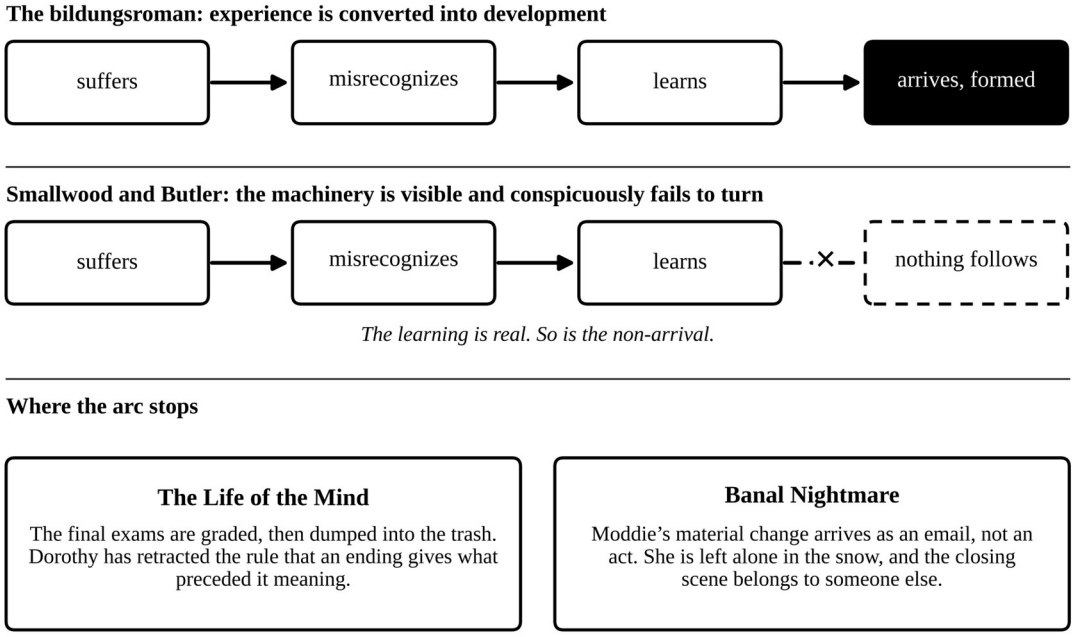


Figure 6. The bildungsroman and its failure to turn in The Life of the Mind and Banal Nightmare.

The millennial novel has been the most useful frame for this, and Barros-Del Río's reading of *Normal People* as a millennial novel of formation in recessionary Ireland gives us the key term: arrested formation, development foreclosed not by the protagonist's failure of will but by conditions that make the conventional trajectory unavailable (Barros-Del Río, 2022). Both of our novels extend that arrest into a new register. Barros-Del Río's protagonists don't quite know why they're stuck. In Smallwood and Butler they know. They have the vocabulary, the diagnosis, the reading list. And the knowing doesn't help, which is what makes these novels a second stage of the genre rather than a repetition of it.

The anti-bildungsroman is thematized inside the books themselves. Smallwood has Dorothy sit through a conference keynote on a theory that praises "the episodic" as a virtue "rather than a failure to achieve 'continuity' or 'coherence'" (Smallwood, "A Few Weeks Later"), a nice joke at the expense of academic fashion that is also the novel's own poetics. Earlier she has wondered, about the miscarriage itself, "What did you call it when a life stopped developing, but didn't end?" (Smallwood, "The End of March"). That question is the anti-bildungsroman in a sentence: development halted, and no ending to give it shape. Butler's Moddie reaches the same conclusion in her own vocabulary, in the most despairing passage in the book, walking the neighbourhood at night: "There's no real narrative, nothing means anything, it's random, we assign it meaning" (Butler, ch. 12).

