

Acting Out: Performance & the Self in Oates and Sontag

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Introduction

Helena Modjeska was a famous Polish stage actress of the late 19th century. *Memories and Impressions* is her autobiography, published posthumously, detailing her journey from a life as a famous actress in Poland to her travels in America where she attempts to found a commune and ends up successfully returning to the stage in her newly adopted homeland. She renewed her fame as an actress in America (under a different name) and became the first actress to have her own train coach in her tours across the country. Since then she has become relatively obscure, but she was one of the most famous celebrities in America in her time.

In the year 2000, *In America* was published. It is Susan Sontag's fictional counter creation to Modjeska's *Memories*. The novel's narrative follows the same time-structure as the autobiography, yet its form uses diary, epistle and third person narration from a variety of the character's perspectives.

Norma Jean Baker may be a lesser known name than that of Marilyn Monroe. Yet they are the same person (or they are technically) and almost forty years after her death she is still one of the most famous film actresses in the world. Starring in *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, *The Seven Year Itch*, and *Some Like it Hot* amongst others, she became a sexual icon. Her tumultuous life story and early, mysterious death stirred up an air of controversy around her that still lasts today. It has been recounted in dozens of biographies and personal accounts of her life. *Blonde*, published, like *In America*, in 2000, is a fictional version of her life written by Joyce Carol Oates. It invents her life from early childhood to her suicide. Its narrative is based primarily on selected points in Norma Jean's life and is related from a series of perspectives.

I have chosen to discuss these novels in relation to each other for a number of reasons, but primarily for the shared task that they undertake; the fictional recreation of the life story of historical women who were (significantly) actresses.

Critical reactions to the novels have been primarily positive, fairly grasping their basic principles in citing the “largesse in the telling, the sheer happiness of art” (Lourie in *Washington Post*, 5 March 2000) found in *In America*, or perceiving the self-consciousness of the “actress who already sees her personality as divided.” (Miller in *New York Times*, 2 April 2000) in *Blonde*. Although highly respected in some literary circles - both were nominated for the National Book Award (*In America* actually won it) - there have been severe misinterpretations of them in some reviews. Some critics have found it difficult to examine the novels without being influenced by the authors’ reputations. Sontag has at different points been labeled as the “dark lady of American letters” (Sayres, 1990, p.35) and Oates has been given equally patronizing labels. The work of both women has frequently been at the centre of critical controversy. From interviews and personal accounts of the authors, it appears that their struggle with public and personal identity coincidentally reflects a similar struggle in the lives of the women they fictionalize in these recent novels. As Oates states in an interview: “You can’t escape your identity. That’s very frustrating.” (Germain, 1989, p.179) This tension over identity is one of the major themes of both *Blonde* and *In America*.

One critical misunderstanding on which I would like to focus is that these famous historical women were convenient subject matter which the authors could exploit. One such example is Michiko Kakutani’s review of *Blonde*:

Ms. Oates gives us pages and pages in which she imagines the graphic sexual details of Monroe's relationship with lovers like President Kennedy, and pages and pages of the sort of heavy-breathing, romance-novel prose one would think beneath a writer of her distinction... These clumsy attempts to channel her characters' most intimate thoughts, like her embroidering of already melodramatic events, cannot help but remind the reader of how shamelessly Ms. Oates is using the life of Marilyn Monroe as a substitute for inventing an original story, how shamelessly she is trying to cash in on her subject's status as a legend. (in New York Times, 31 March 2000)

Kakutani fails to examine the complex way Oates integrates pastiche of generic forms, like that of romantic fiction, into the novel, blending these popular genres with the gossip that surrounds Norma Jean's life in order to create an ironic perspective. The melodramatic dramatization of some of the key historical events of her life within *Blonde* have led to the misinterpretation that Oates is gleaning to crudely profit from the Marilyn legend. However, as I shall argue below, their reinvention is a method of mapping the unsuccessful relationships that are based on images of Norma Jean formed by the society around her.

Kakutani implies that Oates attempts to simply recreate Norma Jean's life with her heavy use of detail and that this is an aspect of the novel's bland form of representation. She makes a similar claim in her review of *In America*: "Despite a playful preface that introduces the author as a postmodernist commentator on the story, the novel quickly devolves into a banal, flat-footed narrative that chronicles the characters' exploits through letters, journals and corny, omniscient voice-overs." (in The New York Times, 29 February 2000) This evaluation of the novels surmises that they use a realist form of representation to enhance the sensational aspects of the women's lives. I will attempt to

explain how the narration of the novels isn't an attempt to mimetically recreate the actress' life but instead plays with realist narrative techniques like diary and soliloquy to present the characters' perspectives in relation to their public image. Rather than produce an atmosphere of verisimilitude in the narrative, I will explain in my analysis how the novels reinvent the historical women as well as the time period surrounding them, allowing, as Lorna Sage wrote of *In America*, "the past its expansive prospect." (in Times Literary Supplement, 2 June 2000)

It may be useful here to introduce some critical frame works as they relate to the function of the novels' forms. It will also more clearly guard against the notion that they dramatize historical events for their sensationalism. I will try to distinguish the novels from that of the realist tradition that tries to "disavow the influence of *form* upon *content*." (Nash, 1987, p.20) The highly developed forms used in the novels emphasise ideas about reality rather than attempting to create a transparent view of reality. Their form is related much more closely to a "postmodernist" style. Obviously, "postmodernism" is a term that has been interpreted in numerous ways and it is important to distinguish how I am using the term. If I were to use Fredric Jameson's broadly philosophical use of the term, "postmodern" novels "lack the allegorical capacity to map or model the system" (1991, p.349) since they are intrinsically built with a self-referential understanding of reality. His critical perspective focuses on "postmodernist" techniques, such as pastiche, and the manner in which they do not deal with history because they are politically neutral. Yet, if I use the definition put forward by Patricia Waugh that "the decentred and fragmented subject of much postmodernist writing is one whose existence is premised upon the disintegration of a pre-existing belief in the possibility of realizing

the full autonomous subject” (1997, p.328) then I may find a more useful assumption with which to examine the form used to narrate these novels. For my analytical purposes, I will focus on the manner in which both novels use a future perspective to tint the point of view in the narration with a built in self-consciousness in the characters who tell it. This is symptomatic of the “postmodern” method of representing the past. As Linda Hutcheon writes,

If the past is only known to us today through its textualized traces (which, like all texts, are always open to interpretation), then the writing of both history and historiographic metafiction becomes a form of complex intertextual cross-referencing that operates within (and does not deny) its unavoidably discursive context. (1989, p.81)

From a “postmodern” perspective, existing texts on any particular historical subject are understood to be the subjective references upon which opinions upon that subject are formed. Because Oates and Sontag are writing about the lives of women whose stories have already been told, they chose not to write about them in a formal mimetic fashion since this would not have been a convincing form of representation. Instead, it is my contention, they have used a form of postmodernism which attempts to reinvent the stories that are already embedded in the public’s consciousness.

