Beauty: Liberation and/or Confinement in *The Life and Loves of a She Devil* by Fay Weldon

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Abstract

This essay critically examines the transformation of the protagonist, Ruth Patchett, in Fay Weldon's novel *The Life and Loves of a She Devil* (1983). The transformation that Ruth undergoes can be viewed in two ways: both in terms of her role in society and her physical appearance. Initially a submissive housewife, Ruth evolves into an independent businesswoman who undergoes extensive cosmetic procedures to conform to prevailing beauty standards. This article reveals, through an analysis of Ruth's liberation from traditional domestic obligations and her response to societal constructs of beauty, the marginalization she experiences as a result of her deviation from societal norms. Ruth's rebellion against the idealized attributes of a housewife reflects her pursuit of qualities associated with appealing femininity. Hence, this article highlights how Ruth transforms herself into a seductive object of the male gaze to remake herself into a powerful subject. Through this transformative journey, the article elucidates the interplay between societal ideals of beauty, female liberation, and implications on personal fulfilment. Although Ruth's transformation into the 'ideal' woman endorses the patriarchal codes of ideal and standardised beauty, this essay argues that the same transformation reverses the process to reveal how female empowerment can be achieved through the manipulation of standards.

Keywords: beauty, confinement, liberation, transformation, *The Life and Loves of a She Devil*

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Fay Weldon'ın *Bir Dişi Şeytanın Hayatı ve Aşkları* Romanında Özgürleştirici ve/ya Sınırlayıcı bir Kavram olarak Güzellik

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Öz

Bu makale, Fay Weldon'ın *Bir Dişi Şeytanın Hayatı ve Aşkları* (1983) isimli romanındaki Ruth Patchett karakterinin dönüşümünü eleştirel bir şekilde incelemektedir. Ruth'un dönüşümü hem toplumsal rolü hem fiziksel görünümü açısından çift katmanlı olarak incelenebilir. Başlangıçta itaatkâr bir ev kadınını temsil eden Ruth, yaygın olarak kabul görmüş güzellik standartlarına uyum sağlamak için estetik ameliyatlar yoluyla fiziksel bir değişim geçiren bağımsız bir iş kadınına dönüşür. Bu makale, Ruth'un geleneksel ev işleri sorumluluğundan kurtuluşu ve toplumsal güzellik kavramına verdiği tepkiyi inceleyerek toplumsal normların dışına çıkması sebebiyle ana karakterin dışlanma deneyimini ortaya koymaktadır. Ruth'un idealize edilen ev kadını özelliklerine karşı isyanı, aynı zamanda çekici ve büyüleyici bir kadınlık kavramıyla ilişkilendirilen nitelikler arayışında olduğunu da yansıtmaktadır. Bu doğrultuda bu makale, ana karakterin kendisini erkek gözünde çekici bir nesneye dönüştürmesini tekrar bir özne olmak için nasıl kullandığını vurgulamaktadır. Ruth'un dönüşüm yolculuğu aracılığıyla, çalışma, toplumsal güzellik idealleri, kadın özgürleşmesi ve kişisel tatmin arasındaki etkileşimi gösterir. Ruth, fiziksel acılar yaşasa da mutluluk arayışı ailevi, maddi, sosyal ve cinsel başarı vaat eden bir arayıştır. Ruth'un ideal kadına dönüşümü, ideal ve standart güzelliğin ataerkil kodlarına hizmet ediyor gibi görünse de, bu çalışma aynı dönüşümün, bu standartların tersine kullanılarak kadının güçlenmesini ortaya çıkardığını ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: güzellik, sınırlama, özgürleştirme, dönüşüm, *Bir Dişi Şeytanın Hayatı ve Aşkları*

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Introduction[1]

This essay provides an analysis of the multifaceted paradigm of beauty within cultural and literary frameworks. The analysis encompasses definitional attributes, connotative implications, inherent signification, as well as the dynamic processes of construction, deconstruction, and subsequent reconstruction. Karen Callaghan describes beauty as being "a pleasurable experience, and yet also a source of pain and rejection as women contort (or fail to contort) their bodies and selves according to restrictive, idealized images" (1994, vii). Callaghan's claim highlights how women struggle to conform to idealised standards within the two aspects of the concept of beauty: pleasure and pain. In a similar vein, Eleanor Heartney asserts that "beauty is inseparable from all

1 This article is a fully revised version of a part of the MA thesis titled *A Cultural Representation of Women in Fay Weldon's The Fat Woman's Joke and The Life and Loves of a She Devil* in 2008 under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Aytül ÖZÜM, within the scope of Hacettepe University English Language and Literature MA Program.

that is best and worst in human experience" (2000, xv). This common ground between Callaghan and Heartney is also explored by the novelist Fay Weldon, who addresses the themes of the body and beauty in her works, specifically in *The Fat Woman's Joke* (1967) and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983). Both novels delve into the ways in which female protagonists use their bodies to simultaneously conform to, while also challenging, societal ideals. Weldon wrote *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* in the 1980s, a period marked by the prevalence of contrasting philosophical perspectives which ranged "from realism to deconstruction, and from humanism to anti-humanism" (Kenyon 1988, 6). Accordingly, Weldon's perspective on the shift from construction to deconstruction, and from a humiliated she-devil to a modified but idealised woman, can be observed in her main character, Ruth Patchett. Ruth undergoes emancipation from the characterization of a "she-devil" which is imposed by her husband to the establishment of her own interpretation of what it means to be a "she-devil".

