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**Women's Poetic Response to the Male Gaze:
Cutting Them Down**

by

Nadine Yonka

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WOMEN'S POETIC RESPONSE TO THE MALE GAZE: CUTTING HIM DOWN TO SIZE

Nadine Yonka

A universal theme of the media is woman versus her body. In our culture, women have been starving themselves, binge eating, dieting, and exercising excessively for decades. Women are bombarded with cookie cutter images of skinny models with blue eyes, blonde hair, and large breasts on billboards, magazines, newspapers, store fronts, advertisements, and television. Girls as young as three or four begin to receive these same image messages with toys like Barbie or Brats dolls. As an example of such gender indoctrination, Betty Friedan pointed to a billboard across from a hospital in New York showcasing a larger-than-life, incredibly beautiful blonde woman, which read, "If I have only one life, let me live it as a blonde' ...Across America, three out of every ten women dyed their hair blonde" (Friedan 17). This one example shows how powerful a hold the advertising industry has on the idea of beauty. Women are at the mercy of the media, the cosmetic industry, and the male dominated beauty industry which dictates what beauty is or should be, and women appear to be willing do whatever it takes short of killing themselves in order to fit this idea of beauty. Even the strongest of women are susceptible to this ideal body image controversy and abuse because each and every woman was raised in the same type of culture that commercializes beauty.

Negative body image messages can be found in every magazine, cosmetic counter, commercial, and fashion industry. Yet, who sets the standards for how a woman should look? The short answer is simply patriarchy and specifically the "male gaze." For this thesis, I will employ the following definition of the male gaze: The male gaze refers

to the time in a young girl or woman's life when she stops dressing for herself and starts wearing or doing things in order to please a man or men in general. It is at this point that women figure out what men like to see or hear, and conform their bodies, style of dress, eating habits, and exercise routine to please men. However, not all women passively allow the male gaze to take over. Author and feminist activist, Naomi Woolf, argues in her book The Beauty Myth that "we 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...is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and a dread of lost control. [It assumes that] the quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it" (The Beauty Myth 10, 12). It is with this idea of beauty that women stop looking for their authentic selves; and instead they focus their gaze and judge themselves with the eyes of a man. Women are no longer dressing for themselves or a set purpose like church, a job interview, or grocery shopping; women feel they have to conform to a male-standard of judgment. They are making personal appearance decisions based on what they think a man would like--thus women are using the male gaze rather than their own gaze to live life. (I am not implying that all men participate in or enforce this concept, and my intention is not to state that all men are chauvinists. The male gaze is to refer to the trends exhibited by our male dominated society as a whole. Like anything else, there will always be exceptions to this idea, but for the purpose of this paper, I'll be referring to the majority of our culture.)

In this thesis, I will focus on how women express or react to the male gaze through poetry. I will analyze the female voice in a number of different poems by

American and international authors such as June Jordan, Dinah Butler, Lucille Clifton, Marge Piercy, and Mohja Khaf. I will distinguish between three categories related to the male gaze: the first category of poems will encompass poetry that addresses the images of the male gaze young girls are exposed to growing up at home and in school. The second category will analyze how women are physically positioned or objectified in the media. The final category is devoted to describing a woman's struggle to empower and love her own body. The three main categories will concentrate on the following themes in the selected poems: 1. Manipulation and destruction of the female image. 2. Female empowerment through objectification. 3. Love for real women. 4. Female sexuality and positive body image. 5. Control of one's sexual desires and needs. I will also discuss both positive and negative effects of the male gaze. Women have had to make a choice in order to survive under the male gaze. A woman either buys into and lives by the code of the male gaze, or she rebels and uses the male gaze to her advantage. Through my exploration of women's poetry, I will investigate the affects the male gaze has on the choices women make in their daily lives; my prediction is that women who choose to conform to the 'male gaze' lose their identity, and women who choose to use the 'male gaze' for their advantage live a more positive and fulfilling life. Yet, can both groups of women still be happy? I think so. These are the topics I wish to explore in my thesis.

Section 1: Male Gaze and Pedagogy

The male gaze has bombarded young women and girls with images of beauty since they were very young. In her book Promiscuities, Naomi Wolf argues that young girls used to learn how to be a woman in all facets of life through their mother's example (14). It

wasn't until the creation of Barbie in 1968 that the most common image for young girls as a representation of womanhood and beauty became the Barbie doll. The plastic doll represents a miniature image of the ideal woman; she has blonde hair, blue eyes, large breasts, a small waist, and large hips. Even though a real person of Barbie's proportions would be unable to walk, she is still a "symbol of ideal femininity to explore and critique girls' appropriations of patriarchal commodity culture, suggesting that such appropriations may be important to their identity formation" (Wald 607). Since Barbie comes from a male driven culture, she is a representation of the male ideal of what a woman should be. Think about it, Barbie has been marketed by male-dominated toy manufacturer, Mattel, since 1968 and was designed to target young girls. This being the case, it also means that Barbie is part of the female identity development. Girls look at Barbie as a role model for everything from fashion, posture, boyfriend, job, and their own sexuality. After the introduction of Barbie to society, girls turned away from their mothers as an example for beauty to the popular, manufactured, plastic Barbie doll that contained an idealized beauty and a hidden sexuality that even their mothers were curious about and every young girl was eager to obtain. Wolf explains that, "Barbie was the first toy that taught us what was expected of us sexually. The fact that some of the moms were trying to become hip young Barbies made it that much more important for us to understand. The twelve-inch dolls held the key to it all. That is why girls, now as well as then, are obsessed with them" (Promiscuities14). Barbie began to set a global standard for women's beauty. Her distinctive legacy lives on in countless retail stores and young girls' bedrooms. Not every girl can live up to her standards of beauty; I believe the only ones who come close are supermodels who are flaunted over pages of magazines and TV

commercials. The following poem by Marge Piercy describes a girl who ultimately kills herself due to the overwhelming pressure from the Barbie image enforced by society. The poem may be fictional, but the underlying message is real and affects hundreds of thousands of young girls and women all over the world.