Of course, the method for this integration of a media consciousness in their representation functions differently in each novel. *In America* probably serves more as an inspiration for the general public to find out more about Modjeska, because the majority contemporary readers will never have heard of her. Sontag was the subject of some controversy when claims were made that she transcribed passages from other works,

including *Memories*, without citing that they were not her original work. Sontag has stated that a very small amount of the novel's text is transcription. Additionally, she feels that "All of us who deal with real characters in history transcribe and adopt original sources" and that some transcriptions she "hoped people would pick up" as they were intended as literary jokes. (Carvajal, in *The New York Times*, 27 May 2000) Aside from the moral issues involved, the transcriptions serve as Sontag's attempt to use the real words of the historical women to invent a new character. Oates has used a similar method of picking and choosing from texts by and about Norma Jean, but in her author's notes she takes care to both cite her sources and draw attention to the points in the novel at which they are drawn upon. What makes these issues relevant to my analysis is that the transcription serves as a script for the characters to stage a performance. The actual words and, more prominently, the general events of the historical women's lives are used as a backdrop upon which the author's create fictional characters and scenes. This points to a level of narrative that is not mimetic, but a referential self-conscious form.

The novels refer in a postmodern manner to the lives of the actresses with reference to what has already been written, because it adds a dynamic to our understanding of both the historical women's lives and the texts we have used to understand them. They have already been interpreted through the public's perspective due to the position of the women as either contemporary or past stars and the media attention and obsession that follows from this. Stardom makes their relationship to the public complex as Richard Dyer explains,

The star phenomenon orchestrates the whole set of problems inherent in the commonplace metaphor of life-as-theatre, role-playing etc., and stars do this because they are known as

performers, because what is interesting about them is not the character they have constructed (the traditional role of the actor) but rather the business of constructing/performing/being (depending upon the particular star involved) a “character.” (1998, p.21)

The public understanding of stars is not limited to their representation through their acting, but includes the many forms of media that portray them or their “public persona”. Through both the professional work and the media coverage of Norma Jean and Modjeska in their respective time periods, the public has formulated an understanding of the “actual” person. The portrayal of them as a “character” who “performs” enables the authors to play with levels of representation, manipulating the already established understanding of a public consciousness influenced by the media.

In order to explain the way in which the authors are able to create a character that “performs” I will use some of the assumptions used by Mikhail Bakhtin in his analysis of Dostoevsky, and, in particular, his formation of the theory of the polyphonic novel. This theory enables the author to create a distance from the character or “hero” by “special methods of discovery and artistic characterization.” (1984, p.48) By imbuing an intense self-consciousness in the characters the author is able to create an apparent distance which distinguishes their position from that of the characters’. Their narration simulates a performance of the characters’ intensely subjective positions rather than the author’s personal depiction of historical events. We are aware that the characters themselves are constructing a perception of reality because they act out the opposing ideologies embedded within their own consciousness; the opposition of “public” and “private” persona. This method, combined with the authors’ framing the professional lives of the women as actresses, produces a narration as performance.

The emphasis on acting throughout both the novels is used not only because it is the profession of the women portrayed, but also because it is linked to the authors' mode of representation. One of the ways that I will explore the authors' narrative method of representation is by exploring the theories of acting in Stanislavski's work. "Method acting" (to paraphrase crudely the American tradition founded on Stanislavskian theory) dictates that performers embody a role through an intense physical understanding of the persona. His work also relates interestingly to the levels of representation which appear in these two novels. The self-consciousness of the fiction as a fiction functions like a theatre where "We are not concerned with the actual naturalistic existence of what surrounds us on the stage, the reality of the material world!" (1993, p.129) Rather, we are concerned with the fragmented perception of the characters who convey the story of their existence, the levels of performance involved, and the way in which "truth" and "belief" can be fused together.

In relation to the representation of the characters as performers I will also use some of the theory surrounding the concept of linguistic performativity. This is a theory that was first developed in J. L. Austin's philosophy of language and aspects of it were subsequently adopted by feminist theory as in, for example, Judith Butler's exploration of gender identity. These theories are relevant to my analysis because they emphasise some of the major ways in which the representation of identity functions in the novels. Identity-as-construct is a theme upon which the narratives are built. Personal reality is invented through labels of identity which are "constituting the identity it is purported to be." (1990, p.24) It is invented not only because it is fiction, but also because it is created out of the character's visions of each of their own lives through words. The general

difficulty with Butler's version of the theory is that it states there is no actual individual behind the interpretation of identity. Butler adapts Nietzsche's theory to state "that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results." (1990, p.25) However, in the analysis of fiction, the characters are inventions and through the creation of their consciousness by the author they are able to act out the performative aspects of identity. The attempt to locate an actual definition of self will be ultimately futile. But, it is important to note, there must be a consciousness behind the performer *choosing* to perform out of the wish for a desired reaction. In each of my cases, the narration is indicated to be a performance and the representation acknowledges that it is representing its mode rather than an actual subject, because the subject is only a variety of interpretations.

Blonde and *In America* both trace journeys in and out of the self in the form of the memoir or the diary novel. In addition, they both represent the failure of these journeys and the ability to recreate their subjects; instead, they invent new ones through modes of cross-reference with established texts and fictional creation. In discussing these levels of representation there are many epistemological questions that arise concerning the nature of the self which the novels invite the reader to question. Rather than dwell on their possible answers, I will attempt to focus on the forms that the novels use as methods to fictionally create a historical individual. I will attempt to use these seemingly disparate theoretical sources to form an understanding of the levels of representation involved in the novels. As I am not approaching the novels with any particular theoretical framework, I hope to draw attention to the presence of forms and themes in the novels that are particularly useful in trying to understand them. The analysis that follows is an attempt to

show that the methods of narration can function as a performance by both the subject and the language in the text.

Chapter 1: Liking to Feel New All Over: Joyce Carol Oates' *Blonde*

As we have seen, *Blonde* immediately raises questions about the motives for its creation due to its author's choice of subject: Norma Jean Baker. To write a lengthy novel based on a figure who has already inspired volumes of biographical accounts and publicity may appear at first sight to be a spurious task, or a merely cynical piece of exploitation. Yet, Joyce Carol Oates, an author whose literary reputation has grown in recent years, has published *Blonde* whose original hardback length reaches 738 pages (she reports the original length to be over 1,400 pages before editing) making it the longest of the thirty-nine novels she has previously published. Why was it necessary for Oates to write this novel now? A partial answer may lie in her disclaimer at the beginning of the novel that clearly defines the work as fiction that should not in any way be understood to be a biographical account of the actress. To mark her novel as a work of the imagination is to distance *Blonde* from interpretations of it as a faithful historical recreation. It insists that the novel intends to deal more with ideas rather than fact. Then why choose to base the characters and events upon historical occurrences? For Oates' purposes, recognising the historical basis of a subject in a novel links the ideas presented with real concerns and issues rather than letting them flounder in an abstract space. That is not to say that fiction which recognises itself to be purely fictional cannot discuss "real" ideas, but rather that Oates' novelistic method uses these historical bases as points for ideological engagement. Oates begins this engagement with the biographical work that has been previously published. The "true" origins and development of the now mythical Marilyn have been reconstructed in dozens of biographical and personal accounts that attempt to outdo or uncover new evidence that their predecessors did not. Many of these, such as Gloria Steinem's collection of essays, try to construct an emotional portrait of the "real person"

in order to compensate for the fact Norma Jean's planned autobiography was left incomplete at the time of her death. (Steinem, 2001) *Blonde* could be interpreted as such an attempt by giving the narrative voice over to Norma Jean entirely and allowing her to invent herself through Oates' narrative as performance.

