

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful



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Theatricalization of Female Experience: A Poststructuralist
Feminist Study of Susan Sontag's Fiction

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To my husband and my son, my best friends and my inspiration,

To my mother, for all she sacrificed,

And to my father, up there in the sky

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Abstract

The present dissertation is an attempt for depiction of female experience in the fictional works of Susan Sontag, the prominent American intellectual and literary figure, including her four novels, *The Benefactor*, *The Death Kit*, *The Volcano Lover* and *In America* and the short story collection, *I, Etcetera*. This research considers Sontag's subversive view of culture and art to shed a new light on the sensibility which her fictional work reflect, the sensibility suggested here to be entitled 'theatricalization of female experience' to demonstrate both the experience of the world in terms of style and the significance of female perspective as prominent features of these novels and stories. Studying this multi-faceted depiction of experience calls for an eclectic methodology; consequently, the researcher draws upon various views: examining the works along some propositions of poststructuralist feminist thought (more precisely, Luce Irigaray), making use of cultural conceptualizations of late modernist thought and considering modernist aesthetics views in the light of postmodernist thought to suggest a re-reading of Sontag's fiction. The arguments are categorized under three main headings: the question of identity and the constant restructuring of the self, performativity and the strategy of mimicry as a destabilizing agent, and, finally, the genealogy of the female voice created for the expression of the self and the unique form of verbalized silence. This deconstructive reading to depict female experience reveals the potential of Sontag's works for becoming models of unmediated and fluid aesthetic experience and the findings show the how the poststructuralist theoretical discussions on the three investigated areas are indicative of Sontag's revolutionary polemic.

Key Words: Theatricalization of Experience, Female identity, Mimicry, Verbalization of the Self, Irigaray, Sontag.

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***CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION***

1.1. General Background

Susan Sontag, a leading commentator, an internationally renowned writer and an active public figure addressed diverse subjects in her works. The varied works were not only reflections of her personal concerns but also the intellectual temperament of her time. Critical thinking and examination of the modernist tradition always fascinated this prolific writer whose works reflected a break with traditional criticism of the postwar period. Susan Sontag was born in 1933 in New York City. She gained great achievements as a student and eventually went to study at Chicago University and then Harvard. She won a scholarship to study at Oxford then moved to the Sorbonne and spent a very productive period in Paris. She repeatedly travelled to Europe in later years. Sontag worked as a lecturer in philosophy at the City College of New York and Sarah Lawrence was an instructor in the religion department of Columbia University for a while and then a writer-in-residence for one year at Rutgers. However, she often preferred to be far from intense academic positions although she was a sought for scholar. In the 1960s Sontag's connection with the *Partisan Review* brought her in close contact with the 'New York intellectuals'. She contributed to various other periodicals, including *New York Review of Books*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Nation*, and *Harper's*.

In 1968, Irving Howe published a famous article entitled "New York Intellectuals" in which he announced that a group of intellectuals (including himself) who had been writing from 30s to 60s are losing their influence and are being replaced by a younger generation who are ambitious and self-assured and are attracted to the idea of power (versus memories of defeat prevalent so far). This was the beginning of a new era, a 'new sensibility' that was reflected in Sontag's essays. "Sontag's criticism is of the utmost importance to the theorization of pop art during the sixties... centered on pop's collapsing of distinctions both between and within cultural

realms, its anonymity and its lack of ‘authorial presence’ or a ‘centered sense of personal identity’” (Harrison 172). Liam Kennedy believes that “Sontag stands as a singular if not a sole example” of a universalizing public intellectual (129).

Susan Sontag was a very active intellectual figure and a popular critic, a political activist and a critic of some policies of the American government. Among several other places, she travelled to Vietnam, Cuba and Bosnia (where a street is named after her). Sontag was diagnosed with blood cancer, a disease that she fought against for years with determination and used as an inspiration for some of her very important ideas, especially in *Illness and its Metaphors*. She died of the disease in 2004 at the age of 71.

