

Space, Gender, and the Gaze in Literature and Art

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Edited by

Ágnes Zsófia Kovács and László B. Sári

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Reprinted with the permission of the artist.

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The idea of volume was conceived during the 12th Biannual Hungarian Society for the Study of English (HUSSE) conference held in Debrecen, 2015. The choice of challenging papers on various strands of the intersection between gender and the visual enabled the organizers of the conference, Nóra Séllei and Gabriella T. Espák, to come up with the plan for a collection of papers on space and gender – and also with titles for other thematic collections. We were happy to take up the task of arranging, editing, and nurturing the material, and would like to thank HUSSE and its management, especially Nóra Séllei, for endorsing our enterprise. The outcome of the project showcases and links work on engendering the visual by different generations of scholars in English and American Studies from the Hungarian academic context.

The Editors

INTRODUCTION

ÁGNES ZSÓFIA KOVÁCS AND LÁSZLÓ SÁRI B.

That we inhabit gendered spaces that are constructed visually, is part and parcel of the daily life, public or personal, of many. Also, it has been of significant theoretical concern for almost as far back as one can remember: from Lacan's notorious toilet doors in "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious", through Cixous's "Laugh of the Medusa" and Foucault's panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*, to de Certeau's "Walking in the City" from *The Practice of Every Life*, or, to politically more explicit discussions of borderlands by Anzaldúa, intersectionality by Crenshaw, or the cyborg by Haraway, just to mention but a few examples and almost at random.¹ It seems to be a theoretical *commonplace* to suggest that particular concepts of space and gaze are tied up with particular social constructions of gender and gender relations, yet, as usual, this commonplace only serves to open up passageways for research, fieldwork and analysis to different approaches to the diverse social and cultural phenomena perceived along the lines provided by the commonly shared idea.

¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in *Écrits: a Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavstock, 1977), 146-178; Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (Summer, 1976): 875-893; Michel Foucault, "Discipline and Punish: Panopticism," in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, ed. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 195-228; Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 91-110; Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: a black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics," *Chicago Legal Forum: Feminism in the Law: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. (1989): 139-167; Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 149-181.

Theoretical commonplaces are sites of diversity and disagreement as well, as this volume will also illustrate. In this case, the interconnectedness of space, gaze and gender is explored along different approaches as diverse as theology and the history of architecture, eventually arriving at expected or not so expected meeting points. Fourteen scholars explore the relationship between female spaces and the body, the possibility for alternative spaces of masculinity and hybrid spaces created by national, regional and racial boundaries, respectively. The papers offer a wide variety in topic and method, encompassing subjects from 18th century fiction to 21st century American art, including discussions of Jane Austen, Edith Wharton, Sylvia Plath, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy, as well as the less central figures of Dorothy Sayers, Iain Banks, Suhayl Saadi and Orshi Drozdik. Thus, the papers collected here, many of which we had a chance to hear at the biannual conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English in 2015 in Debrecen, Hungary, focus on ways in which space and gender are conceptualized in literature and art, and on how these conceptualizations are related in terms of the theories of space and gender they employ or criticize. The papers not only connect core theoretical issues of gendered and racialized space to well-known literary texts and contexts, but also raise the question of possible application in more marginal instances.

In the first part of the collection, two pieces are devoted to Sylvia Plath's poetry. In chapter one, Edit Gálja explores the relation of bodies, consumerism and disability in Plath's late poems to show Plath's critique of the unattainable ideal of the incorruptible body as the perfect consumer item. In chapter two, Boglárka Kiss rereads Plath's "Thalidomide" (1962) by arguing that the poetic interrogation of the reproductive female body in the poem does not simply mean the inclusion of taboo subjects into the poetic discourse through confessional poetry, but it rather explores the ideological regulation of the female body in pregnancy. When the pregnant body disrupts the corporeal norm, it gains monstrous features, while reproductivity also adds a machinelike quality to it. The remaining three essays embrace a wide variety of fields. In chapter three, Amira Benarioua traces how Black feminist voices and spaces interact in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). In chapter four, Lilla Farmasi, relying on recent developments in cognitive narratology, maps the way in which DeLillo's "The Ivory Acrobat" (1988) paces its slow narrative and its linguistic construction based on the bodily sensations of its protagonist.