In the novel, Ruth is described as being an unattractive housewife and is called "a She-Devil" by her husband, Bobbo. She discovers that her husband is having an affair with Mary Fisher, a beautiful romance novel writer, for whom Bobbo leaves the house. Driven by the desire for transformation and empowerment, Ruth undergoes drastic physical, financial, and social changes to take revenge and regain her husband. She undergoes a twofold transformation: first in terms of personality, in that she changes from a subservient wife, who adheres to conventional expectations, to a self-sufficient and self-reliant entrepreneur. The other aspect of her transformation is physical as her initially grotesque appearance is modified in accordance with the prevailing ideals of attractiveness. Weldon describes Ruth's transformation in terms of her defiance of her husband and rejection of domestic obligations, as well as through cosmetic surgery which aims to attain widely considered perceptions of a flawless, beautiful woman.

There are several stages to Ruth's transformation, the first of which is the epiphanic moment she experiences when she is called a "she-devil" and is left for a more successful and beautiful woman. The next stage is her embracing the role of 'she-devil', setting fire to the house, and leaving her children with her husband and his new lover. She then renames herself Vesta Rose and obtains "two certificates of general education, one in English and one in mathematics, for which she paid $50 each" (Weldon 1983, 126). She starts working at a hospital and later sets up the Vesta Rose Employment Agency to help "women who had good skills but lacked worldly confidence after years of domesticity" find employment (Weldon 1983, 138). The whole process is not just a struggle for success but turns into a form of self-torture while trying to punish Bobbo, her husband. Ruth arranges some financial resettlements for the irregularities of Bobbo. While he is put on trial, Ruth sneaks into Judge Henry Bissop's house. Having learned the judge's secret fetish, under the name Polly Patch, she allows herself to be beaten by the judge so he can spend "pleasurable, if hardworking, hours with Polly by night, binding her hand and foot to the bed, and beating her with an old-fashioned bamboo carpet beater" (Weldon 1983, 176). Ruth's physical transformation begins first with her teeth, and she tells the judge that "pain and pleasure were one, and that to do what one willed was the whole of the law" (Weldon 1983, 178). The teeth are followed by the jaw, then the whole body is reshaped with weight loss and procedures such as the shortening of her arms and legs. Ultimately, all of these financial and physical changes provide her with financial wealth, physical archetypal beauty, and the regaining of her husband. She also takes revenge on her husband's lover Mary Fisher by usurping her. Her previous grotesque appearance and monstrous physicality are replaced by grotesque behaviour and a monstrous personality. In this way, Ruth liberates herself from her husband's defining her as a "she-devil" and assumes her definition.

There are two possible ways of interpreting the protagonist's

transformational journey: she is either a victim of societal standards or a rebel who liberates herself from these norms. Weldon portrays her anti-heroine in such an exaggerated, satirical, and playful manner that limiting her to being a mere reflection of Mary Fisher or Bobbo would be inadequate. This essay therefore argues that the protagonist's journey of self-recreation is a response to societal standards of beauty. In addition, her liberation from the confines of marriage represents an act of rebellion against the domestic responsibilities and physical attributions that are imposed on women. Weldon's playful and sarcastic treatment of gender roles is also explored by arguing that Ruth exemplifies the Galatea archetype without any Pygmalion influence and that there is a metaphorical link between the female body and female power. To this end, the protagonist's embodiment of the paradigm by undergoing a process of self-transformation into an attractive object of male attention to reconstitute herself as a powerful subject is explored. While Ruth's transformation into the archetypal woman may initially appear to conform to patriarchal norms of idealized and standardized aesthetics, this essay contends that this very transformation unveils female empowerment through the subversion of these standards.

Beauty and/or Pain: Liberation or Captivation

The central concern of the novel revolves around body image and its impact on a woman's societal roles, physical attributes, and the expression of individuality, particularly manifested through a subversive attitude. The rebellious act of cosmetic surgery which Ruth undergoes addresses the concepts of the ideal body and ideal beauty. However, as stated by Heartney, "beauty can be a double-edged sword – as capable of destabilizing rigid conventions and restrictive behavioural models as it is of reinforcing them" (2000, xv). In relation to this double-edged sword, the novel can be seen to be embracing both