Sontag’s works are numerous and of different types. She wrote novels and short stories, directed plays and short films, wrote articles, reviews and critical comments on stories, books, photographs, plays and movies, introductions to books, and, finally, essays that she is probably most famous for (most of which are gathered in the form of book collections). She wrote several essays published in different magazines and journals, the most famous ones that are collected to form books are: *Against Interpretation* (1966) that includes 26 essays, *styles of Radical Will* with 8, and *Under the Sign of Saturn* that has 7 essays. There are also a few other books that include some of her most prominent and best-known ideas: *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, *Illness as Metaphor* (1977) and *On Photography* (1973). She wrote of several thinkers and artists, introducing them, studying and analyzing different aspects of their lives and hardly missed major artistic and cultural events, operas, exhibitions or plays.

Her interest in aesthetic issues and formal features of creative work usually included social concerns. In his book, Roger Kimball names a part of the chapter on Sontag’s new sensibility “The art of intellectual impersonation” which highlights the focus on formal

properties of the works of art that is the major concern in her own works and states “Distinctions between high and low, good and bad, noble and base, were suddenly rendered otiose, beside the point”. (Kimball 82). As another instance is Sontag’s extensive writing on artistic creations, among which her articles on photography are the most famous. Her first publications about the subject were articles that were finally published together in 1977 entitled *On Photography*. She regarded photography as a way to investigate human and social issues; though, it did include a critique of the prevalent views in Western society: “One wonders, in retrospect, how many general readers got beyond the polished veneer of Sontag's essays and sensed the bite in her views” (Jacobs 7).

Sontag’s experiences as a fiction writer were in line with her other interests as incorporating her re-definitions of constraining cultural misrepresentations. She started her novel writing career with *The Benefactor* (1963) at the age of 30. In this novel, Hippolyte, the strange intellectual, tries to make his daily life conform to his bizarre dreams. Sontag's first novel is said to be not a report of reality but a counterweight to it.

The second novel, *Death Kit* (1967) and its protagonist, Diddy, considered by critics and reviewers to be closely related to *The Benefactor*, picture an existential abstraction of a modern character. Gore Vidal praised her "will to understand" and "her impressive reading in European literature" reflected in the novel (Rollyson 80). According to the writer, the novel represented, at the same time, the self-destructiveness of America in the heat of Vietnam War. It also portrayed Sontag's fascination with the formal properties of works of art which was later dealt with in detail in her essays and critical readings.

The short story collection, *I, Etcetera*, appeared in 1978 after an intense period of creative non-fiction during which she published her very successful works, *On Photography* and

Illness as Metaphor. It is perhaps her most autobiographical work. The main theme of the collection, her argument with tradition and convention, brought about mixed but sympathetic reviews for the book.

The Volcano Lover (1992), her third novel, which was published a long time after the second one, became a best-seller. The novel dealt with an evocation of the historical events and, at the same time, had a sense of the contemporary. It skillfully blended a variety of styles and points of view which brought it very good critical commentary.

Sontag's last novel, *In America*, (1999) was based on a real story. It depicted a woman's search for self-transformation. This novel benefited from the intertextuality created by historical references, too. The book turned out to be controversial and received different kinds of criticism. It won the National Book Award for fiction and attracted a great number of readers.

Sontag's eclecticism makes it difficult to describe all aspects of her writing career, but it could definitely be argued that she was as meticulous as she was prolific, always putting all her works to serious tests by well-known editors and critics. During the three decades after the publications of two novels, Sontag mostly published nonfiction, wrote extensively on diverse artistic subjects and worked in the theater and cinema. However, she returned successfully to the story writing world after so many years, expressing pity that it had taken her such a long time to go back to a kind of creativity which she loved so much and was praised for its experimentations and intellectual complexity.