In chapter five concluding the section on “Female Spaces and the Body,” Anna Kérchy outlines the complex strategies Orshi Drozdik, a Hungarian feminist artist based in New York, employs in her art to challenge institutionally received ways of perceiving art, and how she ultimately queers the gaze.

The second part of the volume is devoted to the representation of alternative spaces of masculinity. In chapter six, Zsófia Anna Tóth provides a comprehensive reading of Jane Austen’s heroines in the tenuous positions usually reserved for male members of the family. In chapter seven, Zsuzsanna Lukács surveys flourishing late-Victorian “demagogic” subcultures that endeavoured to subvert conventional moral precepts and to unveil the dogmas of decadence and aestheticism. In chapter eight, Renáta Zsámber addresses the problem of representing evil in Dorothy Sayers’s *The Documents in the Case* (1930), a moderately popular detective novel written in epistolary form. Zsámber traces the ways in which suburban spaces of interwar Britain limit the agency of male and female characters alike, leading to activities that eventually fall into the category of the criminal and that are all represented as evil. In chapter nine, Gina Bozsó’s analysis of Iain Banks’ *The Wasp Factory* (1984) explains how the novel disregards several elements of Scottish realism by embracing metaphysical yet monstrous manifestations of masculinities, provoking normative notions of gender construction at every turn.

The third and final part of the volume offers case studies of hybrid spaces. In chapter ten, Ágnes Zsófia Kovács explores Edith Wharton’s war-time non-fiction on France to trace the changes in her attitude to French and American culture that are based in her firm belief in the concept of historical continuity at the time of war and destruction. Next, in chapter eleven, Katalin G. Kállay reads Flannery O’Connor’s last short-story, “Judgement Day” (1965) and attempts to provide an understanding of geographical regions in her fiction as relevant to delineating O’Connor’s possible theological subtexts. In chapter twelve, Zsuzsa Sütő’s essay, by juxtaposing two frames of reference, describes how the title character in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) can be found at the intersection of personal “rememory” and cultural memory by the mediation of literary memory. In chapter thirteen, Éva Pataki reads Suhayl Saadi’s *Psychoraag* (2004), a British Asian diaspora novel, the first novel of Scottish-Asian identity portraying a region yet unmapped in diaspora fiction: Glasgow as “Migra Polis.” Pataki traces the musical journey of the main character through times and spaces and analyzes the hybridization process of character, town,

and novel at the same time, as she shows how the text also positions itself as a cultural hybrid with its musical narrative style and complex language. The concluding essay of the third section and of our collection is Andrea F. Szabó richly textured analysis of Cormac McCarthy's gothic Westerns, arguing that they are philosophical anti-novels written in an anti-realist vein about the contestation of several ideologies keeping the individual under siege.

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PART 1:

FEMALE SPACES AND THE BODY

CHAPTER ONE

“WHO HAS DISMEMBERED US?”: GENDER, CONSUMERISM AND DISABILITY IN SYLVIA PLATH’S LATE POEMS

EDIT GÁLLA

Consumerism operates according to the pleasure principle and an ethos of endless possibilities. Therefore, it casts out all phenomena that contradict its philosophy of life as a series of enjoyable moments as abject: illness and disability are viewed as the repulsive Other, as reminders of the finite and circumscribed existence of individuals, and ultimately, of death.

