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Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

Behind the Paper Veil: Exploring Performative Femininity in Susan Sontag's *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1964-1980*

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.24.12.3

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Abstract. In 1990, Judith Butler's work titled *Gender Trouble* introduced the definition of gender performativity into the critical discourse regarding gender identities. Butler's definition, though initially pertaining to the social aspect of gender identity, delineates the performance of gender as an act of social self-expression. In the case of women, however, gender performativity has become a method of self-adjustment to patriarchal demands. Moreover, traces of performative femininity permeate the writing of female diarists who use their diaries not only as a site for self-creation, but also a tool for gaining social acceptance in a patriarchal environment through their performance of femininity. My analysis, focused on Susan Sontag's *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1964-1980*, aims to reveal the influence of performative femininity onto her internal dialogue, and establish connection between both the causes and nature of her gender performance and her use of a diary as a site of performance.

Key words: Susan Sontag, performative femininity, identity, diary, performance, life writing

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of gender performativity, and in particular the performance of femininity, was initially established by Judith Butler in 1990 in her work titled *Gender Trouble* and focused solely on the social aspect of performativity. Although Butler has admitted that the work itself was not extensive enough and followed it with *Bodies That Matter* three years later, Butler's theory of performance was supplemented even further by *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997, 97) where Butler notes that "identity can never be fully totalized by the symbolic." The idea of performative femininity has already established itself in discourses of third wave feminism and has been extensively studied in the following years; the performance of what is traditionally—or rather, patriarchally—considered as "feminine" has since been

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature, 12 (2024), pp. 17-29

scrutinized, among others, as a means of gaining social acceptance and advantages. However, to state that the concept of performativity has been limited to social discourses regarding gender alone would be rash, as the relationship between performativity and other aspects of human existence has been investigated by many researchers. In particular, the concept of identity performance in life writing has also been of interest to the critics in the field, such as Sidonie Smith. Though the critical research in the area emphasized performativity mostly in purely autobiographical writing, diaries as a site of self-expression and self-fashioning also fall under that category, thus allowing for the theories regarding performativity to be applied in a literary analysis. The relationship between performativity and life writing has a long-standing history of analysis and discourse, which mostly weighs in on the purposes and causes of such performances; yet, there is little concern regarding conscious and unconscious dimensions of performance of femininity in diaries of female writers. Especially in the present moment, as the notion of performative identities and genders spreads across digital platforms in various forms, it is necessary to cast light onto the sense of disconnect and potential limitations stemming from the enforced performance of a femininity understood solely as the patriarchal, bioessentialist concept instead of a diverse and evolving notion.

I intend to study Susan Sontag's *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1964-1980* as an account that bridges the sociological understanding of gender performance with its manifestation in diaristic form. Although I find that Sontag's diary perfectly showcases the influence of performative femininity on the internal voices of women, I seek to in particular discern whether or not Sontag herself is conscious of these influences or not. While Sontag's purposes and goals regarding diary-keeping have been discussed at length by Jerome Boyd Maunsell in his works analyzing her as a diarist and essayist alike, the notion of performativity has not been yet explored in regard to Sontag's diaries. My research intends to focus on the Sontag's private dialogue regarding femininity in her personal musings rather than her consciousness of general patriarchal conditioning of women that she discusses in her essays. In particular, herein I aim to analyze the manner and causes of performed feminine identity in Sontag's paper-bound internal speech, as well as her use of diary as a site of identity creation. I also aim to explore whether or not Sontag's diary can be treated as a stage for performance of femininity, despite the fact that the act of diary-keeping ought to be a private practice bereft of witnesses.

2. DIARY AS A STAGE

In order to properly contextualize Sontag's diaristic practices in the framework of gender performativity, it is necessary to first expand on the performance of identity in the general discourse regarding diarism. It might appear that at its core, the secretiveness of a diary is in conflict with the urge to socially project one's identity; however, Kylie Cardell (2014, 16) notes that the "private" nature of the diary is "less about its status as withheld—as unpublished, kept under a pillow, or otherwise resistant to outside readers—than its relation to uncensored and unmediated self-narration." Similarly, I would like to argue that such an unsurveilled personal account of the most innate thoughts accompanied by the awareness of the consequences of potential exposure creates a delicate balance of conflicting intentions. In Sontag's case, this complex

relationship between exposure and confidentiality is what allows her to ponder surrounding circumstantial and social narratives which, akin to personal identity, exist both in the external and internal dimension of her being.