standpoints. Researchers such as Susie Orbach (1978), Naomi Wolf (1991), Susan Bordo (1993), Sander L. Gilman (1999), and Kathy Davis (1991, 1997, 1999, 2003) all consider different aspects of the connection between body and femininity. The first of these, Susie Orbach, wrote *Fat is a Feminist Issue* in 1978, which is close to the date of publication of Weldon's novel. Although Orbach focuses on eating rather than on cosmetic surgery, the two books share similar concerns. In an explanation of her motivation in writing her book, Orbach (2018) explains her belief for the women in those years: "Emotionally schooled to see our value as both sexual beings for others and midwives to their desires, we found ourselves often depleted and empty, and caught up in a kind of compulsive giving. Eating became our source of soothing." In the first decades of the twenty-first century, Orbach emphasises how the issue of body and eating problems has reappeared rather than disappeared. She points to how young women are bombarded by fashion magazines, cosmetic surgery apps, images, and the like on social media which "is an often desperate search for approval, for safety, for body acceptance – a frequently elusive quest." Her book, as is the case with Weldon's novel, is as significant and relevant today as it was in 1978. In this regard, both Orbach's book and Weldon's novel deal with body-obsessed norms and impositions, especially for women.

As with Orbach's connection between body, beauty, and woman, Susan Bordo also analyses the female body. By referring to Michel Foucault's expression, Bordo claims that "female bodies become docile bodies – bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, 'improvement'" (2003, 166). She further clarifies by saying that "[t]hrough the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress," women "are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification" (2003, 166). Bordo concludes her article by stating that she sees female "bodies as a site of struggle, where [women] must work to keep [their] daily practices in the service of resistance to gender

domination, not in the service of docility and gender normalization" (2003, 184). Bordo's amalgamation of these two opposites, the docile body and self-modification, represents Ruth's unifying submission and subversion of beauty concepts and beautification techniques in her own body. Bordo's standpoint on the cultural discourses on beauty is summed up by Kathy Davis: "In Bordo's view, the 'fashion-beauty complex' is central to understanding how gender inequalities are continually reasserted and recuperate, even in the face of all attempts to undermine them" (1991, 28). In other words, Bordo claims that conforming to sexist standards of beauty produces docile female bodies, and she supports women to resist these standards. As a counterpoint to Bordo's argument, Kathy Davis argues that these same standards are to be used by women in challenging them, as Ruth does in Weldon's novel. In Davis's studies on cosmetic surgery, of which *The Life and Loves of a She Devil* is the inspiration, she argues that "cosmetic surgery might be a way for some women within the limitations of their present situation to end their suffering. When viewed against this backdrop, the decision could conceivably become a moment of triumph – a moment when a woman turns the tables and does something to help herself" (1991, 22).

Like Davis, Gilman is also concerned with cosmetic surgery, the female body, and its role in either being self-destructive or self-empowering for women. Gilman (1999) focuses on the connection between the aesthetic body, cosmetic surgery, and the human psyche, while Davis (1999) emphasises cosmetic surgery as a means for women to express their agency and empowerment. This is also a theme of this essay in which the views of both Davis and Gilman are considered in terms of the correlation between standards of beauty and the body to contend that these same standards can be individually empowering for women, as demonstrated by Ruth in Weldon's novel.

The initial depiction of Ruth as the conventional archetype of the

submissive housewife is deconstructed when her husband dismissively calls her a "she-devil." This name compels her to crave power: "I want, I crave, I die to be a part of that other erotic world, of choice and desire and lust. It isn't love I want; it is nothing so simple. What I want is to take everything and return nothing. What I want is power over the hearts and pockets of men" (Weldon 1983, 25-26). Ruth's subsequent transformation into a powerful and subversive individual is a direct consequence of her husband Bobbo's aggressive and judgmental behaviour. This is seen in his denouncement of her: "I see you at last as you really are. You are a third-rate person. You are a bad mother, a worse wife, and a dreadful cook. In fact, I don't think you are a woman at all. I think that what you are is a she-devil!" (Weldon 1983, 47). Bobbo describes the characteristics of an idealised woman by condemning his wife as "a bad mother, a worse wife, and a dreadful cook" (Weldon 1983, 47), thereby accentuating the idealized femininity of a great mother, wife, and a cook through contrasting imagery. Ruth is expected to be the epitome of motherhood, meticulously attending to the needs of her children, as well as being a model wife, dutifully serving her husband, and conforming to his wishes without dissent. However, being called a "she-devil" creates an epiphanic moment for Ruth. She thinks "This is wonderful! This is exhilarating! If you are a she-devil, the mind clears at once. The spirits rise. There is no shame, no guilt, no dreary striving to be good" (Weldon 1983, 48). In this way, her transformation begins, in both a monstrous and a glamorous way:

> I take off my clothes. I stand naked. I look. I want to be changed.
>
> Nothing is impossible, not for she-devils.
>
> Peel away the wife, the mother, find the woman, and there the she-devil is.
>
> Excellent!