Our culture’s rejection of illness is manifest not only on the level of everyday life but on that of literature, as well, as Woolf points out in her well-known essay, “On Being Ill:”

Finally, to hinder the description of illness in literature, there is the poverty of the language. [...]. [L]et a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry. [...]. Yet it is not only a new language that we need, more primitive, more sensual, more obscene, but a new hierarchy of the passions; love must be deposed in favour of a temperature of 104. [...].¹

Towards the end of her life and work, Sylvia Plath foregrounded the dark side of contemporary life in her poetry: the pain and humiliation of illness, the commodification of bodies through related fears and desires, the unattainable ideal of the incorruptible body as the perfect consumer item. The hierarchical relationship between objects as goods to be consumed and people as consumers suffers a reversal in Plath’s poems as individuals become defined by what they consume and eventually, aspire to the perfection of objects.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1947), 15-16.

While consumerism objectifies death and disability, it is in these abject states that an almost total objectification of the body takes place. Disabled bodies are excluded from the cycle of consumption on account of their perfected status but also because they are cast out as the abject Other. However, individuals who continue to partake of the Same—that is, the socially accepted, the able-bodied—strive to reaffirm their Sameness by increasing productivity.² This relentless pursuit of efficiency dehumanizes them: the parallelism between the productive body and the machine that Plath sustains in her poetry points to the potential of complete objectification, and thereby disabledness, that is inherent in machine-like productivity. The very productivity of bodies, then, carries the threat of disability and the abject.³ Although the abject is abhorred, it has a powerful attraction because of the respite it promises from the compulsion to produce and consume.

Individuals with productive bodies are defined by the objects they consume and these include objectified bodies, as well. The commodification of bodies is emphasised in Plath's poetry by metonymy: parts of the body appear as if severed or existing separately from the whole. By dissociating and alienating the body parts, Plath draws attention to the precariousness of individual identity in consumerism and the need to continually affirm it through participation in the production-consumption cycle.

For Kristeva, body and identity are closely intertwined.⁴ While consumerism purports to provide inexhaustible sources of enjoyment and a wide range of potential identities for the body it exalts (the cult of the body beautiful), it fundamentally undermines the relationship between body and mind, alienating the body, threatening its integrity with consumption (object) or its Sameness with rejection (abject). Although it is assumed that there is a direct correlation between able-bodiedness and productivity, late modern culture retains contradictory attitudes towards

² Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language—A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 50. “[T]he idealization of woman (of the Other) signifies the [...] structural necessity for this society to give itself a permutative center, an *Other* entity, which has no value except as an *object of exchange* among members of the *Same*.”

³ Kristeva defines the abject in as “something rejected from which one does not part [...], Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us”, Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, trans. L. S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia, 1982), 4. In other words, the abject is an entity or phenomenon that has been rejected from our culture and become an object, yet is an inescapable part of our reality, such as death.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

the body: it rejects it as unimportant and superficial, but at the same time, it desperately wants to improve it in a bid to deny the frail and mortal nature of human life.⁵

Plath's poetry proves subversive of such consumerist ideologies by embracing the abject and reclaiming it as part of her identity: "to attract the gaze, [...] and then show it those sights which will brutalize, horrify, repulse or shame it. It's the legacy of Plath, whose speakers find strength, dignity and satisfaction in their own debasement."⁶ This paper offers close readings of some of Plath's late poems dealing with the disabled, dissected, or mechanized body, drawing on Kristeva's notion of the abject and Baudrillard's critique of consumerism. It aims to demonstrate the interrelatedness between consumer society and the disabled body: the way in which productive bodies, through mechanically fulfilling their function, regress into an object-like state. For Plath, physical disability is often a metaphor for an emotionally crippled state. The dismembered or disabled body signifies the disintegration of the consumer subjects' identity, while they participate in an accelerated production-consumption cycle.

The productivity of the consumer subject is motivated by an urge to gratify constantly stimulated desires that are oriented towards finding both pleasure and identity. Generating such desires is not just a by-product but the main working principle of consumerism.⁷ Plath sees consumer subjects not as free agents effectually liberated by the act of choosing from the array of commodities but rather as commodities themselves, who are commodified by their illusory freedom to make such choices. The desire for increasing consumption compels the speakers of her poems to improve their efficiency, and thereby, their likeness to machinery.