The novel also represents and explores many of the essential themes with which Oates has concerned herself in her previous works of fiction. Oates chose this historical person as a subject specifically because so much emphasis has been placed upon star personality of "Marilyn Monroe," the public image and not on the complex individual "Norma Jean," the historic person. Though she explores in the later chapters the repercussions of an enforced iconic image, the novel's inspiration and primary fictional drive is to explore the emotional meaning of a girl's disillusionment of the "American dream" after successfully achieving it. From this base, Oates engages with some of her primary concerns as a novelist. She mingles social commentary with an emotional re-imagination of American images in a highly formed postmodernist novel. Here I do not want to simply and exclusively connect Oates' writing with a polemical account of American life, but rather to explore the entwining of ideological and literary issues found in the work itself. For my analysis I want to identify the narrative voices which are operating on a number of levels to understand the method Oates uses to reinvent the historical woman.

In surveying Oates' body of work as a novelist it is easy to see her intense involvement with, and mastery of, generic forms. For instance, in several novels she wrote in the eighties, she created a series that experimented with generic form ranging from the family saga to the gothic romance to the detective mystery. However, behind

these experiments lie ideas about particular American experiences that are uniquely suited to the form in which she has chosen to depict them. Oates states in the preface to *Mysteries of Winterthurn* when questioning her concern with genre in these novels,

Primarily, each novel tells a story I consider uniquely American and of our time. The characters of the quartet are both our ancestors and ourselves... But the formal discipline of *genre* – that it forces us inevitably to a radical revisioning of the world and of the craft of fiction – was the reason I found the project so intriguing.

The deliberate, strategic invocation of generic models is a highly sophisticated way to view the American experiences she bases the stories on. It asks you to question not only what you're told, but the way it is being told to you. In this way the reader can be aware of the manipulations of the medium through Oates' postmodern reworking of the genre while gaining ideas about the content of the discussion. Oates uses the biography as a primary form for *Blonde*, but as a novel the text also manipulates this form. Formal experiment is never a supercilious act on Oates' part, but an attempt to engage the reader in a more highly informed discussion. Viewing a story, especially one that has already been told in a media form like the story of Marilyn, from a different perspective, is central to Oates fictional re-imagination of American life.

The biographical form Oates uses for *Blonde* tells the story of Norma Jeane in a linear first person narrative and divides her life into five major sections. It traces the development of her from a displaced girl to the realization of stardom to the disillusionment with her iconic status. The structure is of a biography, but it is also incorporates the elements for what Oates defines as tragedy:

The art of tragedy grows out of a break between self and community, a sense of isolation. At its base is fear. If it is not always true that human life possesses value, it is at least true that some human life, or the abstract parody of human life as acted out by gods, has a profound and magical value, inexplicable. The drama begins only when a unique human reality asserts its passion against the totality of passion, “arranging the same materials in a unique pattern,” risking loss of self in an attempt to realize self-there steps forward out of the world an Oedipus, an Antigone. (1972, p.4)

At tragedy’s center is the inevitable failure to find fulfillment. Oates process of fictionalizing Norma Jeane’s life incorporates elements of unfulfilled ideals that contribute to this sense of tragedy. Her character passionately seek to revise herself in order to find fulfillment: “I am L.A.-born & a daughter of this city & nobody need know more than that I WILL INVENT MYSELF LIKE THIS CITY INVENTING ITSELF” (2000, p.206) The voice in this is overly confident and assertive, violently declaring in capital letters her right to create her own self even if it means sacrificing the facts of her past. This is written amidst a chapter that is wildly fragmented sentences and half words. It creates a severe dislocation between her desire to be independent and the sense that she is hurtling toward destruction.

Throughout the novel death is a consistent presence. In the prologue, Death delivers a package containing a doll that travels throughout the novel as an indication of Norma Jeane’s inevitable fall. The presence of death is also manifested in the character of the Sharp Shooter who looms in the background of many scenes waiting to assassinate Norma Jeane. This agent, probably of the CIA, is webbed throughout the novel as a

motif. This presence turns the narrative into a schematized form. As John White writes: “The presence of mythological motifs adds a touch of fatalism to the plot of many a modern novel; we have a sense of the sword of Damocles hanging above the protagonist. All kinds of prefiguration, if followed closely, will have such an effect.” (1971, pp.150-151) The consistent elements that point to Norma Jeane’s destruction are spread throughout the novel turning the image of Marilyn into a modern myth. The agents of her death as hypothesized in the many biographies of her are omnipresent forcing her into a fatal role. This journalistic sense of recounting a death multiple times has been dealt with in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. But, unlike the magic realism form of that novella where the murder is told and retold so many times that in the actual representation of the murder, no blood is spilt in the stabbing, Norma Jeane’s murder is taking place in the paranoia of her consciousness. In one instance in the novel, Norma Jeane is trying to save an imaginary baby in the ocean and commit suicide at the same time: “She’d begun to hyperventilate. Not enough oxygen. She was swallowing water. Water up her nose. A hand at her throat. Strong beautiful hands. *Better for both of us to die.*” (2000, p.490) The physical and imaginary death blurs in Norma Jeane’s consciousness. She is unable to stop her death because she is a part of the myth she is narrating in both her mind and her recounting of the events in the novel.

There is an important difference between the author’s and Norma Jeane’s control of the narrative. This is created through Oates’ artistic postmodernist method. There is a recurrent tone throughout *Blonde* that tries to create what Oates calls “psychological realism.” In an interview with Bill Goldstein, Oates states, “when I actually started writing it I went back to when she was a little girl and got very involved in what I would

call psychological realism, the sort of Dickensian density of detail.” (in The New York Times, 28 March 2000) This is a very emotionally involved reimagination of a person’s life that turns them into a fictitious character. But the “density of detail” is not a realistic representation. It is a literary voice that is shaped by the central character. Oates creates the character of Norma Jeane who reveals a hypersensitive awareness of her own being and a special attentiveness to the perspective of the other characters. As Oates writes:

She listened to herself hearing her throaty-whispery-Marilyn voice at a distance like a telephone voice & she was certain she hadn’t spoken sharply to W, she would keep sharp in reserve... Saying to W the distinguished director whom The Studio had hired to please her, ‘Look mister. You have Marilyn Monroe in this ridiculous film so use her, don’t fuck her up.’ (2000, p.625)

In the use of the voices interspersed with Norma Jeane’s own her understanding of their perception of her is evident making her actions highly self-conscious. Bakhtin cites this narrative condition in his explanation of Dostoevsky’s work:

What the author used to do is now done by the hero, who illuminates himself from all possible points of view; the author no longer illuminates the hero’s reality but the hero’s self consciousness, as a reality of the second order. (1984, p.49)

Oates develops self-consciousness in the character of Norma Jeane so that she is able to cast the vision she has of her reality in this emotionally detailed perspective of the world. She establishes a delicate relationship to her self where she is a viewer watching and inventing her reality.