Marge Piercy's poem, "Barbie Doll," discusses the male gaze as manifested into the norm of society. The poem contains four stanzas that objectively follow the life and death of a girl caught in the mist of what many would call the 'Beauty Myth'. The girl is clearly the victim of the male gaze as the reader will notice the perpetual reference to society's standard of beauty. The first stanza begins with the birth of the girl and how she is brought up wearing pink, given toys that are supposed to fit her sex, and spoon fed the social construct of what a woman is and supposed to do,

This girlchild was born as usual
and presented dolls that did pee-pee
and miniature GE stoves and irons
and wee lipsticks the color of cherry candy.

This explains how this "girlchild" is born and thrown into a gender specific world that tells her exactly what she has to do and be in order to be acceptable in society. This poem reflects how young girls are indoctrinated by the male gaze. Gender differences are imposed even before birth in the gender specific colors new moms and dads typically request: pink and purple for girls and blue or green for boys. The stanza concludes with a classmate or male gaze centered society pointing out that the girl is not the right kind of girl,

Then in the magic of puberty, a classmate said:

You have a great big nose and fat legs.

In the difficult physical and emotional stage of puberty, the girl is harassed and degraded because she does not physically fit the acceptable standards of what a girl should look like.

The second stanza describes the girl with cold clinical detachment,
She was healthy, tested intelligent,
possessed strong arms and back,
abundant sexual drive and manual dexterity

The girl is initially described in the past tense and spoken about more like a science experiment rather than a human being with thoughts and feelings. It is as if she is being displayed like an animal for auction. The stanza completely objectifies the girl in a non-attractive way as if any man would only want to use her for manual labor and child birth. According to the speaker, the girl is not pleasing to the eyes of the male onlookers. She does not fit the profile that “they” are looking for, and “they,” being those people in her life, teachers, parents, the media, and friends who are enforcing the male gaze, are pressuring her to feel bad about herself. This is also the first stanza that gives the girl submissive action rather than talking about her like she is an inanimate object: “She went to and fro apologizing./Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs.” The stanza explains that she is caving into society’s strength and apologizing for her appearance; why is she apologizing? The girl is so humiliated and degraded by the society that she starts to feel bad about being herself. We see this more and more in today’s society; a woman’s appearance is being put under a microscope. If she does not fit the cookie cutter 36-24-36 size chart, society and the media gives her a countless number of “tips” in magazines

about how to 'fit-in'. Women are either forced to diet, exercise, or apologize for their natural bodies in order to 'fit-in' to society's standards. The last line of the poem, "Everyone saw a fat nose on thick legs," further reiterates that no matter how many times the girl apologizes she will always be seen as the girl with the unacceptable sized legs and nose.

The third stanza explains the advice the girl was given to 'fit-in' to society,
She was advised to play coy,
exhorted to come on hearty,
exercise, diet, smile and wheedle.

She was told how to act to come across as more athletic to off set her unbecoming features. The girl was prescribed a formula to follow in order to be more appealing to men. Society is telling her that no man will ever want her if she does not follow the prescription and be cured of her ugliness. This prescription does not encourage her to experiment with her individual or physical expression of self; it only urges her to be exactly what "they" want her to be--no exception. The second part of this stanza tells how the girl became burned out with trying to change in order to please everyone else:

Her good nature wore out
like a fan belt
So she cut off her nose and her legs
and offered them up.

The girl had been working so hard to be pleasing to the male eye that she eventually collapsed. Like a car engine that keeps running without any love or positive attention, she

broke down. She could not give society what they wanted, and eventually, in the last sentence, the poem suggests that the girl completely caves into the social pressures and commits suicide. She ceremoniously offers herself up by cutting off the two parts of her body that were scrutinized the most. This grotesque imagery displays to the reader that the girl received an over dose of the male gaze, tried to conform to society's norms, failed to meet society's standards, and in a last gesture, she kills herself.

The final stanza gives the audience an image of her funeral,
In the casket displayed on satin she lay
with the undertaker's cosmetics painted on,
a turned-up putty nose, dressed in a pink and white nightie.

The speaker describes in great detail how she is dressed in her coffin. The image is grossly sexual; it's as if the girl is dressed to have sex rather than to be laid to rest. She finally fits the profile men feel is desirable while laying in her casket. The girl is dressed and designed to fit society rather than the real person that she was. Then society's voice is heard:

Doesn't she look pretty? everyone said.
Consummation at last.
To every woman a happy ending.

Finally, at her death, people think she is pretty. Society is happy with the product they see in front of them; nothing is reminisced about the girl who existed. The only positive words mentioned are those describing how she finally looks like she 'fits-in' to society. The male gaze is ever present- even at the death of one of its victims.