> Glitter-glitter. Are those my eyes? They're so bright they light up the room. (Weldon 1983, 49)

Ruth subsequently enters a new phase in her life in which she decides to honestly embrace her femininity by freeing herself from the roles of wife and mother. After her husband, Bobbo, leaves her to be happily with Mary Fisher, Ruth sets fire to the house and abandons her children, Nicola and Andy, with their father and Mary Fisher. It is through this action that Ruth finally emancipates herself from the confines of domesticity. The boundaries of the house represent the constraints and expectations of a housewife that have oppressed her. Virginia Woolf would name such an action as "killing the Angel in the House". Woolf (1970) describes this angel through reference to Coventry Patmore's well-known poem: "She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily" (237). Woolf emphasises how her desire to write was in reaction to the pressure from this angel: "Had I not killed her she would have killed me" (238). Similar to this symbolic moment of killing the angel through writing, Ruth kills the "angel in the house" by leaving her children and burning down the house.

Tillie Olsen (1972) describes another angel, "who must assume the physical responsibilities for daily living, for the maintenance of life" (11). Olsen argues that women writers have many challenges to face, and unlike male writers, do not have anyone to take care of the house and the children. In other words, they have two angels: "the maintenance of life angel and the angel in the house" (15). In Weldon's novel, Ruth must kill both angels to completely reinvent herself, even if doing so means creating a devil. McCormack (2021) expounds on the monstrous woman in her assertion:

> Women who write or make art are thought to be monstrous because doing this requires breaking the social code that expects women to do the lion's share of cleaning, caring, nurturing and cooking; monstrous

> because it requires sloughing the snake-like skin of femininity to reveal the unreconstructed monster who won't be the domestic worker. (167)

McCormack's description applies to Ruth as the word "femininity" refers to the roles allotted to women in domesticity. A symbol of this is how the moment the flames ignite the house represents the beginning of Ruth's journey towards freedom. This self-proclaimed liberation initiates both a series of physically demanding and painful actions and a transformative process.

Ruth's transformation leads to the creation of a new identity characterised by greater independence, a more callous appearance, and an increased thirst for revenge. It is through this transformation that Ruth not only abandons her maternal responsibilities and home but also, motivated by her relentless quest for physical perfection, becomes romantically entangled with other individuals. According to Lana Faulks (1998), to acquire power, the protagonist feels compelled to suppress her empathy for others and manipulate people for selfish ends. Ruth, who has been emotionally traumatised by the unkindness of others, adopts a harsh and uncompromising strategy to gain an advantage in a society that has marginalised her for being insufficiently physically attractive (Faulks 1998, 49). Ultimately, Ruth becomes a cross between Mary Fisher and Bobbo, a successful, beautiful, and self-centred woman (like Mary Fisher) as well as a flirtatious and manipulative entrepreneur (like Bobbo). Her desire for revenge empowers Ruth and provides various privileges such as wealth, beauty, triumph, and the ability, like Mary Fisher, to write a novel. She expresses her need for revenge as follows: "I cause Bobbo as much misery as he ever caused me, and more. I try not to, but somehow it is not a matter of male or female, after all; it never was: merely power" (277). Ruth articulates her transformation by stating that she is inflicting on Bobbo what he has inflicted on her. She possesses all, while he possesses none. Their roles have been reversed, and what she once was, he has now become (Weldon

1983, 277).

Her decision to undergo physical transformation signifies the initial step towards a corresponding mental transformation. Patricia Waugh (1989) provides a comprehensive explanation of this transformation by illustrating Ruth's symbolic act of metaphorically "killing" her repulsive physical appearance and subservient mentality. This act results in the emergence of a more feminine body and a dominant, cruel, and "monstrous" psychology (Waugh, 1989, 93). Ruth faces significant challenges in her quest for physical and mental transformation, mostly due to her ingrained adherence to cultural norms which dictate her responsibilities as a devoted mother, wife, and woman. These expectations, which serve to satisfy both societal standards and her sense of self, contribute to the gruelling nature of her journey. Ruth acknowledges the difficulty of this endeavour, stating that the roots of self-blame and ingrained patterns of good behaviour run deep in her living flesh and require a violent pulling out that leaves behind wounds (Weldon 1983, 56). Over time, she succumbs to the social norms set by a society that has marginalized her, all in the pursuit of acceptance, and desires to be physically admired by men and to be appreciated as a successful woman. Faulks observes that Ruth's motivations reflect the power structures present within society and are driven by selfishness and a disregard for others (1998, 49). Gradually, Ruth turns into the mirror image of those who criticised her. Mary Fisher dies, and in the final chapter, Ruth comments on the servant Garcia and Bobbo as follows:

> Garcia comes often to my bedroom at night, knocking and whispering with love. Just occasionally I let him in. I make sure Bobbo knows, and suffers; that is the only pleasure I take in Garcia's body. To join with him is a political, not a sexual act, for me if not for him. How emotional men are!
>
> Bobbo loves me, poor confused creature that he has become, pouring

> my tea, mixing my drinks, fetching my bag. He has us both in the one flesh: the one he discarded, the one he never needed at all. Two Mary Fishers. (Weldon 1983, 277)

Ruth has become sarcastic, uncaring, and manipulative. She has transformed into a genderless, power-obsessed, and vengefully monstrous being. However, she has simultaneously become a strong woman who has struggled to reconstruct herself in social, physical, and emotional terms.