Notwithstanding, instead of being considered an obstacle of sorts, the secretiveness associated with the act of diary keeping should be considered a necessity in the process of self-creation that occurs before the self-projection to a wider audience, especially considering Matthew Wagner's (2011, 1203) remark about "the innate sense of audience that accompanies every instance of speech and action." Thus, it is necessary to question whether or not Sontag's diary was also site for the creation of her identity performance, rather than merely a keeper of her secrets and a log of her days. In order to answer that query, I would like to argue that the connection between self-fashioning and identity performance must be drawn and contextualized as an interdisciplinary conjunction between branches of sociology and studies of diarism.

Similarly, Florian Coulmas (2019, 100) likens the performance of one's identity to a theatrical play; to specify, he concludes that "we perform acts of identity following culture-specific stage directions that leave room for individual expressivity." The envisioning of a stage—or rather, a play—is an interesting angle of understanding the performance of a social role, but it insinuates that the performer is solely following directions; instead of embodying the role, the actors are consciously enacting it. A similar (yet somewhat contrary in the aspect of consciousness) concept of social performance of identity is analyzed by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1956, 10); Goffman notes that "the performer" can be equally taken with their performance as the audience they are attempting to convince, as they can be disillusioned with their act. Alas, I must note that these "theatrical" comparisons intend to analyze the social aspect of identity performance; it does not mean, however, that these theories cannot be applied to analysis of autobiographical writing, and diaries in particular. Although performing an identity misaligned with the author's authentic disposition puts the authenticity of life writing in question regardless of the form, it is entirely possible—and furthermore, even anticipated—to create one's identity during life writing practices and to perform it.

Thus, I am led to question—is Susan Sontag's diary titled *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1964-1980* solely an account of her private musings, or perhaps also a reflection of her performance of her identity? Sontag's diary-keeping habits, though often disregarded in comparison to her excellent essayistic works, are confirmed to have had the purpose of self-fashioning and self-revision through the perspective of time. Jerome Boyd Maunsell (2011, 3) notes that

for all the early critical appraisals of the diaries, and of Sontag's oeuvre as a whole, very little has been said to date about precisely how the process of self-creation works in these diaries and the way in which, through the daily act of keeping them, Sontag's project of remaking herself intellectually and socially became inseparable from the project of her writing.

The idea of self-revision in particular is visible in Sontag's margin-bound additions. Some of Sontag's diary entries were annotated by her, seemingly from the perspective of time (for example, 10th of August 1967) and some not; however, majority of the annotated entries indicate that Sontag has been consistently returning to the past versions of herself and commenting on them from the perspective of her personal and intellectual

growth. Such practice is not uncommon; Rachel Cottam (2001, 268) notes that “the diarist continually rereads and amends his or her text, as recent experiences create novel adaptations of the past,” thus establishing a parallel relation between the process of identity creation and diarism. I must note herein that consciously affecting the process through editing and reformulating certain statements or even by removing them entirely, all due to acute awareness of said life writing possibly being externalized (and thus criticized) is no different from a conscious performance of an identity. Such carefully crafted performance, with social validation as a goal (or as an applause of sorts), does not allow for analysis of life writing material as authentic, thus voiding the Lejeunian pact¹. This principle, however, does not apply to Sontag’s diary keeping habits; her retrospective notes do not erase the text she had created prior, and do not seem to have the goal of “amending” the potential social perception of her diaristic “I.”

Although an intrinsic self-analysis as complex as Sontag’s is unarguably made possible through the use of a diary as a site that simultaneously allows a certain element of secrecy, especially in the context of Cottam’s remark that “secrecy defines the diary as both text and practice. The diarist writes out... her secret thoughts and impressions, and also conceals what... she is doing, for there is something secret, and potentially shameful, about diarizing as an activity” (268), I would like to argue that there is an element of performance in an act of diary-keeping in Sontag’s case. Though the spectators that exist in external social life ought to be absent amongst the pages of a diary (granted that the author is not expecting their private musings to ever become publicized) assuming that diarists in general—and especially female diarists, like Sontag herself—are unconscious of being spectated would be preposterous. Sidonie Smith (1991, 191) argues that “autobiographical writing is always a gesture toward publicity, displaying before an impersonal public an individual’s interpretation of experience,” which puts the presumed purpose of diary writing as an intimate and private practice in question. If any identity is categorized as “performative,” then there must be certain level of consciousness during enactment of such a performance by an individual; yet, as Butler notes (2004, 28) “the subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced,” thus voiding any arguments for generalization of identity performance over considering it on a case-by-case basis. In Sontag’s particular case, she has herself donated her diaries to the library of University of California in Los Angeles before her passing in 2004, and she has also remarked:

Maybe that’s why I write—in a journal. That feels ‘right.’ I know I’m alone, that I’m the only reader of what I write here—but the knowledge isn’t painful, on the contrary I feel stronger for it, stronger each time I write something down. (Hence, my worry this past year—I felt myself terribly weakened by the fact that I couldn’t write in the journal, didn’t want to, was blocked, or whatever.) I can’t talk to myself, but I can write to myself. (257)

¹ Philippe Lejeune (1989, 26) defines multiple “pacts” that are entered by the writer and reader of an autobiography and deems them necessary to define an example of autobiographical writing as one. The referential pact in particular refers to the authenticity of written text that must be maintained. Should the demands of the pact not be upheld by the author, Lejeune concedes that a given autobiography ought to be “disqualified” as an authentic autobiographical account and enter the territory dedicated to fiction instead.

As this entry has significantly predated Sontag's decision to donate her private musings, there are grounds for the argument that Sontag's self-revisioning practices allowed her to reach a point of contentment with the fact that her audience is no longer limited to just herself. However, this awareness—and to an extent agreement—to being scrutinized by the reader does not constitute lack of performance; in fact, as Susanna Egan (1984, 14) argues about autobiographers: “even if he intends to write about his life as directly as possible, the activity of writing interferes between his past and the written word that he creates. ... Fiction, in other words, ensnares reality from the beginning.” Therefore, I argue that the concept of fictionality of a diaristic persona—including that of Sontag's—constitutes and coincides with the concept of performativity of autobiographical writing.

3. THE CAUSE OF PERFORMANCE OF FEMININITY

Having drawn an initial connection between performativity and diary-keeping in Susan Sontag's life, I am led to question at this point: what aspects of her identity were performed by Sontag, and how exactly is this performance reflected in her diary? In an attempt to answer this question, I argue it would be best to focus on her performance as a woman—or rather, her performance of femininity. In order to analyze how Sontag understood femininity and how was her performance of it reflected in her diaries (consciously or not), it is best to first discuss how female diarists in general may feel obligated to perform even in their private autobiographical writing, and what are the causes behind this act.

It is necessary to note at this point that keeping a diary has been considered a “feminine” activity; such notion of regarding other forms of autobiographical writing as more valuable due to the chronological, orderly progression as “more masculine” in comparison to diaries reinforces the Freudian idea of femininity being the opposite of logic and reason². It is therefore not surprising that the need for deconstruction of gender is a question often raised by the female diarists; if one argues the genre to be secretive due to the patriarchy-dictated gender binaries, then it should not be shocking to observe that the secretiveness and simultaneous social dismissal of a diary as an important form of self-expression have allowed for it to become a crucial tool used for gender deconstruction by women. Likewise, Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter (1974, 5) note that “the form has been an important outlet for women partly because it is an analogue to their lives: emotional, fragmentary, interrupted, modest, not to be taken seriously, private, restricted, daily, trivial, formless, concerned with self, as endless as their tasks,” further solidifying the diary not as an exclusively female form of self-expression, but certainly one that reflects the uniqueness and covertness of feminine experience under the oppressive, patriarchy-dictated social structures.

Is the sole purpose of diary keeping the self-revision and self-fashioning for female diarists in general? Or was it just the case for Sontag, who “utilized” the diary in quite the literal sense of the word, aiming to gain a deeper insight into herself as a writer of other

² Sigmund Freud's beliefs regarding femininity and women have been conveyed in Lecture XXXIII, titled “The Psychology of Women,” which was later (alongside his other lectures) compiled and preserved in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1933).

genres and forms, such as fiction and essay? It appears that there is an underlying goal of improved social presentation in the scrutiny that the female diarists exercise towards their identity as a social being in the privacy of their own writing; moreover, it seems to stem from the urge of fulfilling social expectations and simultaneously coping with the restraints placed upon their gender.