This poem is a scathing critique of beauty, and what our society dubs as beautiful. Does every woman really have a happy ending or does it only exist in the glossy pages of *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*? I think that some women can survive the social onslaught of the male gaze, but how happy are they with their bodies? Some women may be able to diet, exercise regularly, pay for plastic surgery and fancy make-up that hides every laugh line, but I don't think this makes women any happier. The outside of being maintained, but the inside is not. Women may even become obsessed with fitting into their size 0 pants that they forget or miss out on the joys of life like birthday cake, Christmas dinner, or ice cream on a summer day. I think it's impossible for a woman to have an appearance that fits the male gaze standards perfectly without still feeling unhappy or unsatisfied about some aspect of their body or life in general. Women are not dolls for men to dress up, and I don't think we as women should give men this power; in the end, we might end up burned out like Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll", and then we won't enjoy anything anymore.

However, what about the girls of the younger generation? As exhibited in "Barbie Doll", not all girls can survive a society dominated by images of the 'perfect' women. Some girls turn to eating disorders, overtly sexual behavior, self mutilation, passive conformity, or verbally abusive cliques whose only goal is to alienate other girls for their nonconformity. Girls learn at a young age that there are certain beauty expectations one must comply with in order to make friends and 'fit-in' to a male gaze dominated society.

For me, this poem falls right into the social critique called the 'Beauty Myth'. Naomi Wolf's book, The Beauty Myth, explains how society both consciously and

unconsciously forces women to think they need to feel, look, act, and be a certain way. In the book, Wolf also explains that the increasing number of women falling victim to eating disorders is due to society's definition of beauty as thin. In The Beauty Myth, Wolf explains, "The weight-loss cult recruits women from an early age, and eating diseases are the cult's bequest...From 90-95 percent of anorexics and bulimics are women. America, which has the greatest number of women who have made it into the male sphere, also leads the world with female anorexia" (181). It also amazes me that even though this poem was written in 1969, we are battling more against the 'Beauty Myth' than ever in 2008. There are more opportunities for women in the 'man's world' of business, politics, entrepreneurship, and the like, but women starting at a young age know there is a price to pay. Girls as young as eight years old are dieting because they think they are overweight. (Although in today's world we are battling both obesity and the push for women and men to be thin.) I feel that this poem explains these ideas in a very grotesque way. Piercy is explaining that in order to fit in to the standards of the male gaze, girls have to mutilate their bodies by dieting, exercising excessively, paying for plastic surgery, and dying their hair. Girls are only noticed by their appearance rather than by their intellect, social skills, or kind heart. If girls do not conform, they are hounded by their peers, the media, and advertisements, isolated by boys, or rejected from social settings. According to the constructs of the male gaze, girls are mentally conditioned to endure psychological and physical abuse in order to conform to a male driven society. This also explains how the girl in Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll" buys into the 'Beauty Myth' (inspired by the male gaze), tries to conform, but ends up literally losing herself and her life in the process.

In his article entitled ““Barbie Doll” and “G.I. Joe”: Exploring Issues of Gender,” teacher and author Robert Perrin discusses the seriously lacking pedagogical emphasis on addressing gender issues in schools. In his classroom, students read and discuss Marge Piercy’s “Barbie Doll” as a way of addressing gender issues that have been ignored. Perrin’s goal is to juxtapose the ideas of male and female gender stereotypes and expectations. A group of his students did a close reading of the poem and began their “discussion by describing other stereotypical ‘girl toys’” (Perrin 83). Perrin observes that his class is eager to share their personal observations and experiences. In his goal to get his students thinking about socially specific gender expectations, Perrin poses this question to his class, “So, what would this poem be like and what would it say about our society if it were called ‘G.I. Joe’?” (Perrin 84). I think this is a really interesting and important question asked to students in middle and high school. Kids are influenced at such a young age about what to wear, watch, read, or play with. The male gaze teaches girls to pick toys that reflect a delicate femininity that is heavily influenced by motherhood, shopping, and serving men. Boys, on the other hand, are taught to be aggressive and unemotional; they are typically influenced by superhero figures, guns, army men, and sports. Most kids are like the students in Perrin’s class; they don’t realize the male gaze has affected them until they stop and think about it.

These same aesthetic gender influences are not only present, but they are reinforced in the classroom. For example, girls are scolded for being too loud while boys are rewarded with attention if they cause a disruption. Teachers tend to also call on boys more than girls in the classroom just because they are louder. As Peggy Orenstein maintains, girls are taught the male gaze as the “hidden curriculum” in schools.

Surprisingly, this hidden curriculum has become more prevalent as women have been increasingly able to narrow the gender gap in the American work force. As Peggy

Orenstein explains in her book, Schoolgirls:

We live in a society that associates thinness with success, self-control, strength, and, most significantly, masculinity; we see fat as synonymous with failure, sloth, weakness, and feminine fecundity. We boldly encourage girls to leave behind the limits of tradition--to leave behind the stove and the apron and the soft heft that comes from nurturing many children--to join the world of men. But, at every turn, we remind them that their abilities alone will not ensure a place at the table of success: in order to "have it all" they must also conform to an impossible, media-driven standard of beauty which holds that "you can never be too thin". To achieve it, they must diet rigorously in the name of health; they must even, if need be, sacrifice their health to their diets. (94-95).