Oates is particularly attentive to mapping the evolution of this condition. In Norma Jeane's early years, Oates describes from her perspective how this relationship to her Norma Jeane self is created:

There was a Friend-in-the-Mirror. As soon as I was big enough to see. My Magic Friend. There was a purity in this. Never did I experience my face and body from the inside (where there was numbness like sleep), only through the mirror, where there was sharpness and clarity. In that way I could see myself. (2000, p.30)

The "Magic Friend" is an ontological observer of the character. It is an objective perspective on the self but is a part of the self at the same time. Oates uses a myriad of italics and indentations in the novel to distinguish between these "voices" of the different selves that emerge within a single character. This is a common perspective for many of Oates' female characters, especially Elena Howe in *Do With Me What You Will* who thinks: "Then my face was like the opening of a dream: when everything is experimental." (1974, p.101) The distance the characters feel between themselves and the image of themselves allows them to create an ideal self. We see that it is a useful tool for the character to use within her survival of the fictional world that poses as the real, because it allows her to manipulate other characters around her by understanding the way they perceive her.

As *Blonde* continues, the "Magic Friend" becomes an addictive sedative to Norma Jeane, leading her further into the realm of the fictitious, which presents itself as an inescapable hall of mirrors where she is unable to distinguish her identity constructed, through the "Magic Friend," from the person she considers to be her true self. This

feeling is enhanced by the many roles she plays in the films, and her intense identification with the characters: “She was ‘Marilyn’ – no, she was ‘Angela’ – she was Norma Jeane playing ‘Marilyn’ playing ‘Angela’ – like a Russian doll in which smaller dolls are contained by the largest doll which is the mother.” (2000, p.256) This complex construction of identity leads the character further and further away from a clear understanding of herself as a being separated from “objective” perspectives. The names of these different notions of self are very important to Oates’ depiction of her characters, because they represent the perspective of another, more than the label by which the characters identify themselves. I will elaborate further on this point later. In this divided sense of the self, Oates reveals some of her most powerful literary influences for *Blonde*.

Norma Jeane is cited as reading Dostoevsky several times throughout *Blonde*. Her involvement with his novels illuminates not only her intellectual vigor, but a reference to how an individual can contain multiple perspectives in a single consciousness in a fashion rationalised by Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic. Oates incorporates this theme into the structure of the novel through Norma Jeane’s profession of modeling and acting. Oates has described the novel as a posthumous account from Norma Jeane’s perspective. (The New York Times, 28 March 2000) The narrative logic traces her memories in a chronological order, interspersed with her self-destructive desire, and fated sense of being. Within this narrative, arise also the multiple voices of the people in her life melding her understanding of herself with the perspectives of those who view her. Some sections of the text are narrated in the first person by people who surround Norma Jeane, yet these voices are also tinged with the resentment of Norma Jeane’s perspective so that her “voice” suffuses the text: “*Monroe! A nympho. Who says? I heard she does it for*

money. She's desperate. She's frigid, hates men. She's a lezzie. But yes, she does it for money when she can get her price." (2000, p.539) These labels that she understands are clearly projected on to her, leading to the deterioration of her own sense of herself. *Blonde*, then, depicts an existential crisis: Norma Jeane's struggle to construct a secure sense of being that is unimpeded by the labels of others. In this overly conscious, split sense of self, Norma Jeane parallels the Underground man. And in her ironic backward glance of life she might very well agree, in her own Hollywood register, with the words of Dostoevsky's narrator in *Notes from Underground*: "I swear to you, gentleman, that to be overly conscious is a sickness, a real, thorough sickness. For man's everyday use, ordinary human consciousness would be more than enough" (1993, p.6). This intense consciousness draws the individual into hopeless conundra concerning the reality of being. What is important to highlight here for my analysis is the "voice" of Norma Jeane, which is also able to perform other perspectives on her. The text can be read as her own narration as well as simultaneously giving voice to a host of unknown "others" outside the self.

Norma Jeane's compulsive need for recognition is divided into several identity roles that she can perform at any time. At one point later in the novel Oates writes, "The Blonde Actress heard herself saying in a raw scratchy adolescent voice, 'See, I'm an actress? It is my life! That's why I want to do my best. It's my best self that is the actress.'" (2000, p.637) At this point, Norma Jeane's quest for affirmation has been transformed into a compulsive need to be approved by acting both in her life and on screen. She contains within herself the multiple voices of different identities that have come inhabit her: the child, Norma Jeane, the Beggar Maid, the Fair Princess and the

Blonde Actress. Each is a symbolic representation of a role in society like those used in fairy-tales and must abide its rules. As Oates writes in her analysis of old and modern fairy-tales:

All “good” heroines accept their fate passively, unquestioningly. To express even normal distress at being viciously mistreated would be in violation of the narrow strictures of fairy-tale “goodness.” (1999, p.12)

The roles include “rules” that must be abided for her to participate in the tale of her own life. In Norma Jeane’s identification with these roles she must perform in a certain way at times in order, simply, to “be.” However, the roles are many and frequently confused. This schizophrenic sense lies behind the expressions of performativity.

Throughout Oates’ work, her depictions of these compartmentalized aspects of identity are part of the experience of being an adult and learning to perform. In *Starr Bright Will be With You Soon*, one of Oates’ recent novels written under the pseudonym Rosamond Smith, she writes,

Lily supposed that, in the human brain, deep in the cortex of memory, there is no such thing as ‘time’ – ‘chronology.’ Everything is present tense; nothing is ‘past.’ We may be numerous selves simultaneously. Adult, adolescent, child, infant. (2000, pp.76-77)

This process of naturalizing multiple aspects of identity to one’s life is described as a social habit of the mind. In *Blonde* the process is accelerated for Norma Jeane through her displacement as a child born of a mother spurned by the Hollywood industry, and an

unknown father who could be any one of a number of celebrities. Gladys tells the child Norma Jeane that her father is one of the pallbearers at a Hollywood funeral they attend: “*Ronald Colman! Adolphe Menjou! Nelson Eddy! Clark Gable! Douglas Fairbanks, Jr! Al Jolson! John Barrymore! Basil Rathbone!*” (2000, p.58) Norma Jeane is meant to identify these men and thus Hollywood itself as her parent and, being the product of it, is compelled to gain approval from it. However Hollywood, as depicted in *Blonde*, could never support the emotional needs of an individual because it is only interested in producing images.

Norma Jeane is consistently disappointed in her relation to those images. This has been identified as symptomatic of women who try to identify with cultural symbols of “women.” As Susan Stanford Friedman writes concerning this condition: “Not recognizing themselves in the reflections of cultural representation, women develop a dual consciousness – the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription.” (1988, p.39) Oates identifies these relations to the image through the labels Norma Jeane chooses for her different versions of herself. However, this effect is doubled in the text: names are also assigned to the people in Norma Jeane’s life, who are labeled by the relationship they have to her. An example of this is Norma Jeane’s relation to the Ex-Athlete: “He liked a good-looking woman at his side. Smiling, beaming. Often there were photographers. He liked a woman to cling to his arm but not to cling to *him*.” (2000, p.377) The Ex-Athlete only wishes to acquire the celebrity figure of Marilyn for her status as an image, at the same time subjecting her to his own image of a proper wife. Nothing personal or endearing is ever allowed to enter into their relationship, which

means they only relate to each other through their pre-established perspectives of each other.