The success of these books can be best viewed in the context of the literary tradition of postwar American fiction. A tendency towards experimentalism marks the new direction of writing. The traditional practice of realism was not satisfying for the writers who were fascinated with the fantastic and the anti-real forms. Donald Barthelme, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon

have now become classic examples of this tendency among many others. Guy Reynolds considers Sontag next to Joyce Carol Oates and Sylvia Plath as prominent writers of the 1960s who were innovative in breaking the boundaries of genres and old-fashioned literary traditions and “constructing tales of representative lives which had a general, communal and sometimes didactic significance” (172). Reynolds even sees traces of creative experiments in Sontag’s fiction which would mark the orientation of the novels of the next few decades. He detects in *Death Kit*, “a taste of this postmodern feminism in a desire to unsettle ‘self’, ‘the real’, ‘mimesis’ (171).

In his book on contemporary American novel, Patrick O’Donnell acknowledges a number of novels which are considered to be within the vein of realism but evolve postmodernist and metafictional experimentations, among which he categorizes Sontag’s *Death Kit* “which combines documentary, fantasy, and monologue” (O’Donnell 19). He considers Sontag as one of the ‘high postmodernists’ who make a world out of words, a linguistic construct which manipulates reality. He considers *The Volcano Lover* to be a novel written by a leading intellectual voice of modern aesthetics, “a novel of ideas that uses the historical setting in a ‘century’ or ‘epoch’ to contextualize the parameters of our modernity and to portray its history and origins” (138). Sontag’s novels view the past towards the sensibility of her age and include a variety of speculations.

Sontag’s works reflect an “underlying self-cross-examination” of ideas, believes Alisa Solomon, who reviews these works with appreciation:

There is always an elusiveness about her subjects, and she seems to take a Heraclitus-like relish in paradoxes which can’t be resolved. The activity of contemplating art, the changing relationship between the perceiver and the aesthetic object, are recurrent themes in her work”. (Solomon 132)

Sontag's demonstration of new possibilities for story writing and the subtle strategies which make deliberate complications are typical of postwar fiction. Her depth of experience and sophisticated mind seem to be invaluable resources for creativity, the features which made her an exemplary avant-garde, "a figure who could not be ignored because she had a formidable intelligence and curiosity about new art and was clearly making an impression on contemporary culture" (Rollyson 14).

1.2. The Argument

Susan Sontag's fictional works bring the nature of human experience to the fore, especially giving voice to female experience. There have not been so many attempts on the side of the commentators on her fiction to consider the depiction of female experience. This might be partly due to the fact that there are not many instances of her deliberate and obvious plans advocating feminist concerns—except for a few references in essays or some comments in interviews. What is more, Sontag always seems to be more interested in going beyond gender issues. This attitude might have been formed because the high modernist tradition of her time did not favor any thinker who was not associated with male intellectuals, or as Liam Kennedy suggests: "The tension in her work between private reflection and public address signifies a highly self-conscious attention to the contexts in which she writes and speaks" (Kennedy 15). On the other hand, however, some critics believe she has only been wrongly accused of erasing gender, an accusation which can be easily refuted if her works are studied carefully. Therefore, this study could be regarded as an attempt for investigations in the less explored area of Sontag's fiction which is more directly related to exploring female experience.

There are still a great number of questions left to be answered concerning these fictional works. Exploring this realm is especially important, given that Sontag, being a writer of great

influence on American modernist thought, represents not only herself but the aesthetics of her times. This research considers not merely the major ideas and concepts but the formal aspects of her novels and short stories as well. Kimball points out that “one of Sontag's great gifts has been her ability to enlist her politics in the service of her aestheticism.” (Kimball 90). However, he considers her work a bit too involved with the formal aspect, a quality that makes the title ‘radical chic’ appropriate to describe Sontag’s work.

The prominent female writers after the 1960s were passionate about giving voice to the unheard. The satirical and critical representations in the experimental fiction attempted to reconfigure the accepted standards. The age in which Sontag wrote was marked by a shift from the idealized picture of the American society as praising marriage and having children towards a more conscious literature that could reflect the realities of the lives of women. After the Second World War, there was a strong tendency to expect men to go back home from the fronts and women to stop working and make their domestic life secure. The apparent domesticity and satisfaction was sometimes too shallow and deliberately hid the voice of struggling women (and men) who felt the need for the restructuring of a notable number of norms and establishments. That is why Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, for instance, can be studied next to Sontag’s *Death Kit*: “Plath, Oates and Sontag all wrote fictions engaged with the ‘domestic ideology’ of the 1950s and early 1960s; all placed the typecast motifs of that ideology (idealized marriage, suburban conformity, the ‘junior executive’ male) into dizzying, shifting fictions” (Reynolds 170). Sontag’s fiction is worth studying both in its own right and as a part of female avant-garde art creations which offered new stylistic and formal experimentations.