Our world is hypocritically teaching young girls that there are more opportunities now for women than there ever have been before, but each opportunity comes with a price. Girls today have to find their identity between the pages of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, the latest diet or make-up commercial, or the Barbie isle at Wal-Mart. However, there are a number of girls and young women who are becoming frustrated with the male gaze; they are becoming more aware of the messages that have been beat into them. For example, American poet, Jean Tepperman, writes in her poem, "Witch," about a girl who receives similar social pressures as Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll," but she handles herself in a more positive and powerful manner. In a few excerpts from her poem, she writes:

They told me
I smile prettier with my mouth closed.
They said--better cut your hair--...
...They mocked me with magazines
Full of breasts and lace...
...They told me tweed-suit stories

Of various careers of ladies.
 I woke up at night
 afraid of dying.....
 they buttoned me into dresses
 covered with pink flowers...
 ...I want my black dress.
 I want my hair
 curling wild around me.
 I want my broomstick...
 ...We are screaming,
 we are flying,
 laughing, and won't stop. (Linthwaite 10-11).

Section 2: Images of Women

One of the main arguments surrounding the male gaze focuses on the objectification of women by men. The idea of objectifying women, however, is not a new concept. Women have been viewed as objects as early as the 14th Century with the increasing popularity of 'nude' paintings. The paintings were usually painted by men with their objects being beautiful, naked, and passively positioned women. In most cases, as John Berger explains in his book Ways of Seeing, "the person who is the object of their [male painters'] activities--woman--[is] treated as a thing or an abstraction...the 'ideal' spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him"(62, 64).

It is with this idea in mind that we turn our attention to the painting and poem, "Manet's Olympia." The painting by world renowned French Impressionist, Edouard Manet, challenges the traditional passive nude painting. Berger writes that when looking at "Olympia," "one sees a woman, cast in the traditional role, beginning to question that role, somewhat defiantly" (63). The courtesan in the painting is questioning her role as an object; she causes her male gazers to become uncomfortable because she is not passively

allowing him to look at her as an object. Her strong gaze locks with her male onlooker, and she defiantly explains she is only the object she allows them to view (Snow 34).

Margaret Atwood's poem "Manet's Olympia" is based on the controversial painting and gives the courtesan in the painting a voice. In this free verse poem, Atwood uses this painting as an opportunity to describe the physical attributes of the painting and share the courtesan's internal point of view about her social situation. She also provides the reader with an example of a woman who embodies the male gaze but is still able to stay strong and withstand the gaze of a man; if she could speak, the poem is what she would say to her gazers. The following will contain an analysis of this particular poem.

The poem's first stanza begins by describing the posture of the courtesan. She is sitting in the most unnatural position,

She reclines, more or less.

Try that posture, it's hardly languor.

Her right arm sharp angles.

As she is staring intently at the viewer, she is sitting in a position that is the opposite of passive. Her arm is angled in an uncomfortable position, and she is not lying submissively--rather she is in control of how she is sitting. Just by the look in her eyes and her posture, the male gazer knows he is not welcome. She is also letting the man know she is not going to make him feel welcome; this initial description suggests that she is in control of her body and mind; she is not an object to be discarded after use

The poem continues with the description of how the courtesan is playing coy despite her attitude,

With her left she conceals her ambush.

Shoes but not stockings,
 how sinister. The flower
 behind her ear is naturally
 not real, of a piece
 with the sofa's drapery.

The courtesan has positioned her left arm in a way to cover her vagina from the view of the client suggesting that she is playing the woman the man desires. She is also wearing shoes with no stockings and a fake flower in her hair. The courtesan is using her sexuality as a tool to convince her client that she is willing to have sex with him. However, the description of the 'fake' flower in her ear suggests that all of her actions are part of the 'package' she is offering to her client. The courtesan defies the parameters of her occupation by taking control of her body and allowing herself to be an object for only a short period of time. She uses her sexuality as a means to get what she wants- money. Her actions do not contain anything that is remotely sincere or real; she is merely viewing this upcoming interaction as a business transaction and nothing else.

The last part of this stanza discusses what the rest of the room looks like,

The windows (if any) are shut.

This is indoor sin.

Above the head of the (clothed) maid

is an invisible voice balloon: *Slut*

The room is designed to keep the "indoor sin", sex outside of marriage or paying for sex, inside and out of view to the rest of the world. This part of the poem also implies that the courtesan must be quite wealthy because she has a maid that is attending to her.

However, this section insinuates that the maid has no respect for the courtesan, but the courtesan does not seem to care. She is more concerned with the client and the business transaction that is about to take place.

The second stanza begins with a conjunction that force readers to reconsider their first impression of the courtesan,

But. Consider the body,
unfragile, defiant, the pale nipples
staring you right in the bull's-eye.

The reader is asked to reexamine the courtesan's body to find some unusual and unfeminine features. The courtesan is projecting a sense of strength, confidence, and control in her posturing. She is not portraying herself as a weak and submissive woman who will let a man take advantage of her. The courtesan is in full control of her body and the choices that she makes with it. The description of her erect nipples suggests the image of a weapon like an arrow aiming to hit its target, and she is pointing them at the object, her "bull's-eye"- the viewer. Also, earlier in the first stanza the speaker refers to her vagina as an "ambush"; this is a very militaristic term to refer to such a feminine and delicate part of a woman's body. However, the courtesan is using her body and sexuality as a weapon, and she knows that the male gaze will not have any affect on her; she has put on her armor and loaded her weapons. She is ready for battle.