Sontag is not “exempt” from this approach to diary-keeping either, though it may not appear so initially. An example of Sontag expressing her consciousness of the early onset social conditioning of women is her remarking that “[she] can be more genuinely a woman (but still strong, still autonomous, still an adult) more genuinely than any man can!” (256). Through stating that being a woman is contradictory to being autonomous, strong, and most importantly an adult, Sontag reduces womanhood to child-like state³. Simultaneously, she sets herself apart from the majority of women and men alike by noting that she possesses such traits—which especially in the case of being “still an adult” could be understood as social consciousness. What could possibly be the reasoning behind such a scathing yet hopeful remark, as well as Sontag’s appreciation of adulthood? Upon examining her diary entries, it appears that the cause behind Sontag’s stance is rooted in her own childhood and her relationship with her mother, the latter of which she expands on extensively in almost essay-like form in one of the entries. Her mother clearly heavily influenced Sontag’s worldview as her primary caregiver, which is reflected by Sontag’s remarks about child-parent relations:

If a child feels the parent wants to do him in, he gets news of a hostile persecuting universe from which he must defend himself—also must placate the parent—also must deal with his own rage and sense of impotence. Ultimately the child has no ego but what is confirmed by the parents; if they don’t love you it must be because they think you’re bad, you must be—they can’t be wrong. So you think you’re bad but you hate them anyway for not loving you—which produces guilt, because they’re good. So you start to punish yourself, which reduces the feeling of hate (some of it is now turned against yourself, siding with them) + makes it possible to love them more—personal love. (209)

Ken Corbett (2008, 845) highlights that “gender is built through the complex accrual of an infinite array of parent–child exchanges, social–child exchanges, symbolic–child exchanges.” Such understanding of gender as a social construct built through familiar relations explains the causes of Sontag’s distaste. She remarks that “everything ‘feminine’ is ‘en principe’ [‘in principle’] poisoned for me by my mother. If she even would ... do it, I don’t want to do it. If she liked it, I can’t like it” (255). Therefore, I find it appropriate to state that Sontag’s negative approach to “traditional” femininity is reflective and intertwined with her upbringing; she notes that her mother physically abused her for opposing her and her views, and that it caused Sontag to become angry.

³ Though the subject of this article is *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries 1964-1980*, I believe it is necessary to herein note that in “The Double Standard of Aging” (1972), Sontag also notes that “the ideal state proposed for women is docility, which means not being fully grown up. Most of what is cherished as typically ‘feminine’ is simply behavior that is childish, immature, weak” (35), which proves that her views on the subjugation women (and their child- or property-like social status) that she has previously expressed in her diaries indeed have been revised and reinforced later in her life as a result of her reflections.

Interestingly, Sontag also remarks: “I’ve never allowed my anger, my outrage” (37), thus perpetuating the patriarchal stereotype of a docile, meek women who silently withstand the struggle—something she simultaneously denotes to be a weakness and “taking the consequences.”

Notwithstanding, Sontag openly remarks in another diary entry that her mother did not like children, yet simultaneously criticized Sontag’s attempts at refraining from a “childish” attitude; Sontag refers to her reaction to those juxtaposing expectations as a “program of ‘being good’” (225). The notion of goodness and being “bad” continues to be mentioned by Sontag in several entries that discuss her failure at complying with the expectations of her external environment; interestingly, these expectations, especially when coming from her mother, coincide with the expectations placed on women as an enactment of their “feminine” gender (being docile, complicit, acting as a care-giver).

By placating the parent and striving to avoid being thought of as “bad,” a child engages in a performance which is a conscious act of depicting various expectations placed by them by the parent. Although the statement above sounds rather general, due to Sontag stating that “everyone who has had a bad childhood is angry. I must have felt angry at first (early)” (292), I argue that not only does this statement reflect Sontag’s own personal experience, but it also continues to influence her own beliefs far into the very adulthood that she desires. The manner in which Sontag considers the femininity that (other) women perform as something equal to lacking in autonomy, strength, and a status of an adult (all of which Sontag aims to separate herself from) appears to be an extension of such instructions under parental and patriarchal guidance she herself was subjected to by her mother. Furthermore, Sontag perceives performing femininity as an act that women—with the exception of herself, as she came to understanding that she “can” be a woman in a manner more genuine than other women and men are—are unconscious of due to social conditioning.