What kind of affect does an anti-bildungsroman run on? Ngai's ugly feelings are the relevant category, though it's her later concept of stuplimity that I find more useful here, the affect

produced by shock and boredom together, by too much and not enough at once, an exhaustion that is also a kind of overload (Ngai, 2005). Both novels run on stuplimity. Smallwood's prose produces it through sheer density of qualification; Butler's through the flat repetition of a vocabulary that says a great deal and means nothing. In neither case do the feelings convert into narrative movement. They accumulate. That describes exactly the formal problem these novels set themselves and then decline to solve.

There's also the question of likeability, which is not a trivial one. Szołtysek's argument that unlikeability in recent fiction by women functions as a formal strategy rather than a character flaw applies with real force here (Szołtysek, 2025). Dorothy isn't charming. Moddie isn't sympathetic; her narration of her own affair is so self-serving that it is hard to know where to stand. Neither novel works to make them so, and the refusal matters because likeability is the readerly mechanism by which the bildungsroman secures our investment in a protagonist's transformation. By withholding the charm, both novels withhold the payoff. They make it hard to want Dorothy's or Moddie's development the way the genre has trained us to want it, and in doing so they quietly take away one of the supports that makes the transformation plot feel necessary. A novel that doesn't ask you to root for its protagonist has already begun to dismantle the arc.

Yilmaz's account of the literary sad girl, and her argument for passive dissent, female disaffection that isn't a prelude to recovery but a mode of refusal in its own right, is the most useful formulation available (Yilmaz, 2026). Both novels read as sad-girl texts, though of different vintages: Smallwood's is the sad girl as adjunct intellectual, Butler's the sad girl as therapized millennial. Fuller and Miller's work on sad girl literature as a site for reading power, politics, and the body bears on the way both novels insist that the failure of transformation isn't merely psychic (Fuller & Miller, 2025), and Kempynck's rethinking of dissociative feminism in fiction names the mechanism both use, a strategic withdrawal of the self from a situation it can't change (Kempynck, 2026). Butler's opening gives it nearly in those terms, as Moddie confronts Nick in "a dissociative state," "as if she were inside an orb, watching as the actions of some other thing flowed through her" (Butler, ch. 1). Clein's much-circulated observation that the smartest women she knows are all dissociating belongs to the same conversation, and its tone is instructive: the essay is wry, exhausted, and entirely without a program (Clein, 2019). Dissociation here is no symptom awaiting a cure. It is what intelligence looks like when it has run out of exits.

Alic's recent *Los Angeles Review of Books* essay, "Your Life Is Not a Plot," argues against imposing narrative shape on lived experience (Alic, 2025). The title alone names the formal intuition these novels work from. If a life has no plot, then a novel that insists on one is doing violence to its subject. The anti-bildungsroman isn't a refusal of narrative; it's a refusal of that narrative, and the refusal is a claim about what twenty-first-century life is actually like.

Which brings the argument to its sharpest point. The failure of transformation in these novels isn't a failure of the novels. It is a formal thesis: that the contemporary subject has been handed the tools of self-narration without the conditions of self-authorization, and that the resulting gap between the story one can tell about oneself and the life one can actually lead is the characteristic subject of twenty-first-century fiction. Bokan's survey of the millennial novel is useful for showing how widespread this thematic is (Bokan, 2024), though as an undergraduate thesis it should be cited for taxonomy rather than argument. The point is that the thematic has become formal. Smallwood and Butler aren't writing about people who can't change. They're writing novels that can't change either, novels that hold their shape, refuse the arc, and end without the relief of an ending. Form and diagnosis are the same thing. And that, finally, is why the next section can restate the paradox without resolving it: the novels have already shown us what a resolution would cost, and declined to pay it.

5. The Paradox Restated: Agency Without Transformation

It would be tempting, at this point, to resolve the paradox, to say that self-awareness fails in these novels because it's the wrong kind of self-awareness, and that some other kind, more embodied or more relational or more politically conscious, might succeed. Smallwood and Butler aren't diagnosing a deficit. They're describing a surplus, and the surplus is the problem. Dorothy has more self-knowledge than any character in recent fiction needs, and it doesn't move her an inch. Moddie has an entire therapeutic lexicon at her disposal, and the lexicon is the room she can't leave. Together the novels expose the false equation on which so much contemporary advice about the self depends: that awareness is the precondition of freedom, and that more of it will carry you further. In these books, awareness is the medium of captivity. Butler's last page puts it in a mother's mouth. Chrissy, taking her toddler sledding on a snow day, tells him she will not ride down with him, and explains why: "it's never going to be enough… Real life and real satisfaction come from inside." The book's final sentence is "Up above, the sky was cold, blue" (Butler, ch. 13). It is the wellness injunction in its purest form, delivered with love, and the novel declines to say what happens at the bottom of the hill.