Although Sara Martin describes the later version of Ruth as being a "pathetic, grotesque moral monster" (1999, 8) and Lana Faulks claims that she "loses her own humanity" (1998, 51), Pentney finds the story more humorous and "both liberating and anxiety-ridden for its familiarity". Pentney also feels that is a "serious inquiry into the power relations between men and women, and a commentary on the ineffectual legacy of modern definitions of moral worth" (2009, 91). At the end of the novel, Ruth has reached the point when she berates Bobbo for his "thickening eyelids" for which "he could have plastic surgery and be young again, but he would have to ask [her] for the money" (Weldon 1983, 277). During her criticism of Bobbo, Ruth exclaims: "How weak people are! How they simply accept what happens, as if there were such a thing as destiny, and not just a life to be grappled with" (Weldon 1983, 277). As such, she demonstrates both her power and the self-determination she has gained over her life.

Ruth appears to be emancipating herself from the societal expectations of traditional gender roles, although her self-constructed sense of liberation is not a complete manifestation of independent agency as it has certain constraints and limitations. As Waugh (1989) argues, Weldon's novel effectively portrays a protagonist who believes she has liberated herself from the prevailing economic and social hierarchies. Paradoxically, however, this newfound freedom leads her to pursue a romantic ideal that ultimately oppresses her.

Pentney describes her transformation as follows: "She sheds her womanliness like the skin of a snake and, in the process, amputates her maternal love, her sexual ambivalence, and her desire for reciprocal love. In doing so, she gains power, wilfulness, and an almost god-like omniscience" (2009, 83). Ruth's motivation revolves primarily around self-reinvention and the endurance of arduous procedures driven by a singular objective: to take revenge on Mary Fisher, to inflict suffering on her husband, and ultimately to reclaim him as her own.

Galatea Re-Moulding without any Pygmalion

Beauty has become another ideal for the twentieth-century woman to aspire to, along with qualities such as being a perfect housewife and an excellent mother. This phenomenon, aptly characterized by Wolf (1991, 9) as the 'beauty myth', perpetuates women's dependence on external validation for the cultivation of their self-worth (Peach 1998, 172). Wolf asserts that "[w]e are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement: the beauty myth" (1991, 10). Thanks to the promotion of the slim female body through extensive media, magazines, modelling and visual advertising, particularly since the 1960s, women have increasingly internalized this ideal of beauty in trying to achieve the prescribed ideal of the archetypal woman. Wolf explains this shift as follows: "As women released themselves from the feminine mystique of domesticity, the beauty myth took over its lost ground, expanding as it wanted to carry on its work of social control" (1991, 10). Ruth's shift from entrapment in the house to entrapment in her body exemplifies Wolf's statement. However, this same entrapment is liberating for Ruth since she becomes an individual woman, instead of merely a wife and a mother.

The physical attributes and their restraining, yet defining role, are

considered by Ruth as she compares her physical attributes with those of Mary Fisher:

> […] I am six feet two inches tall, which is fine for a man, but not for a woman. I am as dark as Mary Fisher is fair, and have one of those jutting jaws that tall, dark women have, and eyes sunk rather far back into my face, and a hooked nose. My shoulders are broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy, and the muscles in my legs are well developed. My arms, I swear, are too short for my body. My nature and my looks do not agree. I was unlucky, you might think, in the great lottery that is woman's life. (Weldon 1983, 5)

The different depiction of the physical appearances of these two women creates a perception of perfect beauty in Mary Fisher and flawed beauty in Ruth. In other words, Ruth sees Mary as the embodiment of beauty, while she feels "other" in comparison. In their reading, Golban and Karip point to the anti-fairy tale structure in the novel in reference to the opposition between these two female characters and Ruth's hatred as being a form of "female rivalry" (2017, 225). That said, although they are portrayed as rivals or opposites, Mary Fisher and Ruth are both trapped in the oppositions of beauty and ugly, feminine and anti-feminine, ideal and non-ideal, with both of them using and abusing this "beauty myth" for their own benefit one way or another. This form of entrapment in their bodies is reminiscent of what Wolf describes as "the prisons" (1991, 184), yet is used by both characters for their own benefit, with one exploiting, and the other manipulating the myth.