The ceaseless pursuit of consumption compels the speaker in "Gigolo" to increase his efficiency, and thereby, his likeness to machinery. The words 'pocket watch,' 'mill' and 'engine' convey the machine-like precision of the productive body and also the processing of individuals into 'digestible' goods—while the 'gold joints' refer to its commodity value. The phrase "my way of turning / Bitches to ripples of silver" combines these two aspects by referring the value-enhancement as a result

⁵ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 7.

⁶ Danielle Pafunda, "Meat Life," in *Beauty is a Verb: The New Poetry of Disability*, ed. J. Barlett, S. Black, and M. Northen. (El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2011), 314.

⁷ Keith J. Hayward, "Consumer Culture and Crime in Late Modernity," In *The Blackwell Companion to Criminology*, ed. C. Sumner. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 151-152.

of productivity back to the productive body. The gigolo's narcissism, fuelled by both his consumer needs and his corresponding 'output,'—the "cellos of moans"—is representative of the ego-centrism of the late modern consumer subject. This results in a "peculiarly 'postmodern' form of subjectivity,"⁸ which, without a teleological objective, must rely on the illusory sense of an immortal, incorruptible body.

Thus, the dialectics of consumerism does not permit a stable identity to develop. The narcissistic consumer subject can never be satisfied because believes he has "an implicit *right to consume*."⁹ However, this perceived right often conceals a clinging dependence on consumer goods—not merely on their enjoyment value but more importantly, on their ability to confer an identity on the consumer subject which "takes on the form of a consumption-oriented narcissism."¹⁰ The gigolo's clinging, slimy neediness is conveyed by an abundance of sea creature-imagery: 'jellyfish,' 'squid,' and 'oysters.' It is certainly not any emotional attachment that these refer to: "There one is safe, / There are no family photographs." Although the squid and the oyster are consumed by the speaker and therefore may be interpreted as metaphors for the women he seduces, the line: "Bright fish hooks, the smiles of women" identifies the speaker as the fish to be caught.

Finally, the mirror in which he is admiring himself is a pool of water. This closing image confirms the sense of the speaker's narcissistic subjectivity—referring to the myth of Narcissus—and also clinches the sea creature-imagery, aligning the speaker, who is continuously searching for new experiences to confirm his identity, with these grasping, sticky animals. Thus, "Gigolo" shows the specifically male version of the "sensation-gatherer,"¹¹ who is repelled by family ties and prides himself on his promiscuity.

However, for a woman, her body itself, viewed from the perspective of a long tradition of the female body conceived as machine, fulfils the function of a consumer item by virtue of its reproductive and caretaking role. "An Appearance" plays on the female-body-as-machine concept by identifying the woman with the household appliances she uses. Again, the metaphor of the body as a watch ("How her body opens and shuts—/ A Swiss watch, jewelled in the hinges!") denotes the status of her body as a consumer item.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 150.

¹⁰ Ibid., 145.

¹¹ Hayward, "Consumer Culture," 152.

The speaker in the poem is the organisation man (“I wear white cuffs, I bow”), who is fascinated by the Otherness of his female counterpart: the suburban housewife. He is attracted and repelled at the same time by the ambiguity the woman embodies: the caring, nurturing domestic woman on the one hand, and the efficient, subhuman machine, on the other. Ambiguity, Kristeva claims, elicits revulsion and thus belongs to the realm of abjection.¹²

Abjection then derives from the discrepancy between appearance and essence—or rather, its lack: the mechanized woman is all appearance, mimicking the signs of affection without feeling any. However, the ambiguity of this ‘affectionate machine’ enthrals the speaker:

[The object] is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become *alter ego*, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence. Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant.¹³

Thus, the abjection of the subhuman housewife attracts the man because her different, object-like existence enables him to preserve his own, symbolic subjecthood.