Meanwhile, amidst relations divided into performance roles, Norma Jeane remains committed to her own understanding of herself: “She knew she was who she was. Her studio/Hollywood name. But the woman’s deepest self shone through. A pure soul. It was beautiful, and it had no name.” (2000, p.439) Norma Jeane isn’t able to maintain this purified version of herself through the rest of her life and is lost in slanted images of her personality. This style of writing that presents images as if they were the individual, enhances ironically the feeling in the text that all the events are being narrated from Norma Jeane’s perspective in the future. The objective perspective of her life is diluted through the emotional intensity of the reinvention of her life and both her and the reader’s struggle to separate the levels of “voices.”

The loss of Norma Jeane’s self is also represented in the creation of an overabundance of cinematic and photographic images of her. The images serve as grotesque versions of herself that a superficial and capitalistic entertainment industry has forced her into. They succeed in overriding her wish for the films she acts in to be emblems of artistic achievement. But her relationship to them is complex, because she is responsible for their creation, yet she feels resentful toward them. Rather than viewing these images as the comic and luxuriously beautiful ideal which their creators apparently wished them to be, they serve, through Oates’ portrayal, as emblems of a dangerous and violent misogynistic dominance that is directed toward her. In *Blonde* a realization of this result leads to a rant at the beginning of the chapter ‘Sugar Kane 1959’, asking why the actress was forced to play a part in this demeaning image when it contradicts the painful

reality of her life. Oates intersperses these questions with the monotonous and insistent lyrics to Monroe's famous song 'I Wanna be Loved by You', creating a depressing sense about her metaphysical situation through its repetition and anger:

why was Sugar Kane funny, was Sugar Kane the supreme female impersonator? was this funny? why was this funny? why is female funny? why were people going to laugh at Sugar Kane & fall in love with Sugar Kane?... why did they love her? why when her life was in shreds like clawed silk? why when her life was in pieces like smashed glass? why when her insides had scooped out? why when she carried poison in her womb? why when her head was ringing with pain?... *I wanna be loved by you boop boopie do!*... This curse of a compulsion! It was the Beggar Maid's punishment. (2000, p.614)

Because the text doesn't specify who is speaking here, the reader must work to identify the voices. Oates uses these questions in between the lines of the song to illustrate the self-consciousness Norma Jeane feels in the roles she is compelled to play, and to point to the fact that she is not complacent. Norma Jeane's voice performs the compulsive need to question the mechanics of the desire for her to fulfill a comic sex image. She recognizes that it is a part of the inadequacy she must feel, as someone who originates out of a displaced background. This is the role of the "Beggar Maid." This distinction of voices illustrates how the author separates herself from the character and allows her to invent her own presentation of herself.

Norma Jeane is also portrayed as being slowly wooed by this image of herself, falling into the dangerous trap of it. This adaptation is similar to a suggestion Susan Sontag makes in one of her essays on photography:

our ability to stomach this rising grotesqueness in images (moving and still) and in print has a stiff price. In the long run, it works out not as a liberation of but as a subtraction from the self: a pseudo-familiarity with the horrible reinforces alienation, making one less able to react in real life. (1978, p.41)

Developing a tolerance for grotesque images results in a sense that we have become acclimatized to the tone of the image; this tolerance is created from a sense of reality as a fabrication. Norma Jeane's personality is suffused by these grotesque versions of her screen persona and they, in turn, are dramatized, and therefore reinforced, in her performance of them. This process is represented by the portrayal of Hollywood as her parent and the blonde doll with whom she finds a close identification. This doll travels throughout the novel as an ironic counterpoint to the idea of a woman that Norma Jeane wants to become.

By the end of the novel, Norma Jeane's original name has been lost to her profession as a blonde actress. This identity as the Blonde Actress invoked through the perspective of the Magic Friend can only prove to temporarily solve her unfulfilled sense of being. The entire novel is a description of the way in which Norma Jeane dissolves into the mythic figure of Marilyn Monroe, *from her own perspective*. This location of her perspective is described by Oates in an interview with Greg Johnson:

The voice, point of view, ironic perspective, mythic distance: this curious distancing effect is my approximation of how an individual might feel dreaming back over his or her own life at the very conclusion of that life, on the brink of extinction even as, as in a fairy tale, the individual life

enters an abstract, communal 'posterity.' Norma Jeane dies, and 'Marilyn Monroe,' the role, the concoction, the artifice, would seem to endure. (in Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 12 March 2000)

Blonde maintains this doubled and collusive perspective on Norma Jeane's life throughout the novel, allowing her to self-consciously play the role of herself as she enters a mythic image. It achieves this through a language that invents a reality that is separate from a mimetic representation of Norma Jeane's real life and encompasses the media interpretations of her life. *Blonde* probes questions as to why people identify with mythic images, and whether the survival of the individual is compatible with the evolution of these images. It seeks to clarify the values of a society that fits people into these images and asks why people are compelled to sell themselves to these images. Because Norma Jeane believes that her relationships are only formed out of images, she is unable to find any emotional fulfillment in them. The need to maintain this perspective of the self as an object for public consumption is presented as compulsive. The process of formulating an invented self that follows from this, and the need to sell the self to others, makes up the central subject of *Blonde*.

Chapter 2: Performing Diva: Susan Sontag's *In America*

Susan Sontag's transition from writing fiction in the sixties and seventies that was experimental in its form, heavily influenced by European philosophy and theoretical thought, to writing two historical novels in the past decade certainly has transformed the critical opinion of her category as an artist. This transition in form over the decades wasn't a spontaneous one. The tone of her essays changed most dramatically during her initial struggle with cancer. This is evident in her choice of subject in the collections *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors* where she emphatically argued that "illness is *not* a metaphor." (1991, p.3) *The Way We Live Now*, whose proceeds were donated to AIDS charities, is a fictional work dealing frankly with the subject of living with illness. It might be described as her most realistic work up until the time of its publication in its depiction of recognizable characters dealing with modern dilemmas. Its narrative is constructed out of the revolving speeches of several characters discussing an ill friend and their own methods for dealing with questions of mortality. It is highly attentive to narrative form, never naming the friend or in fact the disease. The voices are left dislocated; their methods of conceptualizing strategies for dealing with death are aligned with the dangerous disease that is never named within the story. She emphasizes the way we can fear words and the way they are able to *do* things.

In a 1988 interview, Sontag declares: "What I want to see is a strong literature, and I want to see a literature which is also very conscientious about language." (Poague, 1995, p.246) How does this attention to the use of words relate to her recent writing of historical novels? Her analytical way of approaching a subject like the history of the representation of disease may very well reflect her approach to depicting fictional representations of historical circumstances. Historical figures and occurrences are treated

in her novel *The Volcano Lover* not only as points of identification, but as the vocabulary by which we understand the past. Their representation, in the frame of a historical novel, deflects the tautological method for understanding history and invents a way to renegotiate our relation to history as something that can be reinvented. The characters who populate the novels are not only our link with the past, but are the instruments of the past in whom we find an identification in their methods of verbalizing our reality and our past. There are many things I could discuss in the development of Sontag's writing, but I shall focus here primarily on her use of subject and narrative form within *In America*. I will explain how these elements are used to create characters as performers and the language as a performance in itself.