As individuals want to attain aesthetic appeal, assimilate into a collective and gain societal validation, they inadvertently or intentionally adopt similarities to others. Kathy Davis critically examines this phenomenon of homogeneity and notes that a dominant standard, characterised by a white, Western model, emerges as a benchmark that many individuals consciously or

unconsciously wish to emulate (2003, 7). The global normalisation of cosmetic surgery is an example of the influence of Western beauty standards on general perceptions and the pursuit of beauty around the world. Grosz (1995) provides a detailed analysis of the process of corporeal transformation which sheds light on the ways in which the body is moulded and shaped by power. She explains how the body becomes malleable "to power, a machinic structure in which 'components' can be altered, adjusted, removed, or replaced" (Grosz 1995, 35). Plastic surgery is often used to alter and transform an individual's physical characteristics to comply with societal standards of aesthetic perception. Davis conducts interviews with women who have had or are planning to have, cosmetic surgery, and in her summarises of their replies she describes how she "learned of their despair, not because their bodies were not beautiful, but because they were not ordinary – 'just like everyone else'" (1999, 455). These women expect that these surgical procedures will bring social recognition and approval for their bodies as individuals. In the novel, Ruth's doctors question her demands on her body, which are primarily to resemble Mary Fisher using her as a model, with Dr. Black wondering whether this model is not too "ordinary":

> "If you have been extraordinary all your life," reflected Mr. Ghengis, "just to be ordinary must be wonderful."
>
> "But we don't want to make her like the others who come in here."
>
> "Why not?" asked Mr. Ghengis, who prided himself on his perception. "Since this is what she wants; all she has ever wanted is to be like other women." (Weldon 1983, 253)

While there are some who embrace ordinariness as a means of being accepted by the majority, there are others who view being ordinary as a threat to the distinctiveness of the individual. This process of becoming ordinary and normal via cosmetic surgeries is criticised for "homogenising beauty" among

different women and different ethnicities (Maine 2000, 138). Ruth's story is an example of the necessity of ordinariness in an environment where uniqueness in distinctive terms is unappreciated and even alienating. Davis also makes the point that "cosmetic surgery may be, first and foremost, about being ordinary, taking one's life in one's own hands, and determining how much suffering is fair" (1991, 23).

Gilman denotes the attempt to transform as "passing," a process in which individuals seek to become "differently visible" by gaining recognition as a member of a particular social group (1999, xx-xxi). The belief is that only by achieving the status of an ideal woman can one truly integrate into society and secure the approval of its members. Ruth's life is profoundly influenced by the opinions of others because "social acceptance lies in appearance," and because she feels she lacks physical beauty, "she cannot change her effect on people by simply changing her behaviour" (Faulks 1998, 48). There is a belief that merely adjusting one's mindset or adapting one's actions will prove insufficient to secure social acceptance and approval, and that physical appearance must also undergo transformation to maintain validation. This perception resonates for women around the world in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with many women being fixated on achieving a perfect physical appearance. This belief is largely driven by women's heightened awareness of being objects of scrutiny themselves and of participants in the scrutiny of others (Howson 2004, 97).

The dominant conceptualization of ideal femininity includes attributes such as thinness, fitness, attractiveness, sexiness, youthfulness, immaculate grooming, and fashionable dress. These attributes, or other externally imposed characteristics, relate primarily to the physical appearance of women. Waugh highlights this perspective by characterizing Ruth as "another heroine who believes that, given the impossibility of changing her culture, she may gain

acceptance within it only through changing herself. This means, specifically, changing her body" (1989, 191). This relates to the ideas presented in Sander Gilman's work entitled *Making the Body Beautiful*, in which a patient undergoes a fat removal operation, but a follow-up interview conducted twenty months later reveals that the patient is dissatisfied. Gilman is demonstrating that while it is possible to modify a physically unappealing body, fundamental mental discontentment may remain unchanged (1999, 231, 234). The various operations Ruth undergoes to transform her body from its current state to the desired are in a similar vein. In parallel with Gilman's ideas regarding aesthetic surgery, Ruth seeks to fulfil society's expectations by transforming herself physically. Despite the objections and warnings voiced by her aesthetic surgeon regarding the perils and futility of altering one's personality through physical modification, Ruth is adamant in her demands:

> I have an exceptionally adaptable personality [...] I have tried many ways of fitting myself to change my original body, and the world into which I was born, and have failed. I am no revolutionary. Since I cannot change the world, I will change myself. I am quite sure I will settle happily enough into my new body. (Weldon 1983, 236-7)

This excerpt exemplifies the mindset of women who choose to modify themselves, their internal sphere, their external image, or even their entire existence due to being unable to change the external environment, the social context, or what they encounter. It can be said that such individuals choose to pursue compatibility rather than embracing a "revolutionary" position.

Ruth challenges the humiliation and abandonment caused by not meeting beauty standards by using the same standards of beauty to exact revenge. She uses the same discourse to oppose her degradation and look down on Mary Fisher and Bobbo. By using the constructs of ideal beauty to first deconstruct, and then reconstruct herself, she defines beauty standards

through conformation rather than rejection. In other words, Ruth tries to make herself ordinary to defeat the social discourse that labels her as extraordinary. However, this process becomes paradoxical in that she becomes part of the same discourse by taking revenge through desiring appreciation. At the end of the novel, Ruth almost turns into Mary Fisher. Her "voice sounded as Mary Fisher's had, long ago" (261); she behaves as "once, Mary Fisher would have behaved" (261); she "look[s] out, as Mary Fisher looked out from her bedroom window" (266). However, reshaping herself into an imitation of Mary Fisher is not indicative of losing her identity; rather, it symbolizes a form of recreation, conveyed with a touch of sarcasm or even mockery.