A similar two-fold contradiction structures “The Applicant.” Firstly, the candidate must have a body with an obvious handicap in order to qualify for the job. Secondly, the goods the speaker wants to sell him—a suit which is “[b]lack and stiff, but not a bad fit” and a “living doll”—carry the promise of a secure “waterproof, shatterproof” future. However, the present condition of the candidate seems bleak enough: “I notice you are stark naked.” The salesman-like speaker projects a future in which lack becomes an asset since it carries within it the possibility of improvement:

First, are you our sort of a person?
Do you wear
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,
A brace or a hook,
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch

The impoverished and lonely, though able-bodied existence of the applicant is traded for an economically and socially cushioned, yet

¹² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

disabled way of life.

The applicant will find that the “[b]lack and stiff” suit fits him because his vacuous personality and emotional barrenness makes it easy for him to adapt to a faceless corporate culture. He will be tied to the organisation as closely and intimately as to his wife: he will marry both because they respond to a basic need, a want that constitutes his incipient personhood:

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being. [...] [A]ll abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.¹⁴

The want on which the candidate's being is founded is that of achieving social status. In order to reach this goal, he has to forego the affect, the emotional reaction to the realization of his abjection, his humiliated and base existence. The rejection of emotional responses is required by both ‘marriages’: corporate culture disseminates an invisible power that demands complete submission from its employees. In contrast, the suburban housewife lives—and even dies—for this same, subjected organisation man, her role as wife being the sole purpose of her existence, as she is

[...] willing
To bring teacups and roll away headaches
And do whatever you tell it.
Will you marry it?
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end
And dissolve of sorrow.

Thus, the affect is displaced, removed from the man to his wife: the woman operates as the abject *alter ego* of the man who is thereby redeemed, and can safely occupy his place in the symbolic order.

The wife is intended to compensate for the perceived lack in the man's life as well as anchor his being to an easily available and uniform identity as ‘organisation man.’ Although in life, the man avoids the abjection of his self by means of his wife, he cannot avoid the ultimate form of disability and abjection in death. The fact that he will have to rely on “a living doll” in the event of pain, disease, or death, indicates the precariousness of the

¹⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 5.

symbolic order he is invited to enter. The organisation man, lured by the prospect of a future that holds little pleasure yet offers safety from major disasters and utter loneliness, “represents [...] social conformism, which [...] is always familial. [...] [H]e embodies the castration of modern man [...] ultimate token of a world lacking in jouissance and able to find being only in abjection.”¹⁵ His empty-headedness enables the corporate salesman to refashion the candidate so that he conforms to the social norms that require submission. The prosthetics mentioned as necessary to a successful applicant represent previous interventions of institutional power on his body—and, by implication, his mind. These orthopaedic or aesthetic implements suggest that the body wearing them are both a subjected and a perfectible body.

The medical ideology of the reconstructible body-machine is exposed as inadequate and false in the face of abject human suffering presented in “Berck-Plage.” The clay of earth—that is, nature—that finally covers the body beyond repair, alone corresponds to the sense of loss and suffering:

What is the name of that color? –
 Old blood of caked walls the sun heals,

 Old blood of limb stumps, burnt hearts.

The finality of death reveals the pretentious ideology of infinite renewal as misleading and brutal in its denial of human frailty. By refusing to accept the natural process of decay, the cult of the ‘body beautiful’ denies the validity of the experience of physical pain and the sense of approaching dissolution: “Refusal to come to terms with the full reality of bodily life, including those aspects of it that are rejected culturally, leads people to embrace the myth of control, whose essence is to believe that it is possible [...] to avoid illness, disability, and death.”¹⁶ In this respect, late modern culture threatens to thrust any human shortcoming or sense of pain outside culture, making them unacceptable: abject.

Death and sexuality overlap in the poem because both have its share of the abject. “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection.”¹⁷ While death is arguably the most unclean and taboo human phenomenon, sexuality is presented by the speaker in terms of a

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 173.