Berlant remains the most useful thinker for saying what's left when transformation is foreclosed, precisely because she won't treat foreclosure as simple defeat (Berlant, 2011). Her subject isn't the person who has given up but the person who keeps going under conditions already shown to be unyielding, and who keeps going because the attachment itself, however cruel, is what makes a life feel like a life. That is the agency these novels preserve, and it's minimal, negative, and not nothing. Dorothy's irony is a way of continuing to hold her situation in view rather than turning away from it, and holding it in view is a kind of work, even if the work yields no exit. Moddie's relentless diagnosing is likewise a way of staying in relation to her own life instead of abandoning it. Neither is passive in the ordinary sense. Both are doing something all the time. The something just isn't transformation.

Yilmaz's concept of passive dissent is the most precise name we have for this, and it is where the argument lands (Yilmaz, 2026). It is dissent because refusing to perform the recovery narrative is itself a refusal, a withholding of the compliance that the therapeutic and professional worlds alike expect. It is passive because it takes the form of non-arrival rather than confrontation, and because its energies go into not becoming what one is asked to become rather than into building an alternative. Read this way, the endings of both novels stop looking like failures of nerve and start looking like arguments. Dorothy doesn't transform, and the novel doesn't ask her to. Moddie doesn't transform, and the novel doesn't punish her for it. What they do instead is decline the demand, and once you notice the demand it's everywhere: in the wellness injunction to work on yourself, in the professional injunction to be resilient, in the therapeutic injunction to heal on schedule. Passive dissent is what it looks like when a person has understood the demand and quietly declined to meet it, without making a speech about it.

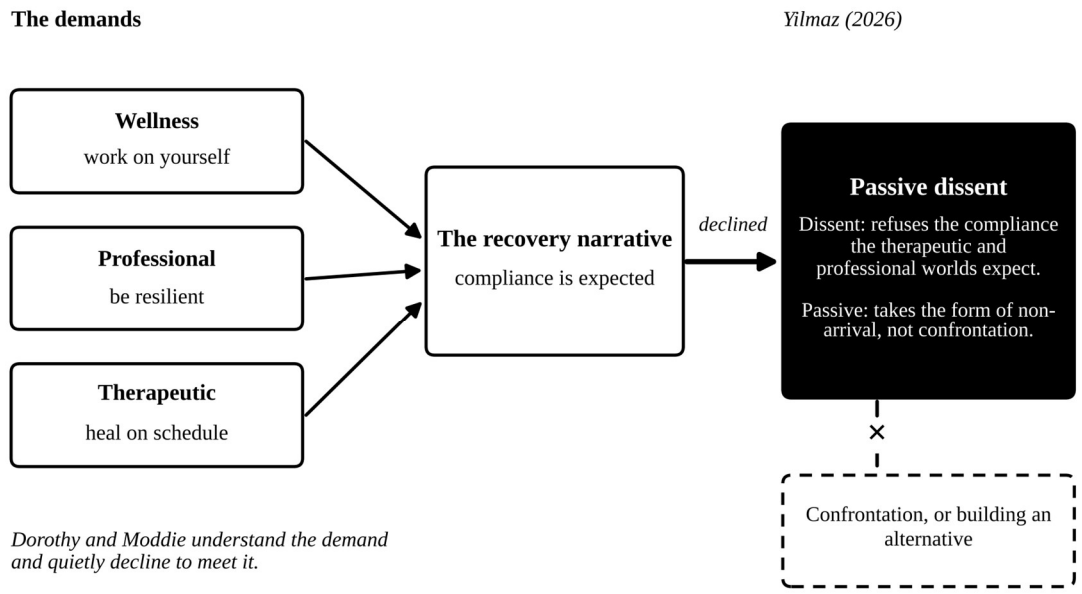


Figure 7. Passive dissent as the refusal of the recovery narrative (Yilmaz, 2026).