After all the painful operations and procedures, the doctor tells his wife that the new Ruth reminds him of Venus: "She's like Venus, […] risen freshly from her conch shell. Enchanting!" (Weldon 1983, 257). The reference here is to Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1486), which depicts the newly born naked goddess Venus standing on a seashell. The tone of Catherine McCormack's (2021) description of Botticelli's Venus is critical: "Her skin is opaque and flawless, like polished marble. There are no bruises, no scars, no stretchmarks from hormonal growth spurts. Her breasts are high and round like apples, her stomach softly curved" (35-36). McCormack (2021) also emphasises how this painting strengthens the imposition of beauty standards on women as Botticelli's Venus "has represented the unrealistic, impossible-to-emulate standards of beauty that we continue to impose on women, and a suppression of their sexual maturity" (37). When the original mythological story is considered, it would be seen that "the enduring Western symbol of feminine beauty and sexuality did not come from the body of a woman but the sex organ of a man" (McCormack 2021, 37) since she was born from the testicles of the god Uranus that were thrown into the sea by his son, Cronos. Hence, the birth of Venus is a representative of both male creation (for the mythological origin) and that of the male gaze (for the artistic representation).

McCormack claims "Venus' violent genesis was cleaned up to make a stone goddess of bloodless and impenetrable beauty in Botticelli's archetypal image" (2021, 37). This is reminiscent of how Ruth's doctors, ignoring her pain, romanticise her change in artistic and aesthetic terms. It is expected that the pain and all the trouble she has undergone be disregarded.

In addition to Venus, there are also allusions in the novel to Frankenstein's monster, the Pygmalion myth, and Andersen's fairy tale. Weldon recites the fairy tale crafted by the Danish author, Hans Christian Andersen, to vividly portray the physical agony and suffering endured by Ruth. The tale centres around a mermaid who yearns to have legs to win the affection of a prince. However, when the mermaid does finally attain her legs, they cause her agonizing pain in which every movement is like "stepping on knives" (Weldon 1983, 173). In another allusion, Faulks argues that this story can be read as a reinterpretation of the Pygmalion myth (1998, 48) in that the idealisation of the protagonist's physical transformation recalls Pygmalion's sculpting of Galatea. The plastic surgeons reshaping and sculpting her flesh to provide Ruth with a new silhouette can be compared with Pygmalion's crafting of ivory. However, Ruth opposes this notion of 'being crafted' to characterize her metamorphosis, or rather, re-creation, as an independent act: "She-devils are beyond nature: they create themselves out of nothing" (Weldon 1983, 153). She vehemently refuses to place her trust in fate or divine order, asserting her agency to fashion a new image from the raw materials that she herself has forged. This resolute defiance of her Creator is manifested in her determination to remake herself (Weldon 1983, 186). When Mr. Genghis is frightened by a "violent electrical storm" before the second operation, he warns Ruth that she is going against God. However, when he exclaims "You're defying Him", she replies, "Of course He's angry, […] I am remaking myself" (269). Although Ruth does not accept any creator, the doctors do make self-appreciative allusions. Similar to Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Dr. Black and Mr. Ghengis invite Ruth to a party

where Mr. Ghengis praises her beauty, claiming that there is no one "more beautiful than his creature". However, he does not appreciate her nature when he states: "I am her Pygmalion, […] I made her, and she is cold, cold! Where is Aphrodite, to breathe her into life?" (Weldon 1983, 258).

Likewise, Mrs. Black, who is Dr. Black's wife, calls her husband Frankenstein and expects Ruth to be a monster "with the plates of her scalp pinned together with iron bolts" (Weldon 1983, 258). Indeed, the description of Ruth's healing process is reminiscent of the monster's rejuvenation scene in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*. The night Ruth stays at the hospital is described as follows: "Ruth hovered, moaning, drifting, on the edge of life and death. Another electrical storm seemed to stimulate her into life […]" (270). Dr. Black also refers to Ruth as "Frankenstein's monster" (271). The birth of Venus, Frankenstein's monster, and Pygmalion's ivory sculpture all represent the story of creation via a male creator or maker, and they are reframed in the novel by male characters, not by Ruth herself. Instead, Ruth likens her self-sacrifice and desire to be loved to how Anderson's little mermaid adapts herself to the prince's world. Like the mermaid's tale, Ruth's transformation is both difficult and painful. However, Ruth does not "wish to be free from the pain: [as] pain, she knew, was the healing agent. It marked the transition from her old life to her new one. She must endure it now, to be free of it hereafter" (268).