¹⁶ Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 4.

horrified revulsion, insinuating that sex also contaminates life, being an abjection similar to death:

Limbs, images, shrieks. Behind the concrete bunkers
Two lovers unstick themselves.

. . .

And the onlooker, trembling,
Drawn like a long material

Through a still virulence,
And a weed, hairy as privates.

While the abjection of sexuality is represented in a public place, the beach, the abjection of the corpse can only be witnessed in private. Accordingly, the poem shifts the focus from the beach with its "[o]bscene bikinis"—a public scene where practically naked bodies are exposed to the gaze of others—to the ominous sight of the metallic prosthetics on the seaside hospital balconies and on to the private scene of the sick room. A division of public and private spheres, with regard to illness and disability, implies that our culture has not accepted the frailty of the human body.¹⁸

Acknowledging that the sight of the corpse is "horrible," the speaker nevertheless describes it and the room where it lies in a tone of almost envious wonder at the finality of death: "This is what it is to be complete." The completeness of death evokes a sense of being cleansed and provides a calm antithesis to the upsetting and infectious "virulence" of lovemaking.

In the fifth part, the dead and "complete" human being is defined retrospectively by the objects he leaves behind. Outlasting their owner and even his memory, objects stand in a metonymic relation to the dead man's personhood:

One curtain is flickering from the open window,

. . .

This is the tongue of the dead man: remember, remember.
How far he is now, his actions

Around him like livingroom furniture, like a décor.

¹⁸ Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 40.

Objects become the vessels of personality; the banality of these insignificant things, which are nevertheless more enduring than human life, makes the transience of the latter even more pathetic. Material items not only assume the personhood of their late owner but they also prove more loyal to him than people. The book with which “[t]hey propped his jaw [...] until it stiffened” or the “jelly-glassfuls of daffodils” in the graveyard seem to participate in the mourning more fully than his family or friends. People’s absent-minded attitude is conveyed through metaphors that emphasise the easy movement of insincere, worthless thoughts.

Gilbert locates the gripping effect of the poem in the correspondences between the disassociated body parts and the objects that seem to come alive: “people are disassembled into surreal fragments of themselves [...]. On the other hand, as the living disintegrate into body parts, inhuman objects [...] take on a bizarrely autonomous existence. [...] as if there were no distinction between people and possessions [...]”¹⁹ By foregrounding and personifying the objects that play a part in this silent drama of leavetaking from life, the poem is closing in on a terrifying judgement about people: their piety and remembrance are delegated to objects which replace, rather than symbolise, human affection.

Plath carries this line of thought to a drastic conclusion in “Berck-Plage,” in which the imagery of disability—most significantly the club-footed priest celebrating an orgasmic funeral service with the obscenely self-objectified female bathers in the background—collapses the symbolic human rituals of sex and death into an utter vacuum of symbolic meaning. The consumerist imperative of objectification creates a void in which human relationships and subjectivities are absorbed into the soulless existence of objects:

Six round black hats and a lozenge of wood,
And a naked mouth, red and awkward.

For a minute the sky pours into the hole like plasma.
There is no hope, it is given up.

The crippled foot of the priest becomes the symbol of a maimed and distorted culture where human life is deprived of any transcendent significance, where the ontological goal of individuals is to reach the imperturbable state of objects. The shockingly accurate description of the

¹⁹ Sandra Gilbert, “On the Beach with Sylvia Plath,” in *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. A. Helle (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 133.

funeral scene solely in terms of objects instead of human participants substantiates the notion, implicit in the earlier parts of the poem, that the dominating presence of objects indicates people's inability to relate to themselves or to each other as human beings.

Therefore, objects are endowed with a mediating function between people who express their own and interpret others' personhood through them. This shift in the relative value of consumer goods is largely due to this mediating role, as Baudrillard points out with regard to advertising: "it targets everyone in *their relation to others*, in their hankerings after reified social prestige."²⁰ In other words, the seemingly exaggerated value attributed to consumer items is due to their acting as signs that determine individuals' status in society.