The poem continues with a specific interest and description of a particular black ribbon around her neck,

Consider also the black ribbon
around the neck. What's under it?

A fine read threadline, where the head
was taken off and glued back on.

The ribbon is very important to the courtesan; it appears to be a dividing line between what her clients are allowed to have and not have. The “threadline” separates her head from the rest of her body; therefore, she is allowing men to have her body for a short time, but she will never allow them to have any influence over her head--thoughts, emotions, and desires. The gruesome images of her head being “taken off and glued back on” suggests that every time she has sex with a man, she advertently disconnects her thoughts [her head] and only allows the man to touch her body. This idea of dismemberment can also be found in Marge Piercy’s “Barbie Doll”; however, in this case, the courtesan is not losing her identity or life by literally taking her head off. She is merely protecting herself from the men that visit her by metaphorically disconnecting her thoughts and emotions from the physical act of sex. After her encounter, she returns her head to its proper place, and disconnects herself from the man entirely. The objectification only affects her body not her thoughts. The speaker explains,

The body’s an offer,
but the neck’s as far as it goes.

Again, she is in control of herself and where the man ‘touches’ her.

The next lines describe the courtesan as a very strong women,

This is no morsel.

Put clothes on her and you’d have a schoolteacher,

the kind with the brittle whiphand.

Atwood suggests that imagining the courtesan as anything but a paid sex worker is not a small task. Yet, as discussed earlier, the reader discovers that the courtesan is anything but just a woman. Her posture alone suggests her inner feminine strength. The courtesan is mentally able to absorb the male gaze to “offer” her body as an object, but only allows men to use the parts of her body that she permits. Atwood notes that if she were a woman who had a more ‘respectable’ job, she would be the toughest in her field. This woman is a force to be reckoned with, and she lets her male clients know it.

The third stanza explains that she is not impressed by any part of the male ego,

There’s someone else in the room.

You, Monsieur Voyeur.

As for that object of yours

she’s seen those before, and better.

The speaker explains that there is another person in the room watching her—someone who enjoys watching sex. Yet, despite the intrusion, the courtesan is still in control of her body. Even more, she is not impressed by his “object”—a reference to his penis. The tone is quite sarcastic in this stanza as the courtesan shrinks the ego of her viewer down to size. She makes it clear that she is not impressed and will not be swayed by any man because she has seen them all in one form or the other.

The final stanza is spoken from the “head” of the courtesan,

I the head, am the only subject

of this picture.

You, Sir are furniture.

Get stuffed.

She is speaking to the man in the room with her. In this last part, she is again asserting herself as a person rather than an object for this or any man she encounters. In this part, she reverses the gender roles and views the man as an object; he becomes her object and is merely the means to her wealth and nothing more. Her last line, “*Get stuffed,*” further suggests her view of this man as an object; she is essentially commanding him to “Get stuffed” like the furniture in the room. This command is directly related to her annoyance and rejection towards any man who tries to objectify her without her permission. She does not allow her male clients to use her in a way that she does not dictate first. This strong courtesan uses men as the pawns in her game of life.

If we look at the poem as the personification of Edouard Manet’s painting, “Manet’s Olympia,” the reader must recognize the extreme attention paid to the posture of courtesan. She is described as being in a very controlled specific position. Now if we juxtapose her posture to those of women in modern film, advertisements, magazines, and so on we will find a completely different image. Today, women are posed or positioned sexually and/or passively in order to sell a product but also to entice the reader. Sheri Klein explains in her article, “Breaking the Mold with Humor: Images of Women in the Visual Media”:

If you open any popular woman’s magazine, you may find advertisements where women are: (1) caressing objects, (2) stand behind men or animals, (3) turning their heads to the side or down to suggest appeasement, (4) grinning widely, (5) arranged in a bashful knee pose, (6) gazing at their hands, (7) talking on the telephone and smiling, and (8) snuggling with children, animals, and men...and (their) identities revolve around the manipulation of their body parts as if they were mere instruments...(Klein 61).

The positions listed above are passive and submissive. As a culture, we do not see aggressive women in advertisements unless they are situated in a sexualized manner. The

male gaze has forced its influence on the portrayal of women so much that the media is telling women how they should look and act in order to be more attractive for men. Men's and women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, *Playboy*, *Maximum*, *Marie Claire*, etc. all exploit women as objects. However, the women's magazines in particular are notorious for incorporating articles like- "25 Ways to Please 'Him' In Bed", "Flat Abs in 2 Weeks", "Botox: The Next Must-Have", "The Beach Body in 3 Weeks", etc. The majority of the articles focus on how a woman should change her body in order to look better for men or how to act in order to please her partner sexually. Aside from the health benefits of exercising, most of these articles are advertising the impossible. It is no wonder that we are surrounded by young girls who are more worried about their waist line and 'looking good' than filling their heads with knowledge and discovering their true identity.