As I have already mentioned, Helena Modjeska is a historical figure of whom most current readers would be unaware, upon first reading *In America*. Unlike *Blonde's* Norma Jeane, Modjeska's story is not heavily embedded in the general public's consciousness because her celebrity occurred before the explosion of mass media such as television. Sontag's method for dealing with this unfamiliarity is to hold the reader's hand, as she travels back in history within the narrative to an imagined space of a party in Cracow within chapter Zero. The narrative voice of the author, heavily inflected with Sontag's own voice, creates an identification with the space, as she cites her own Polish background and the personal relationship she feels with the characters. She gradually merges her own history with the characters wanting Maryna to have characteristics of Dorothea Brooke and then ruminating on the fact that she married her own Mr. Casaubon, a particularly cutting reference to Sontag's early marriage. Her linguistic identification also transgresses physical boundaries, the foreign language becoming

clearly intelligible without translation to the narrator: “their words reached me as sense.” (2001, p.3) The narrator finds an emotional connection with the characters who are designated as historical figures by their initial names which are then transposed to the fictitious world through their renaming: “either Helena or Maryna... I decided to think of her as Maryna.” (2001, p.4) This self-conscious use of language establishes a reclamation of historical figures to act as performers of the narrator’s ideas. Thus what differentiates *In America*’s method from that of a traditional historical novel, which uses a mimetic form of representation, is the transparency of the narrative as a fiction and the metafictional levels upon which the characters narrate.

The narrator blurs the meaning of fact and fiction in the opening chapter. This confusion originates from the difficulty of transposing historical periods of time into a fictional work:

“the past is the biggest country of all, and there’s a reason one gives in to the desire to set stories in the past: almost everything good seems located in the past, perhaps that’s an illusion, but I feel nostalgic for every era before I was born; and one is freer of modern inhibitions, perhaps because one bears no responsibility for the past, sometimes I feel simply ashamed of the time in which I live. And this past will also be the present, because it was I in the private dining room of the hotel, scattering seeds of prediction. I did not belong there, I was an alien presence, I would have to lean very close to hear, and I would not understand everything, but even what I misunderstood would be a kind of truth, if only about the time in which live, rather than the one in which their story took place.” (2001, pp.23-24)

The narrator unapologetically declares that the invention of these historical circumstances will be inflected with her own understanding based in her present circumstances. This is actively working against the mimetic desire to recreate the past as if the medium were did not influence the reader's perspective. Neither is it a simple attempt to rewrite a historical woman's autobiographical narrative to "retell their tales so that they are the told and not the tellers" (1988, p.115) as Jane Marcus describes. On the contrary, Sontag's narrative, thus freed from the illusion that the character's consciousness has magically been transported into a modern fiction, has given the characters the space to create new versions of themselves that are built upon the historical autobiographical narrative. Thus the narrative functions as a postmodern act by which I mean it is conscious of itself as a fiction playfully using an established form of fiction. I now need to explain in detail how these narrative voices are given the freedom to invent their own pasts within Sontag's fictional construction.

The narrative voice that follows the highly self-conscious chapter zero is initially a third person narrative relating events in Maryna's life. The narrative voice is infused both with Maryna's and Sontag's voice: "You have to float your ideals a little off the ground, to keep them from being profaned. And cut loose the misfortunes and insults, too, lest they take root and strangle your soul." (2001, p.31) Sontag's penchant for an analytical method for understanding motivations is evident in this passage, but so is the process by which Maryna resists being specifically located. Her tactic to resist definition is always to resist naming the cause for her own actions. In this way her ideals can never settle on any particular plane of reality.

This divide, between a realization of ideals and the voicing of them, allows the element of faith to supercede any judgement of Maryna's character. This process is described in what Sontag calls "a letter to nobody, that is, to herself." (2001, p.39) This declaration asks the reader to assume that the letter will be an introspective deliberation about internalized conflicts. Yet, like a monologue, it is performed out of a need to communicate something to an audience. This is complicated by the fact that the communication is filled with negation:

It's not because my brother, my beloved brother, is dying I will have no one to revere... it's not because my mother, out beloved mother, grates on my nerves, oh, how I wish I could stop her mouth... it's not because I too am not a good mother (how could I be? I am an actress)... it's not because my husband, who is not the father of my son, is so kind and will do whatever I want. (2001, p.39)

The "it" is never named, but we gather from the narration that proceeds that "it" is the move to America and consequently Maryna's new formation of herself. In the continuous denial of the reasons for "it," the voices of the other characters and the author herself can be heard explaining why she is going to do "it" in Maryna's consciousness. The refusal of these perspectives creates the effect that her position is independent from that of the author and other characters.

This parallels the status of Norma Jeane in *Blonde*, in her relation to the author. The positions of the other character and the author are internalized within the character's consciousness as a dialogue. As Bakhtin writes,

The consciousness of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things- one can only relate to them dialogically. To think about them means to talk with them; otherwise they immediately turn to us their objectivized side: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectivized images. (1984, p.68)

The ability to argue with the other positions enables Maryna to destabilize the novel as a subjective view of a historical woman's life. Maryna is given the freedom to perform for herself.

She is able to perform "it" with a dialogicized understanding. In this way Maryna is allowed her own truth as to the reasons for "it." This is, as Stanislavski describes, an essential part of successful acting:

Put life into all the imagined circumstances and actions until you have completely satisfied your *sense of truth*, and until you have awakened a *sense of faith* in the reality of your sensations. This process is what we call *justification* of a part. (1993, p.129)

By negating all the explanations imaginable for "it", Maryna is able to find, and the viewer is made to believe in, a justification for "it", built on her invention of truth and faith. The emphasis on performance is not only because Maryna is an actress, but because of the physical involvement she feels for her part in the journey to America. All the characters Maryna brings with her to America are compelled to perform in this drama she is creating, filled with the artificiality of theatrical gestures that are incapable of being maintained.

The characters', especially Maryna's, control over the performance is stripped away from them over the course of the novel when it becomes increasingly evident that they are not pioneers but performers. The narrator comments upon this condition:

Loyalty to an imperiled group enterprise was a virtue rooted in her professional life. You accept the leading role in a new play, you go into rehearsal, and then realize that, for all your efforts and those of the others, it's not working, the play is less good than you thought. (2001, p.199)

As the characters began to leave the commune before it actually dispersed, it became clear to Maryna that she was not completely in control of the play she was trying to orchestrate which accounts for the tone in this narration which is mingled with Maryna's philosophical ruminations about the theatre. At this point the characters who traveled to America need to renegotiate their sense of direction to decide whether to revert back to their old identity or persevere in America. Maryna finds it necessary to reinvent her past in order to assimilate to her new position in the American environment.