The eroticised body parts in "Berck-Plage" are exclusively feminine and evocative of the most direct form of consumption, which is eating: "Breasts and hips a confectioner's sugar." When describing the feminine model of the consumer individual, Baudrillard states that "what is perpetuated in the feminine model is [...] the vicarious value [...]. Women are only called on to gratify themselves in order the better to be able to enter as objects into the masculine competition [...]."²¹ The vicarious gratification of the woman consumer, enjoying herself and showing off her objectified value as a 'chosen' item, is represented by the triumphant "[w]hite Nike" of "The Other."

The voracious appetite of the 'other woman' is not merely directed towards consumer goods: it wants the vicarious status enjoyed by the kept woman, the trappings of the man's status. The situation of "open competition,"²² though pleasurable for the mistress, elicits a painfully visceral emotion from the wife. A "therapeutic discourse"²³ is at work in the speaker's exclamations, addressing the mistress: "O moon-glow, o sick one." When the speaker designates this confrontational situation as physical pain and illness, she implicitly admits of the consumerist aspect of the relationships between the three people: the husband consumes both women as eroticised objects and signs of his status, while both women vicariously consume the signs of the man's social status, including the objectified relationships between the man and each woman, respectively. What prevents the wife from integrating the experience of psychic pain is her commodity status in relation to her husband—a status not much

²⁰ Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. (London: SAGE, 1998), 64.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 167.

different in essence from that of the mistress, both embodying the feminine model of vicarious consumption.

Femininity as pure model, as an abstract form without the content of personality or even desire, is encapsulated in the fashion mannequin. In "The Munich Mannequins," the shop-window dummies, representing the ideal feminine body, are described as "Naked and bald in their furs, / [...] / Intolerable, without mind." Baudrillard states that: "in advertising and fashion naked bodies [...] deny] the body in its very evocation" because their beauty "is wholly an abstraction, in emptiness, in ecstatic absence [...]." ²⁴ The negation of the female body becomes manifest in the denial of its procreative function and the radical separation of the productive (pregnant) body on the one hand, with its excess of flesh, its evocation of the abject uncleanness of giving birth, and the beautiful body on the other, which is slim, graceful, impermeable.

The attractiveness of the mannequins is largely due to their sterility: "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children." A beauty which refutes the possibility of change, deformation or decay, constitutes the unattainable ideal of femininity in consumer culture and this aestheticism of the body is inseparable from narcissism. The narcissistic devotion to the 'body beautiful' involves, paradoxically, an ascetic attitude to life.

This is where the notion of sacrifice spans the seeming divide between consumerism and asceticism:

The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice.

[...]

[...]

So, in their sulphur loveliness, in their smiles

These mannequins lean tonight

In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome

The word "sacrifice" gains greater emphasis and sinister connotations when the German city—with its own associations with the rise of Nazism and the subsequent tragedy of World War II—is compared to a morgue. Hence, the word "sacrifice" loses its religious or spiritual aura and signifies a senseless destruction of life. As there is no place for the soul in consumer society, it is the body that assumes the mythic connotations

²⁴ Ibid., 133-134.

previously attributed to spirituality: "[T]he body today, [...] has [...] taken over from the soul as mythic instance, as dogma and as salvational scheme."²⁵ In addition, the notion of sacrifice refers to the contrast between the "lean" mannequins, in a state of metaphorical starvation from cold and hunger, and the "thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz." The imperative of slimness evolves from the ancient urge to sacrifice the body: "The mystique of the 'figure' and the fascination with slimness have such a profound impact only because they are forms of violence, because in them the body is literally sacrificed."²⁶ In a way, the mannequins—and those women who successfully emulate them—are the sacrificial victims of the affluent society. They make it possible for the corpulent and complacent citizen to slumber peacefully, knowing that the body has been sacrificed in the form of an idealised and negated womanhood.