With this in mind it is no question that the male gaze plays a predominate role in influencing male and female sexuality. Even with the controlled posturing described in "Manet's Olympia," as a courtesan, Olympia is still an object of desire for her male viewer. A man still takes pleasure in looking at her naked body regardless of how she acts towards him. Moreover, looking at other images of objectified women, we, as women, begin to learn about what men want women to look like; we learn what men desire women to do. Robert Schultz explains that we learn more about what men want by looking at images of women in his article, "When Men Look at Women: Sex in an Age of Theory". He writes that, "everything has to be arranged by conventions of his [the man's] own making, shaped by his desire. The image is what he requires, and the woman represented is a missing person--an object and mirage...sexual anxiety drives the

gaze...men look; women are looked at. Active men project their fantasies upon passive women, who are 'styled' accordingly"(367-369). It is by these "conventions" that women use to make themselves more appealing to men. They ask questions posed in the third stanza of Dinah Butler's poem, "Do You Fancy Me?,"

Do you fancy me?
 Do I suit and do I
 meet with your approval
 And requirements?
 Will you endorse my thoughts?
 Will you turn these
 simple breasts to beauty
 beneath your gaze?
 Am I a winner? Do I win that
 stirring in your groin?
 Could I become
 your life's pin-up and find
 myself a face?... (Linthwaite 55-56).

So my question is-- are women looking for their own face or the face men want to see? When we, as women, dress for work, school, or the night life, whom are we dressing for? When we put make-up on, what is our motivation? In The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf writes how "the beauty myth keeps a gap of fantasy between men and women. That gap is made with mirrors; no law of nature supports it. It keeps us spending vast sums of money and looking distractedly around us, but its smoke and reflection interfere with our freedom to be sexually ourselves" (144). I am not arguing that women should not care about their appearance; what I am arguing is that women should have the controlled mind that Olympia expressed and realize that the male gaze limits us from grasping our full potential as women and more importantly as human beings. As a courtesan, Olympia knows she is a sex object for men, but she will not lower her mind and self to that level; her self-worth is more important than what a man thinks. As a culture that constantly tells

women how to look, I challenge women to be conscious of the male gaze and how it manipulates women into thinking they should wear this or be that. If women allow the male gaze to fully infiltrate our lives and let men use women as objects, then we are going to end up hating ourselves.

Already, self-objectification has become increasingly popular with younger generations of women. In her article, “A Test of Objectification Theory: The Effect of The Male Gaze on Appearance Concerns In College Women,” professor and researcher Rachel Calogero explains that self-objectification can be triggered by an event such as an interview. Her study was based on the “objectification theory” which basically states that women whose bodies are objectified sexually are more likely to develop a negative persona of themselves and other women (Calogero 16). Her results are based on her study of college women being prepped for an interview: one group of women were told they were going to be interviewed by a man, one group by a woman, and one group by a man or a woman. Calogero explained that the group of women who were “anticipating a male gaze produced significantly greater body shame and social physique anxiety than anticipating a female gaze” (16). Calogero goes on to explain that, “according to the objectification theory, self-objectification is the result of internalizing the sexually objectifying male gaze” (17).

As discussed in this section, we find there are multiple ways that women react to being objectified by the male gaze. Some women are like the strong and controlled courtesan from “Manet’s Olympia”; these women ‘package themselves’ to the specifications of the male gaze but they use their bodies for their own financial advantage rather than let their lives be dictated by the male gaze. For many of these women, it is

because of men that they are financially independent. To Olympia, sex is a business--a commodity to be sold, and according to American's capitalistic society, she is a very savvy business woman. On the other hand, there are different groupings of women who endorse the male gaze blindly; these women buy into the media version of how a woman should be, should act, and should look. This description may sound black and white, but it's actually very fuzzy. Women can fall into any range between these two groups of male gaze understanding. It is within these parameters that women have to live; we float between pleasing everyone else and ourselves. Tragically, when women are not acknowledged as beautiful by the media, corporations, and men in general, most women feel they are inadequate and worthless; they end up blaming themselves and their bodies for their short coming. In Ways of Seeing, John Berger agrees writing that,

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself...she has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to others, and ultimately how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another (46).

Women forget about natural beauty and finding their own personal definition of how a woman should be, should act, and should look. Women forget that there is so much more to a 'Woman' than how she looks. A woman's body is not defined by how large or small her breast are--a woman's body is a story; it holds a power that most men will never understand. Like Wolf, Robert Shultz agrees that women are more than how they are depicted by the male gaze; he writes that, "The woman is not merely the passive object of the gaze, but is active, in motion, and her motion implies the past and future...This body has a history and a future, which includes the woman's own will and intentions" (374).

Women are strong and incredible creatures and should not be defined by a three dimensional image someone else has created.

Section 3: Male Gaze- -Struggle for Self-Love

Female-self-worth is an important aspect of the male gaze. Most women are so bombarded with the media telling them to look, act, or talk a certain way that women forget to appreciate or view their bodies in a positive manner. The following poem, “homage to my hips,” by Lucille Clifton celebrates one on the most criticized parts of a woman’s body--the hips. Yet I would argue that the image of hips is a metaphor for women. I will come back to this idea throughout the poem. On a structural level, the poem is one stanza that seems to flow images back and forth like moving hips.