4. THE (UN)CONSCIOUS NATURE OF PERFORMANCE

Although Sontag perpetuates the idea of femininity being inferior and yet simultaneously acknowledges her own behaviors that are complicit with what is considered traditionally feminine, her consciousness about her performance of femininity appears to be limited to her real-life actions; she does not openly question whether or not her internal dialogue—which is reflected on the pages of her diary and created by her habit of self-revision—is affected by performative femininity.

Arguably, even outside of the written diaristic form, Sontag struggled with differentiating between her overlapping social identities despite her intense interest in self-revision—which is a struggle that coincides with the self-fashioning purpose of Sontag’s diary keeping. If the element of self-surveillance from an external perspective is removed from the act of diary writing, what remains is the notion of intrinsic self-analysis being externalized, materialized and eternalized by the written word. Butler (1990, 16) notes that “within philosophical discourse itself, the notion of ‘the person’ has received analytic elaboration on the assumption that whatever social context the person is ‘in’ remains somehow externally related to the definitional structure of personhood” which could be an explanation as to why Sontag was likely to transfer demands and definitions of social environment onto her understanding of personal identity. Notably,

Sontag remarks on the contextualization of her own social identities in a following manner:

Feeling of discontinuity as a person. My various selves—woman, mother, teacher, lover, etc.—how do they all come together? And anxiety at moments of transition from one “role” to another. Will I make it fifteen minutes from now? Be able to step into, inhabit that person I’m supposed to be? This is felt as an infinitely hazardous leap, no matter how often it’s successfully executed. (209)

Carol Watts (2012, 84) observes a similar relation between social expectations and self-creation by stating that “an individual is clearly not able to interpret her gender as she pleases in an act of free invention, but must comply with those social constraints—economic, patriarchal—which seek to define her unambiguously within binary gender norms.” The “social constraints” coincide with those that hinder the development of individual identity, both in addition to gender and separately from it. Expressed as worries over fulfilling a social role of a mother, lover, daughter, or wife, unconscious performance of femininity bleeds into the mediums used for the most intimate form of self-expression; even without an active external surveillance, women forced to conform their gender expression to social expectations continue to struggle against this pressure and yet perpetuate it in their own self-perception, with Sontag being no exception despite her obvious disagreement. These diaristic reflections of performance of femininity by women mirror Butler’s (2004, 1) sentiment of an individual “doing” their gender with audience of another person in mind, “even if the other is only imaginary.” In Sontag’s case, “the other” presupposes not only her (therein absent) mother—and subsequently, her acceptance—but also the unrelated potential witnesses of her “various selves” and the transition between them. Simultaneously, the effects of the subconscious influences of the social sphere (such as anxiety) accompanying such a performance are acknowledged by Sontag alongside her conscious choice to enact and exchange these identities, oftentimes connected with her gender.

Notably, under patriarchal social structures, the identity of a woman is not developed independent from one’s gender; many feminist life writing critics like Sidonie Smith (1995, 19) consider it to be inseparable and yet simultaneously performative. Through the comparison of autobiographical writing to a scene, she highlights that “the ‘scene’ is at once a literal place, a location, but also a moment in history, a (sociopolitical) space in culture. Permeating the scene are all those many and non-identical discourses that comprise the sense of the ‘credible’ and the ‘real’” (19). Similarly, Judith Butler (1993, 12) remarks that

[p]erformativity is thus not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.