This loss of spirituality as an indispensable facet to consumerism, accounts for the ascendancy of objects, the objectification of the body and its treatment as the finest consumer item²⁷, as well as the ensuing fragmentation of people's identities. In her reading of the poem, Annas emphasises the connection between proliferating consumer items, objectified body parts, and the death of the self: "In 'The Munich Mannequins,' [...] Plath points out the deadening of human beings, their disappearance, fragmentation and accretion into the objects that surround them."²⁸ The insatiability of consumer subjects "amidst material abundance [...] is both perplexing and by all accounts a necessary condition for the survival of capitalist society."²⁹ Thus, "chronic marginal dissatisfaction"³⁰ becomes the basic existential condition of the consumer subject.

The only alternative to being 'chronically dissatisfied' is to reach the completed status of an object. This can be achieved in death or in a death-like, utterly disabled state. The speaker of "Paralytic" experiences a state of absolute helplessness, an almost disembodied condition due to his incapacitated body:

No fingers to grip, no tongue,
My god the iron lung

²⁵ Ibid., 135-136.

²⁶ Ibid., 143.

²⁷ Ibid., 131.

²⁸ Pamela J. Annas, *A Disturbance in Mirrors*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 114.

²⁹ Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 97.

³⁰ Ibid., 99.

[...]
Will not

Let me relapse
While the day outside glides by like ticker tape.

His paralysed body prevents him from participating in the workaday world. Therefore, time —reified and commodified for others—ceases to be of any importance to him. Reified time belongs to the world of action, but the disabled man's universe revolves according to a subjective, inner time.

The compulsive rhythm of able-bodied life fades away, leaving him free from its constraints: “[I]n health the genial pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed—[...] to work together by day [...] In illness this make-believe ceases. [...] We float with the sticks of the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested [...].”³¹ Having dropped out of the world of exchange, he also loses touch with the people around him. The insatiable consumption of individuals establishes and maintains their interpersonal relationships; when a person ceases to participate in the active and enforced collective behaviour of consumption,³² his ties to the community also weaken:

The night brings violets,
Tapestries of eyes,

Lights,
The soft anonymous
Talkers: 'You all right?'

With the disappearance of tactile sensory perception and the loss of mobility, however, the fragmentation of body parts no longer applies: the man regains his wholeness. His parts are not functional, “useable and saleable”³³ any more, therefore not alienable from him. A unity and integrity of self is restored to him which is unattainable for the able-bodied: “Dead egg, I lie / Whole / On a whole world I cannot touch.” His sense of recovered wholeness is comparable to the innocence of fetal existence.

His psychic return to the maternal Other signifies his desertion of the paternal symbolic order,³⁴ and it also results in a break with narcissistic

³¹ Woolf, *The Moment*, 18.

³² Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society*, 81.

³³ Dunn, *Identifying Consumption*, 114.

³⁴ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 13.

consumer attitudes.³⁵ By reaching a mentally self-sufficient state as well as a realistic awareness of his physical disability, the speaker has defeated his narcissism. Thus, the state of disability, when coupled with acceptance, can be posited as the antithesis of the consumer mentality; the former achieves unity and peace within the self, while the latter remains entrapped in feelings of dissatisfaction.

Plath's images of disabled bodies convey the loss of the spiritual dimension to life and the subsequent mutilation of the psyche by an ideology that objectifies not only human beings, but also ideas, and cultures. In Plath's late poetry, images of disability and the dissociation of body parts are metaphors for the psychic depletion of individuals amidst material affluence as well as the concomitant objectification of bodies. The fact that people depend on consumer items for an identity leads to the commodification of previously abstract and inalienable things, such as personality, social status, and relationships. For Plath, the overriding importance of consumer goods and the commodification of human beings bring about a spiritual vacuum in late modern society. In these late poems, the proliferation of consumer items indicates the presence of an invidious consumerist ideology which cripples the human psyche by its promise of an eternal present, perpetual immanence, and the possibility of becoming a perfect object.

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³⁵ Ibid., 14.

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