The title, “homage to my hips,” is very significant to the poem. The word ‘homage’ means to ‘pay tribute’ to something. In this case, the speaker is ‘paying tribute’ to her hips. The poem is a way for her to worship her womanhood; this idea does seem very strange yet liberating. At a young age, girls are taught to find imperfections with their bodies-- most of the time girls complain that their hips are too big or too small. Also, according to The Beauty Myth, Wolf explains that the male gaze and, “the [beauty] myth...encourages women’s wariness of one another on the basis of their appearance, it tries to isolate them from all women...beauty thinking urges women to approach one another as possible adversaries until they know they are friends” (75). This battle of body image between women on a social and individual level seems never ending; however, this speaker defies the male dominated body image doctrine by writing a powerful poem about her hips. I would also use this poem as a metaphor for her entire

body. She is not only rejoicing about her hips, but her entire body or being as a woman. It is evident that by writing in 'homage' to her body the speaker is empowering herself and simultaneously defying the foundations of the male gaze and ultimately beginning to create a new definition of herself as a woman.

The first line, "these hips are big hips/they need their space to/ move around in.", implies that the speaker is female because of the emphasis placed on the hips of the person. The speaker begins her poem with the acknowledgement that *her* hips are in fact big. The tone and repetition of the word 'hips' in the first line and throughout the poem express that she is asserting herself as a real woman and is in fact proud of her womanly figure; in a society focused on small waist and hip sizes, this woman defies the norm by recognizing that her hips are big and they make her feel like a powerful, free, and beautiful woman. She also states that her hips need room to move around; the woman is asserting herself as confident and in charge of her body. She is warning people to get out of the way because she needs room; this allusion doesn't just apply to her physical hips, but these ideas apply to her gender. As a woman, she is proud and confident, and she needs her space to move around.

The next few lines continue describing her hips,
 they don't fit into little
 petty places. these hips
 are free hips.

The speaker's hips cannot be confined into any space; she will not be held in second place. Her hips need to be free, but her body also needs to be free to make choices and do everything. The next couple lines continues this theme,

they don't like to be held back.
 these hips have never been enslaved,
 they go where they want to go
 they do what they want to do.

I view the hip metaphor for women as very strong in these few lines. As a woman, she has “never been enslaved”; no man or patriarchal society has ever owned her or forced her to do anything that she didn't want to do. There is a great sense of power in these few lines. The speaker is asserting herself as a woman; she and her hips are not restrained--they go and do whatever they want to do. These lines are very empowering--very anti-male gaze.

The last few lines of the poem are even more powerful than any other lines in the poem,

these hips are mighty hips.
 these hips are magic hips.
 i have known them
 to put a spell on a man and
 spin him like a top!

To the speaker, hips possess a supernatural power. They are larger than life and they have powers that cause men to forget themselves. The “spell” the speaker is referring to is sexual desire. The speaker's reference to her past lovers or suitors falling for her showcases the speaker's knowledge of the male gaze and how men are attracted to her because of how her body is shaped. She is using her body in a powerful way to make men desire her; I think she is also doing this for her personal amusement. She knows men

desire her so she uses her body in a way that causes men to, “spin like a top,” or act in a crazy way to have her. The speaker has so much confidence in herself and her body that she uses her objectification to lure men into her sexual trap and toy with them. According to the male gaze, she should be the passive object for the man, but she turns the tables, asserts herself as a beautiful and confident woman who knows how to use her body for her advantage.

As a woman, one of the hardest things to learn is how to love yourself and your body in its natural form. Today’s women are bombarded with advertisements about the latest anti-ageing cream, hair color, fashion trends, or hip new products to make them feel and look younger, and as is normal for a capitalistic, consumer based society most women mindlessly buy these products. But the question is, why do women continue to buy these products? In The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan discusses that consumption of these products temporarily fills a void, but then leaves women feeling the need for more ‘stuff’ and are distracted from their internal fulfillment needs. She writes:

The buying of things drains away those needs which cannot really be satisfied by home and family -- the housewives’ [women] need for ‘something beyond themselves with which to identify’, ‘a sense of movement with others toward aims that give meaning and purpose to life’, ‘an unquestioned social aim to which each individual can devote his [her] efforts (Friedan 225).

We are so caught up in a consumer society that we forget to realize and appreciate beauty that is not manufactured. It is in this sense that women are rarely depicted as beautiful without the aide of the cosmetic industry; it is only recently that the soap company, Dove, has started a campaign called, Campaign for Real Women, (More information can be found at www.campaginforrealwomen.com) where women of all ages can learn about beauty, self-esteem, and the façade that the media uses to portray beauty (the male gaze).

Now this is not to say that all women ultimately hate their bodies, and all men despise women in their 'natural' form. But, the male gaze does help us understand why there is a smaller percentage of women who love themselves and men who love them than women who fall into the trap of the male gaze. The answer is simple-- corporations, media, and 'male-dominated institutions' who continue to perpetuate the concept of the male gaze. Think about it-- if all women loved their 'hips' like Lucille Clifton's speaker than these 'institutions' would lose money. Wolf explains:

Women who love themselves are threatening; but men who love real women, more so. Women who have broken out of the gender roles have proved manageable: Those few with power are being retrained as men. But with the apparition of numbers of men moving into passionate, sexual love of real women, serious money and authority could defect and join forces with the opposition [women] (The Beauty Myth 143).

In other words, the more men who appreciate and love 'real' women the more men who will join the campaign against the male gaze to promote the beauty of real women, and then this male ideal of women will begin to collapse.