Sontag’s revisionist attitude towards the spirit of certitude in 1950s and 1960s calls for a less conventional critical view to her works. Therefore, the present researcher has decided to

adopt a postmodernist view to the works of an author of the 1960s, hoping to reflect Sontag's pioneering challenge to conformity and domesticity of the mid-twentieth century through a fresh perspective, since the resistance against the more orthodox structural patterns of the stories on one hand and the self-declarative voice on the other were needed to be taken into account. The new non-literary culture (about which Sontag talks) seriously questions the "heavy burden of content" ("One Culture" 298). This dissertation focuses on her fiction to show the strength of sensations and the effect of abstract forms and styles of visual and performative arts, as well as the interest in stylization and playfulness—the features which make a 'theatricalized' attitude to re-reading her novels and short stories possible.

The phrase 'theatricalization of female experience' which is used here is hoped to foreground at least two of the most significant aspects of Sontag's work. The first would be the 'female' voice, the subtly formulated way of a female writer restructuring stereotypical motifs and themes of canonical literature, or as Guy Reynolds states: "her re-definition of male cultures from a woman's perspective, rather than the excavation of overlooked female traditions" (178). The other equally important aspect of the phrase is the direct reference to the concept of theatricalization of experience which Sontag regards as the ability of Camp sensibility to transform experience—something which the present researcher believes a poststructuralist re-reading might follow as the aesthetics that these fictional works offer. The phrase refers to the attraction to the artifice and the frivolous, the observation of the world as an 'aesthetic' phenomenon, which the cult name of Camp indicates. She recognizes this sensibility as the spirit of 'extravagance' and a seriousness that is not successful, "of course not all seriousness that fails can be redeemed as Camp. Only that which has the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve" ("Notes on Camp" 283). This vision of the world 'in

terms of style', in Art Nouveau objects for instance (the lighting fixtures that look like flowering plants) is in everything as pure artifice: "Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman'. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater" (280).

All this said, pure Camp is definitely not self-consciousness and intentional, nor is it a means of critical analysis of the works. The naïve Camp, the one that does not know itself as thus is definitely 'not' the criterion based on which to evaluate a successful work (that would be a contradiction to the idea), and therefore not the measurement applied here; however, it 'does' offer an appreciation of the aesthetic experience of things in any creative work. Hence theatricalization of experience is not the concluding phrase in the present study; it is the starting point, the inspiration to look for "a different—a supplementary—set of standards" (286).

In order to respond to the vertiginous world of the stories and novels influenced by this outrageous aesthetic taste and to be able to appreciate this sensibility, there was the need to avoid treating them as texts for interpretation or a kind of diagnosis. What is more, it was crucial to simultaneously appreciate the sublime in the sensation created by the works. The questions that started this dissertation and the above-mentioned factors, led the researcher to the deconstructive strategy of poststructuralist feminism as treated in Luce Irigaray's theoretical framework. Of all the possible perspectives, to turn to Irigaray's arguments to propose reading strategies for Sontag's works has been quite challenging. Nevertheless, the daunting task is rewarding, considering the multi-layered depiction of identity and the performance of male and female characters in the works. Poststructuralist feminism and, more specifically, Luce Irigaray's conceptualizations as a feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst, raised several questions to be

asked regarding the issues of femaleness, its articulation and gender identity—the concepts the present research has chosen to concentrate on. Like the other thinkers who consider the notion of gendered bodies as crucial in feminist discourse, Irigaray concentrates on the subject to show how gendered bodies reflect their own meanings and how cultures play a crucial role in this formulation. This gives one a chance to go beyond the clichés of female body as a symbol of sin or subject to other degrading positions. Irigaray’s deconstructive methods against stereotypes of Western culture, especially the body as symbolizing metaphysical principles, and her suggestions for changes of the symbolism, mainly the idea of mimicry as well as reconstructing mother-daughter relationships, make up the framework for this study. In other words, the more orthodox method of interpretation of the story elements is not the preferred strategy here; instead, we look for the signifiers which shed some light on the issues related to the areas in this study.