In America is related in an important way to Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* in its strategy of forming a discontinuity between characters who attempt to constantly perform in real life and their failure to create an ideal self. At one point in *Nightwood* the Baron is trying to negotiate fact from fiction:

'if I tell the whole truth,' the Baron continued, 'the very abundance of what then appeared to me to be security, and which was, in reality, the most formless loss, gave me at the same time pleasure and a sense of terrible anxiety, which proved only too legitimate.' (1961, p.113)

The past, which has been denied in favor of a realization of an ideal state of being, has been transformed in an essential way so that it cannot be fully regained. Sontag develops this theme, physically transforming the past in the creation of Maryna's character:

Some truths need to be emphasized to jibe with local ideas of seamliness (she knew Americans liked being told about early hardships and rebuffs by those crowned with wealth and success), while some truths, the ones that have their just weight only back home, are best not mentioned at all. (2001, pp.269-270)

The performance of her new self that Maryna creates requires that her past be reinvented as well. Part of process is formed from the physical necessity of her profession to sell herself to her audience and part of it is out of the desire to create an ideal self. The process of performance redefines the character's identity so that belief in who she is becomes essentially connected to the truth of who she has become in the present.

Once Maryna is able to regulate a sense of truth to her actions she produces the realization of "it," building a performance with her friends functioning as actors and the imagined blank plain of America functioning as the stage. The difficulty, however, is that the sense of truth is not necessarily the actual truth that motivates the journey. The intention of the journey is to found an ideal community, but the actual reason, which Maryna realizes, is for Maryna to create a new self:

'Always. Since I was a child. And the older I get, the more I believe in it, because paradise is something necessary.' 'You don't find it...difficult to believe in paradise?' 'Oh,' she groaned, 'the problem is not paradise. The problem is myself, my wretched self.' (2001, p.38)

This self-conscious dissatisfaction with herself is never explained in the text, but connected with the unnamed “it” whose cause Maryna wishes to remain enigmatic.

The intentional nature of the project is based more in the belief that to live in America is to enact a realization of ideals. Both *Blonde* and *In America* deconstruct the meaning of the “American dream.” They ask what forms the idyllic notions that are invested in those who belong to America? What are the ideologies that fuel these notions? And the characters’ personalities display a willingness to subscribe to these ideologies even if only on a superficial level because of personal needs. Within *In America* this is shown in the explanations for travelling to the “New World” which the characters give:

‘Because people should live in harmony, as Fourier says, though-it must be very uplifting from all that I’ve heard-I confess that each time I try to read his article on work as the key to human happiness my eyes start to-’ ‘Then forget about Fourier! Shakespeare,’ Maryna said. ‘Think of Shakespeare.’ ‘But there’s everything in Shakespeare.’ ‘Exactly. As in America. America is meant to mean everything.’ (2001, p.91)

Characteristic of all the characters’ motivations, it is a general form of idealism that drives the characters’ interest in the journey rather than a method of realizing a fulfillment of those ideals. The explanations of the characters, whose voices are interlocked with Maryna’s own, are filled with the conviction that by naming their desires within the intentional space of America their ideals will be realized. By saying “we are a commune” or even “we are going to form a commune” a transformation takes place. The

words used to label these desires function for the characters as the realization of the ideals by their very utterance.

The characters use language to perform the transformations they desire. This is accomplished through the ability of words to change the conditions by which their reality is understood. The physical transformation is what follows after the words are spoken. J. L. Austin explains this phenomenon in his explanation of the performative:

The uttering of the word is, indeed, usually a, or even the, leading incident in the performance of the act (of betting or what not), the performance of which is also the object of the utterance, but it is far from being usually, even if it is ever, the sole thing necessary if the act is to be deemed to have been performed. (1975, p.8)

The realization of a commune cannot take place for the characters only by naming the idea, or even the fact, that they are part of one; but it also demands the physical creation of it. This does not mean that the change will be performed successfully and in the course of the narrative the performance is unsuccessful. These cases are what Austin terms as “unhappy.” (1975, p.14) *In America* maps the failure of the characters’ commune. The failure of the commune is not only caused by a physical inability to maintain it, but also through its definition as a theatrical performance that is specifically Maryna’s play.

There are many novels that might trace the realization of what is termed an “unhappy” performative. After the pronouncement that a couple is man and wife in a novel, it might trace the subsequent action that causes the marriage to fail. *In America* focuses on such an example with the formation of a commune, but it complicates the issue of the failure of the performative to fulfill what it was intended to do, by its

emphasis on theatricality. Maryna attempts to create a character for the enactment her ideals:

I can change, I know it. Already I am no longer 'the same person.' Illusion of an actor, you will say: of one used to changing characters, putting on the garments of another. Well, I shall show you that it can be done *without* being on a stage! (2001, p.123)

As I have already suggested, Maryna's self-consciousness allows her to maintain her own narrative voice, a voice that understands the author and the other character's perspectives. She is able to invent a character with these perspectives to function in the new role of pioneer, although a very domestic one. The truth and faith she maintains for this role however are only possible if she is conscious of being viewed.

Rather than present the historical experiment of the commune as a purely ideological effort, Sontag elaborated on the theatrical emphasis found in the memoirs of Modjeska. Within her narrative that records with hindsight her experiences in America, she treats elements of her new life in America as props for the performance of new theatrical role. She describes her first day in their new California home: "My housekeeping days began. At seven next morning, attired in one of my pretty aprons which I had brought from Europe, I went to the kitchen." (1969, p.288) She emphasizes the details of her life as an exaggeration of the state of being a housewife. No doubt Sontag picked up on what she has described in her analysis of the sensibility of "camp" as "one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon." (1966, p.277) Sontag describes in her essay on "camp" how this particular view of social behavior emphasises the artifice and refuses any suggestion of content. Maryna's invention of her pioneering

character is suffused with this sensibility. In this exaggeration of her actions as a performance the language used to describe her life in America takes on a double-sided meaning of description and pleasure in the artifice of the thing described. It also creates a feeling of split identity as Maryna describes:

Two Jacks. Two Ryszards. Two Bogdans, I do not doubt. And two Marynas, I am sure. Tell me that you don't feel you are acting in a play. Tell me there isn't one Maryna who is kneading dough for bread, washing clothes in the round wooden tub in the yard, weeding the vegetable plots, and the other, standing beautifully tall as only you do, who gazes at herself with amazement and incredulity. Tell me. I'll not believe you. (2001, p.206)

The emphasis that suffuses Maryna's narration of her life is always on the performance of the action rather than the emotional habitation of the action.

It comes as no surprise in the story that the commune fails because of the language used to emphasise the artifice of the journey. However, it is hardly a failure for Maryna who is able to establish a new life for herself in American theatre. She inhabits not only a new livelihood after the commune's demise, but a new American sensibility as described by Ryszard: "DOESN'T IT SEEM very American, he said to Julian, to whom he reported this exchange (though not its setting) on his return to the hotel, that America has its America, its better destination where everyone dreams of going?" (2001, p.120) The implication in this sensibility is that there is never a point of completion, but a constant sense of reinvention at which Maryna is particularly adept. She formulates a new American identity, changing her name to Marina Zalenska, a Russian name, but easier to pronounce for Americans, and speaks English as fluently as possible. She does go back to

Poland, but her travels back weren't in recognition of a failure, but as Lorna Sage describes in her review that "She had found, in fact a further west, west of the west, for she acquired a new language and a new identity." (in Times Literary Supplement, 2 June 2000) In this way Maryna is able to redefine herself outside of the constraints of the intentional life she created in her initial journey to America.