Therapeutic self-medication is the mechanism, and Woodhead's work on depressed women and self-medication in millennial fiction gives us the term in a usable form (Woodhead, 2025). Her subjects reach for pills; Butler's and Smallwood's reach for interpretation. The structure is the same. The interpretation is taken in repeated doses, it brings relief that doesn't last, and the return of the symptom sends the patient back for more. Dorothy medicates with critique. Moddie medicates with diagnosis. This is the cruelest optimism in either book. It isn't the attachment to a person or a job or a city but the attachment to the act of explaining oneself, which is the last thing left when every explanation has failed to produce a life. Dorothy's second therapist, in the novel's most absurd scene, announces that she has a podcast and an agent and offers to tell Dorothy how much she earns (Smallwood, "The Next Day"). Even the cure has found a way to scale.

Timms's warning about Berlant's concepts travelling between theory and fiction is worth returning to here, because the conclusion is where the pull toward over-theorizing is strongest (Timms, 2026). I'm not claiming that Smallwood and Butler illustrate Berlant. I'm claiming that they do Berlant's thinking in narrative form, with a specificity the theory can't supply: a particular woman's particular stack of final exams, a particular friend group's particular vocabulary, a particular dinner at which a particular turd is said to be a feeling. Theory and fiction aren't related by application. They are related by complementarity, and the novels are arguably the more precise instrument.

The materialist frame has to be part of the conclusion, or the whole argument risks collapsing into a claim about temperament. Resano's work on affect, precarity, and unhousing, and Ashbridge's on precarity's thermo-economic mode, are the right reminders that the failure of transformation isn't merely a psychic event (Ashbridge, 2024; Resano, 2025). Moddie's one real change arrives from outside, by email, as the proceeds of a farm sale, and she knows exactly what that means: "Something's always coming from the outside, there's nothing you can do about it… it's always someone else's decision what happens to you, not yours" (Butler, ch. 12). The therapeutic vocabulary that saturates Butler's novel isn't a free-floating cultural style; it is what precarity sounds like once it has been internalized and given a name that makes it bearable. In this light the novels' formal refusals, the withheld arc, the ending that doesn't end, the protagonist who doesn't arrive, look like the appropriate form for conditions in which arrival has been structurally foreclosed. Form follows precarity, and that is no counsel of despair; it's a description of what honesty looks like under these conditions.

So the paradox, restated one last time, is this: the twenty-first-century subject has been given an unprecedented vocabulary for understanding itself and no matching capacity to act on what it understands. Smallwood's novel shows the critical version of this condition, where insight becomes the refined instrument of suspension. Butler's shows the therapeutic version, where diagnosis becomes the completed act. Neither novel proposes an escape, and the critic who insists on finding one in them is probably reading past what's there. What they propose instead is a diagnostic category, the failure of transformation, understood not as a personal deficiency or a narrative flaw but as a condition, one that contemporary fiction is unusually well equipped to register, and that these two novels register with a precision criticism hasn't yet caught up with.

The value of these books, in the end, is that they refuse to console, and that the refusal isn't nihilism but a form of respect. They don't tell their protagonists, or their readers, that the impasse will resolve if only they find the right language, because they have seen what happens when the right language is found and nothing follows. What remains is the negative agency Berlant taught us to notice: the capacity to register one's imprisonment clearly, to turn down the stories that would make it bearable, and to keep the record going. Dorothy, grading at the end of term, reaches for the nearest image of that capacity: the post office, which "was proof that you believed in the possibility of reaching someone, anyone. That a letter could arrive" (Smallwood, "Ten Days Later"). It isn't much. It's what these novels have, and it's what they offer.

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