Sontag refers to this performative act as a “game”: “Dressing > good (means leisure vs work) / bad (means for others vs for oneself) / For me, to dress is to ‘dress up,’ play the grown-ups’ game. When I’m myself, I’m sloppy” (158). In another entry, she also indicates her awareness of her being perceived through the perspective of her gender, notably by men rather than women (137). This approach further highlights her distaste

towards the performance of femininity; therefore, though she does not state it explicitly therein, her apprehension reinforces my theory of the enforced performance of femininity being rooted in Sontag's upbringing. Through noting that "Femininity = weakness (or being strong through weakness) / No image of strong woman who is just strong, + takes the consequences" (47), Sontag continuously denotes femininity as something negative and nearly demeaning; yet by noting that she plays "dress up", she highlights her awareness of social performativity stemming from a traditionally feminine presentation. I must note herein that although Sontag herself confirmed in her diaries that she interacted with Simone de Beauvoir's work titled *The Second Sex*, she did not seem to reach the conclusion about femininity similar to that of de Beauvoir. In fact, this disdain for feminine is in direct opposition with de Beauvoir's statement about rejection of femininity being equal to renouncement of humanity (2011, 739), or her observation about femininity being "fashioned" by the culture (2011, 740); yet, despite Sontag claiming in *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh* that she owes the French writer her "liberation" (314), she foregoes these sentiments and continues to reduce femininity to "weakness" and compliance therein.

It ought to be noted herein that the influences of patriarchal understanding and demeaning of femininity and womanhood that Sontag vehemently excludes herself from are ironically a reflection of her desire for self-revision and self-scrutiny, yet simultaneously reminiscent of real-life social hyper-awareness of femininity performance, as described by John Berger (1972, 46):

To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men. The social presence of women has developed as a result of their ingenuity in living under such tutelage within such a limited space. But this has been at the cost of a woman's self being split into two. A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.

Under the assumption that women continually spectate themselves—both consciously and unconsciously—as described by Berger, Sontag's diaristic endeavors with the goal of self-development and self-revision gain an underlying, second meaning. She is simultaneously the autobiographical performer and the spectator of the autobiographical performance; furthermore, the spectatorship she engages in is dictated by the condition of fulfilling the aim of being "good"—or rather, good enough at either performing the femininity or freeing herself from the notion completely. The notion of goodness is clearly ingrained in her from her childhood, a time during which "being good" meant placating her mother's demands. Sontag remarks on her childhood in the following manner: "I felt abandoned and unloved. My response to this was to want to be very good. (If I'm tremendously good, they'll love me.)"; simultaneously, she continues to strive for goodness even in adulthood, though with an "updated" purpose of becoming autonomous, successful and most importantly, loved (293-4).

Is the "goodness" Sontag seeks a reframing of patriarchal femininity, per her late mother's wish? Or is it the opposite, as the traits she associates with it in adulthood are contrary to traditionally "feminine" ones? To a degree, it is obvious that Sontag is very

much aware of these connotations instilled in her by her mother—and perhaps due to her mother’s actions and words as well, she is also conscious of their negative undertone—yet despite being able to discuss it in her diaries in a less restrained manner, she still disconnects herself from the notion entirely, and instead becomes the observer and the critic. Simultaneously, Sontag is conscious of her own critical tendencies, but it does not mean her criticism is unbiased. In fact, she admits to the semi-hypocrisy by noting “one criticizes in others what one recognizes + despises in oneself” (46). This statement appears to be Sontag’s way of recognizing that her criticism of performative femininity stems from her own frustration and compliance that she feels forced to enact. Arguably, while Sontag is critical towards herself and her development, the consciousness of performing femininity—and simultaneously perpetuating Freudian stereotypes regarding it to a degree—escapes her when it comes to her internal dialogue. This dialogue is established by the constant revision of the entries and her own commentary, through which Sontag becomes the second viewer in the diaristic audience and holds a conversation with her past self. This self-spectatorship allows her to transgress past the resentment of her mother and the disdain for patriarchal structures in her self-deconstruction process, and gain deeper insight on her criticism:

Where I detected envy, I forbore to criticize—lest my motives be impure, and my judgment less than impartial. I was benevolent. I was malicious only about strangers, people who were indifferent.

It seems noble.

But, thereby, I rescued my ‘superiors,’ those I admired, from my dislike, my aggression. Criticism was reserved only for those ‘beneath’ me, whom I didn’t respect ... I used my power of criticism to confirm the status quo. (48)

To a degree, the “superiors” include Sontag herself; the criticism she extends towards women in general, or her mother in particular, is far more virulent than the one that she exhibits towards her own self. The self-improvement that she strives for through self-revision is evident, yet Sontag’s internal dialogue follows a pattern of deconstructing the beliefs instilled in her during childhood as a response to either coming in contact with other people, or forms of art. As a result of gaining knowledge about other perspectives on femininity and womanhood, Sontag reminisces on differences between women in different cultures and countries (281-2), interacts with texts written by feminist critic Simone Beauvoir (314), and leaves remarks on margins of her own diary entries for herself; yet, at the same time, despite her extensive self-revision, Sontag is not yet openly acknowledging her own, internalized performativity.