Maryna is in many ways as susceptible as Norma Jeane was in *Blonde* to becoming lost in divisions of herself through how she is observed. At one point in the novel Maryna falls ill out of an overlyconscious sense of being watched:

There were faces enough peering out of the dark knots in the beams that supported the ceiling, which seemed to be just above her, pressing down on her, shimmering, scintillating. All she wanted was to be left alone. To vomit. To sleep. (2001, p.72)

Inanimate objects physically observe her. The world seems to collapse on to her because she is unable to escape from what has come to define her. Yet, she is able to later find a method to sustain an unfinished view of herself:

Happiness depended on not being trapped in your individual existence, a container with your name on it. You have to forget yourself, your container. You have to attach yourself to what takes you outside yourself, what stretches the world. (2001, p.216)

The process of reinvention serves not as an escape from herself but a way in which to renegotiate a better understanding of the world.

This does not mean Maryna is able to live without a degree of delusion in her life. The other characters in the novel are tied in with Maryna's pioneering performance. Although they declare their own reasons for going to America, they are "acting out her vision." (2001, p.153) Through letters and diary entries the characters are able to maintain a separate life outside of the one she devises for them. In Bogdan's diary entries he records his repressed homosexual feelings that undercut Maryna's belief in his utter devotion to her as a husband. The characters may be left to perform for each other, acting out ideal visions for one another. The final chapter contains only Maryna and Edwin Booth and is structured as a scene in a play:

I think, let me see, I think I shall impersonate Edwin Booth. What an outstanding idea... However, don't think me too tyrannical, I'd prefer...tonight...that you not play Marina Zalenska. [*Fetches a bottle of whiskey from a cabinet.*] Could you consider it? Just to humor me. Surely you have a few other selves in your repertory. (2001, pp.371-372)

Edwin gives a long monologue and it is structured as if it is a dramatic piece including stage directions. This leaves the question open as to whether life may be viewed as anything but a performance. Maryna, who is conspicuously silent throughout Edwin's speech only speaks a few words toward the end telling him to stop. The curtain may only be dropped on her command.

In America plays with the form of Modjeska's memoir using a postmodern novelistic form to create a new version of the story. The characters are not intended to represent historical figures, but are created as unapologetic fictitious beings that invent personalities for themselves. Their reinvention does not indulge in the desire to acquire

an iconic personality, but demonstrate the intentional nature of being. Sontag uses language to form the basis of these intentions that continually fall short of a satisfying actualization. Maryna's renaming of herself is not only a strategic career choice, but it *does* something to her relation to the world. There is an agreement made in the vociferation of naming that creates a physical transformation in the ways the characters will proceed to interact with each other. Maryna is aware that this form of agreement can manipulate those around her to draw out desired reactions. However, the physical result of these intended interactions are not always successfully realized. Performances end "unhappily" not only in the dramatic sense, but in the way these agreements of linguistic construction are broken.

Conclusion: Curtain Call

I have discussed in the previous chapters how *Blonde* and *In America* both focus on reinventing the lives of famous historical women using forms that involve ideas about performance. These ideas transform the method of creating a historically sealed characterization of a self as in a biography. The novels make obvious references to the historical lives of the fictional women they portray and relate the events of their lives in a chronological order using detailed references to the historical period. An example of this is in chapter zero of *In America*, “I wondered if the flue was drawing as well as it should, knowing that I could expect nothing better of the gas jets, unevenly fed and therefore leaking and sputtering as they always did then.” (2001, p.14) This depiction of the atmosphere is meant to produce a sense of verisimilitude for the reader who is brought back to a specific historical time. However, this realistic frame that is used in historical novels is subverted by the authors’ method of characterization. The implementation of a self-conscious understanding of the other character’s perspectives and their own status as celebrity figures in the characters of Norma Jeane and Maryna allow them the ability to revise their past through the performance of the narrative the authors create. This transforms the text’s presentation of a historical reality by filtering the narrative through fragmented layers of perspectives. In a completely fictional invented space, it assembles from these perspectives a series of ideas which the characters can perform for the reader.

The performances are constructed in different ways in each novel. The voices in the narration of *Blonde* work fluidly sometimes invoking the author’s, Norma Jeane’s and an imagined audience’s voice simultaneously. This overly packed narration frequently leads to the equivalent of an emotional breakdown where the words on the page are irregularly separated and sentences become jumbled and fragmented. The language

performs in the Modernist sense of an aesthetic manipulation of form to create the sense of an emotional reality. Yet, by the terms I defined in the introduction, the work is distinctly postmodernist through its acquisition of cultural images in a self-reflexive mode. This is seen, for example, in the use of “marks” of Norma Jeane representing her signature, lipstick kiss imprint and graffiti spray “WHORE” on the page. (2000, p.420 & p.681) The text’s break from a conventional grammatical form functions on several levels. It imagines Norma Jeane’s consciousness as she descends into a form of madness. It portrays the violent clash of the ideologies in an American sensibility. Additionally, language is shown as incapable of effectively relating the emotional sincerity of the character’s consciousness. These levels of narration intensify the irony of Norma Jeane’s relation to her recollection of her past as a performance viewed in a movie rather than something with which she was physically involved. They play on the myth of her displaced childhood and the sense that she is a child of Hollywood. However, the narration always indicates that she is a creation of the author and, through the author’s method, a self-conscious creation of her own. In this way she is both a creation in the mythic sense and the literal.

In America is similar with its portrayal of its subject as a construct by the author and a further construct of her own through her pioneering journey to America as I have described in the second chapter. Maryna’s performance is similar to Norma Jeane’s in its methodical creation of a character to be inhabited in real life. Yet, it differs in the narrative form it is portrayed by simulating historical documentation such as diary entries and letters. It presents these documents with analytical asides by the author alluding to the psychology of the characters. Events are not emotionally reimagined, as in *Blonde*,

but constructed using elements of the conventional historical novel's form in order to question the levels of self-identification of the characters. The consciousness of the characters influences the documentation form so that it is not representing the reality of the characters but the methods in which they are constructing a new identity. Apart from serving as a way to relate plot information, the historical documents like the real memoirs of Helena Modjeska illuminate the identification of new details in the character's life with a new conception of their identity. This is related through the author's framing of the documents within a third person narration that questions the nature of selfhood and theatricality. In both novels issues surrounding the nature of being in relation to intention and societal influence are evident, but it is beyond the scope of my analysis to speculate on the philosophical and psychological issues involved in this.

The central issue of my analysis has been to discuss the reasons why it would be a mistake to read *Blonde* and *In America* as mimetic representations of reality. This critical interpretation implies that the novel's writing is stylistically reactionary. The authors are obviously incorporating established literary styles, but it is in a form of pastiche that reconditions the modes to issues raised in the text. By viewing the lives of these historical women through this form, the women's presence in the novel is reconstituted from an attempt to factually render their lives to an evaluation of the ideological drives that motivated what we understand to be their lives. It additionally raises issues surrounding the meaning of performance in both theatre and in film and its relation to self-perception and self-evaluation in life. Norma Jeane and Maryna perform for us as if they were on stage but only through the innovative literary techniques of their authors.

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