This dissertation considers the pursuit of the self in Sontag’s short stories and novels. Irigaray’s method of keeping a free, fluid account of woman’s subject position against making stereotypes that talk about a ‘typical’ and inclusive femininity can be considered in line with Sontag’s manner of narration which moves between the solid world of events and the dream world of the characters’ inner life. Irigaray challenges the dominant beliefs of psychoanalytic discourse, stating that women’s right to their becoming implies that their identity cannot be reduced to any pre-defined models, even if it is in relation to motherhood. At the same time, she emphasizes maintaining and improving mother-daughter genealogies that patriarchy has repressed suggesting some practical ways for developing this relationship which gives both mother and daughter recognition as subject.

The masculine and feminine discourse is another significant issue to consider. Language in poststructuralism is considered responsible for the construction of a person’s subjectivity, as

well as individual and social consciousness. It is language which decides the meaning of masculinity and femininity in different discourses. In this sense, gender is a social and variable construction. The sense of self, then, is developing and reconstituted in discourse which makes subjectivity open to changes. The strategy of de-centering the subject shows the diversity of forms of subjectivity that are culturally and historically produced. Poststructuralist feminism, therefore, emphasizes the constant contradiction and conflicts experienced by women as different discursive fields always re-constitute their subjectivity and consciousness.

Understanding that there is no inherent essential meaning in experience provides a picture of any individual as the potential site for a subject who is both influenced by discourse and originator of language. Irigaray believes that female sexuality is not based on patriarchal symbolic order but is other to male. Therefore, woman's language, that produces desire, is essentially different from male language. Irigaray does not accept the view that describing language as neutral or universal and tries to show that speakers in every age impose their needs and ideas on language. Historically speaking, language has been used by the male to establish his name as it is given to his wife, children and possessions, making femininity secondary. As a result, a transformation in language means liberation. Poststructuralist feminism, in brief, is concerned with some basic notions, constant reconstruction of subjectivity, the significance of discourse and challenging power in a process which deconstructs established values and meaning. This theoretical framework applied to literary practice addresses the role of fictional works in challenging the exercise of patriarchal power. Irigaray's model, more particularly, consciously works in a few areas: exploring the relation between biology and identity and the emphasis on a positive interpretation of body for woman, liberating her from being defined in terms of lack, as Freud and Lacan did.

Sontag's fiction clearly contests the fixity of meaning and does not show the same transparency of more popular and realistic forms of fiction. The access to subjective position of the character which is offered by poststructuralist feminist criticism means avoiding the danger of closure of meaning. It shows the exercise of power in discourse and the possibility of resistance against oppression of discourse through showing deferring and not fixed meanings.

The questions to be dealt with in the dissertation are categorized based on different aspects of exploring female experience. The first set of questions consider the reconstruction of portrayal of female characters and address Sontag's writing as production of discourse that reflects female identity:

1. How might Luce Irigaray's deconstructive reading of psychoanalytic theory be used as a critical strategy to examine negative female imagery and replace it with positive cultural conceptualizations?
2. How can poststructuralist ethics of sexual difference contribute to a new understanding of experiencing subjectivity in fictional works?
3. How can female identity be approached in Sontag's fiction? And how do the very recent theoretical discussions on the concept apply to the works of a mid-twentieth century author? Is this indicative of Sontag's revolutionary polemics?
4. In which ways are the characters in Sontag's fiction affected by the imposed conditions and how do their reactions to the dilemmas reflect the portrayal of the self?
5. How do the hallucinatory world of Sontag's earlier novels, the historiographic world of the later novels and the experimentalism of the short stories reflect the complexity of the characters' identity?