Butler (1995, 175) notes that “the reduction of the psychic workings of gender to the literal performance of gender would be a mistake.” Similarly, I concede that social conditioning into performing femininity in Sontag’s case is not limited to only her external presentation, but also her internal dialogue. When not contrasting and juxtaposing her experiences with those of others, Sontag’s beliefs regarding femininity ultimately circle back to her time spent as a child and how her perception of feminine behaviors has been tainted by her mother’s actions. However, her entries do offer a perspective on Sontag’s childhood that not only further indicates how enforced femininity was in her childhood, but also how she perceived masculinity at the time; she

remarks that her “boyishness as a little girl meant something entirely different—I never fought, or wanted to fight; I wanted the right to be free, to run away” (301).

Does it mean that Sontag considers femininity an ultimate restraint, especially in comparison to masculinity? Perhaps, but due to the process of self-evaluation and self-fashioning Sontag engages in, these negative connotations seem to gradually fade as Sontag expands her perspective and pushes the boundaries ingrained in her by her upbringing. Her acknowledgement of being conscious of the femininity she unintentionally performs within the bounds of her diary is at once unobtrusive and yet powerful, as it unveils alongside Sontag’s personal growth.

I must also concede herein that Sontag herself remarks that her desire to speak her own mind is hindered by her inability to face herself fully. Her remark about the “eyes averted way with myself” (319) is nothing short of an expression of self-disappointment caused by her inability to express unbiased judgements due to her unwillingness to face herself. In another entry Sontag states that her enforced politeness and lack of anger (both of which are traits aligned with patriarchal definition of femininity) are at the root of her inability to convey her ideas (419). Therefore, these remarks further confirm the semi-consciousness of the performativity’s clutches on Sontag’s mind; however, considering that Judith Butler’s first work regarding performativity was not yet published, I find it possible that Sontag had no tools to recognize the ingrained influences in her diaristic “I” at the time.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Regardless of whether or not a diarist is considered a conscious or unconscious performer, the diary itself can certainly be considered a stage for a performance of an identity. Therefore, aside from serving more purposes than just being a recollection of passing days—namely developing an identity of a seasoned writer—Sontag’s diaristic endeavors are also reflective of her manner of self-fashioning reminiscent of a performance, which aligns with the notion of self-spectatorship enforced in women existing in patriarchal structures by the means of social conditioning.

In Sontag’s early life, her mother serves the role of the “enforcer” of femininity through expecting servitude and compliance from her daughter; this pressure in turn leads Sontag to develop an understanding of femininity as a weakness. This negative approach to femininity, which is simultaneously juxtaposed and intertwined with consciousness of external performance of feminine traits through appearance, makes itself apparent in Sontag’s diaristic dialogue. Her claims about womanhood—and thus, by extent, femininity itself—appear to equate it with traits that align with patriarchal definition of femininity, and thus denigrate it. By comparing women to children in their likelihood to be “servile, supportive and unadventurous,” Sontag inadvertently projects her own childhood experiences and thoughts regarding femininity, womanhood and children alike. Moreover, the influence of performative femininity on Susan Sontag’s life and internal dialogue as written by her in her diaries from the time between 1964 to 1980 showcases how Sontag’s diaristic “I” was an entity simultaneously separate and conjoined with her identity as a writer. Though she is undoubtedly aware of the “visual” nature of performance of femininity, she still acknowledges her tendencies to perform it as more than just by her external presentation, while simultaneously perpetuating stereotypical

narratives regarding femininity. Therefore, Sontag's yearning for "adulthood" is not only an expression of her desire for independence, but also an attempt at rejecting the notion of performing femininity through "goodness" as instilled in her by her mother. Unfortunately, Sontag ambivalent attempts at rejecting femininity and its performance do not concur with her diaristic "I," thus proving that despite its title, *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh* is not a display of Sontag's ultimate consciousness.

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