The Life and Loves of a She Devil is a fascinating interpretation of how the concept of beauty in society revolves around a pervasive mechanism of power and influence over women. The novel demonstrates how women possess the ability, through strategic manipulation, to undermine the pervading standards of attractiveness and bodily ideals and ultimately leverage them for their benefit. Ruth's reactionary response to the pervading standards is to pursue aesthetic surgery which represents a form of self-transformation

and reconfiguration of her own body. However, claiming power through the manipulation of these standards may also have a destructive result, as can be seen partially in the case of Ruth. Examples of women's destructive responses to preconceived and enforced ideals of body and beauty include self-harming behaviour and eating disorders such as anorexia or compulsive overeating. Valentine states that these conditions are "dramatic examples of internalized inferiority in women," which stem from a fear of negative scrutiny and criticism from others (1994, 120). Conversely, cosmetic surgery can be seen as an alternative approach to conforming to cultural ideals of beauty, but with an emphasis on self-transformation, rather than self-destruction.

Aesthetic surgery can be viewed as "both an expression of the objectification of the female body and an opportunity to become an embodied subject" (Davis 1997, 12). Although women may be perceived as objects of aesthetic appeal shaped to satisfy male preferences, they undoubtedly also possess the capacity to transform from objects to becoming individuals, by asserting their authority and power via the process of redefining their outward appearance. Hence, aesthetic procedures may both objectify and subjectify women, according to how they are used. The quest to uphold beauty through bodily modification, cosmetic products, and aesthetic surgeries, simultaneously entails the subversion and manipulation of conventional ideals of beauty. Davis's perspective on cosmetic surgery echoes this notion, highlighting its role in exposing the "victimization of women without having to be victims [themselves]" (1997, 178). Davis describes cosmetic surgery as a complex situation involving both subjugation and an act of self-empowerment, stating that it is "a complex dilemma: problem and solution, symptom of oppression and act of empowerment, all in one" (1997, 169). In an earlier article, Davis comments that "Ruth is both a victim of feminine beauty system and one of its most devastating critics" (1991, 29). This dilemma of oppression and empowerment can be observed in the transformation Ruth undergoes in the

novel. The body sculpting that Ruth employs as a tool can be interpreted as both a manifestation of resistance and defiance which grants women the agency to assert their definitions and interpretations of beauty.

Conclusion

To conclude, *The Life and Loves of a She Devil* depicts both the marginalization of a woman due to her physicality and her response to her exclusion from society. Despite Ruth's initial adherence to the traditional paradigm of having a husband and children, Bobbo's misbehaviour fuels Ruth's initial rejection of all the preconceptions of womanhood and motherhood. She resists the conventional attributes of the ideal housewife, choosing instead to embrace the qualities of a seductive and attractive woman. This leads her to undergo a series of extensive surgical procedures to achieve these desired aesthetic features. She thus participates in the normative process of idealisation by adhering to the portrayal of beauty as prescribed by men or society at large. Ruth's reactive demeanour results in physical anguish, but also promises domestic, financial, social, and sexual success. Towards the end of the novel, she states in the first-person narrative: "I am a lady of six foot two, who had tucks taken in her legs. A comic turn, turned serious" (278).

The body is subjected to a state of exploitation, manipulated as a means of taking revenge, responding to perceived grievances, rejecting established norms, or even seeking a radical reconfiguration of the prevailing standards of beauty by women. This becomes particularly significant when the female character finds herself confined to her own body. In resisting the entrenched paradigms of beauty, she assumes a position of authority over her bodily self. This perspective is vividly represented in Weldon's work, where physical and surgical interventions emerge not only as a manifestation of the quest for an ideal physique but also as a powerful means of challenging the impositions of

conventional physical attributes.

Ruth's counteractions to undermine established notions of beauty are inexorably guided by the very paradigms they seek to oppose. Indeed, beneath her reactionary efforts, she discerns the enduring hegemony of normative feminine attributes and standards of beauty. Her actions contain a fascinating array of paradoxical features. In her quest for transformation, she orchestrates her own corporeal destruction to reshape herself in the image of her husband's mistress, Mary Fisher. Striving to transcend the confines of the archetypal roles of a wife, mother, and housewife, her quest for emancipation is not realized unambiguously in the attainment of an autonomous identity; rather, the denouement ends in her transformation into an embodiment of the ideal woman in her husband's vision. However, her efforts to reshape herself in accordance with her husband's standards, as a strategic measure to wrest him away from the allure of Mary Fisher, ultimately propel Ruth into a newfound identity – one that is characterised by aesthetic allure, wealth, vindictiveness, and an unremorseful demeanour. Ruth's quest for external appreciation and salvation from being called a "she-devil" by means of transforming herself into a beauty creates a new type of woman who is both beautiful and monstrous. This essay concludes that beautification techniques can be empowering and liberating, and by using and abusing the patriarchal codes, the protagonist reverses the confinement of beauty constructs by reconstructing herself as an empowered woman who regains her husband, becomes rich and successful, and is respected by those who initially ignored her.

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