Yet, before this 'ideal' can be complete, women are still at battle with themselves, the media, cosmetic corporations, and other areas of influence including politics and religion. In the poem entitled "My Body Is Not Your Battleground" found in the book, E-mails from Scheherasad, by Mohja Kahf, the speaker repeats her message that her body is her own-- it is no one else's to fight over. In the poem her body is used as a metaphor for the earth and all women suffering persecution under radical Islamic regimes. In her last stanza she states,

My body is not your battleground
How dare you put your hand
where I have not given permission
Has God, then, given you permission
to put your hand there?

My body is not your battleground
Withdraw from the eastern fronts and the western
Withdraw these armaments and this siege
so that I may prepare the earth
for the new age of lilac and clover,
so that I may celebrate this spring
the pageant of beauty with my sweet love (Kahf 58).

The woman in this poem is not only battling ideas of beauty and gender roles, but she is fighting for her right to love whom and when she chooses. This poem demonstrates that women of all ethnic backgrounds are fighting for the same thing: the freedom to love ourselves for who we are not what we look like. (I think the race of a woman is also very valid in the influences of the male gaze, but I think the exploration of that topic can be used to fuel another avenue of research and would extend my research in a direction that was not intended.)

In many ways the male gaze has taught women how to look, act, and feel based on the male 'ideal' of what a woman is or should be. According to gender theorist Judith Butler, women have been subjected to a manufactured idea of gender. Butler states that "what we take to be an essential essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gender stylization of the body. Gender becomes thus a performative entity..." (quoted in Michailidou 124). In other words, the male gaze has created a list of set gender specifications for women to follow, and most women act it out for men like a performance--not knowing that they are losing their individuality and right to define their gender expression in the process.

Yet I believe that the tide is turning for women. I think women are becoming fed up with being pushed around and told what to do and how to look. I think women are tired of having lots of opportunities but even more social restrictions written in the

footnotes. I think women are getting ready to make a stand against the male gaze.

Women are reexamining the women from the two feminist movements this country has seen and using their determination and fire to stand up for the rights of the 21st Century woman. In select sections of June Jordan's poem, "Poem about My Rights" found in her book, Naming Our Destiny: New and Selected Poems by June Jordan, she vents her anger about not being given her rights as a woman and not being able to express herself as a real woman.

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear
 my head about this poem about why I can't
 go out without changing my clothes my shoes
 my body posture my gender identity my age
 my status as a woman alone in the evening/
 alone on the streets/ alone not being the point/
 the point being that I can't do what I want
 to do with my own body because I am the wrong
 sex the wrong age the wrong skin ...
 it was my father saying I was wrong saying that
 I should have been a boy because he wanted one/a
 boy and that I should have been lighter skinned and
 that I should have had straighter hair and that
 I should not be so boy crazy but instead I should
 just be one/a boy and before that
 it was my mother pleading plastic surgery for
 my nose and braces for my teeth and telling me
 to let the books loose to let them loose in other
 words...
 I am the history or rape
 I am the history of the rejection of who I am
 I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of
 Myself...
I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name
 My name is my own my own my own
 and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this
 but I can tell you that from now on my resistance
 my simple and daily and nightly self-determination
 my very well cost you your life (Jordan 102).

As women, we need to all learn how to look past the male gaze and see ourselves for who we truly are--beautiful, real women. We also need to embody the speakers of these poems and begin to challenge the male dominated system. Women are amazing, powerful creatures, and more men need to recognize this, or in the end, they will be the one paying the price.

Conclusion:

In my exploration of the male gaze through female poets, I've discovered that the male gaze is more prevalent than I originally thought. We see the influence of the male gaze creep up in the lives of young people in Marge Piercy's "Barbie Doll." We discover the use of the male gaze by a woman to further her income as a courtesan in Margaret Atwood's "Manet's Olympia," and we hear the repeated affirmation of female beauty through a woman's celebration of her hips in Cucille Clifton's "homage to my hips." Through these female voices and a number of others discussed in this paper, we find many variations of the male gaze and how it affects women. We find young women crumbling under it, older women using it to make a life for themselves, and a select group of women defying it and celebrating their self-beauty.

Yet, in my research, I also discovered that even though the male gaze has seeped into every facet of our society, there are an increasing number of women and men who are not only becoming aware of the male gaze, but are taking a stand and fighting back. I have found that women have been calling for a new definition of beauty that has not been created by our male dominated culture. Like the women of the first feminist movement who had to prove their humanity, independence, intelligence, worth as individuals, and

shattered the male ideal of whom or what a woman was, we too, as women of the 21st Century, have to begin to redefine beauty and femininity for the generations of women to come (Friedan 81). We need to listen to the words of female poets read here and take their advice.

I think it's also imperative that we as a culture acknowledge the male gaze and confront its effects on our society. Women and girls are not the only ones being influenced by the male gaze. Young boys are also growing up in a culture that is telling them what to expect from a woman and what criteria to use to judge her as beautiful. It is because of these indirect influences of the male gaze that women need to step up and stand up for their rights to create a new sense of beauty. In The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf feels that it is important for us to start "with a reinterpretation of 'beauty' that is *noncompetitive, nonhierarchical, and nonviolent*...we must see that it does not matter in the least what women look like as long as we feel beautiful" (286, 272). This new revolution needs to be based in how women feel about themselves. Women need to be confident in their beauty; they need to look in the mirror and know that they are a unique and beautiful creature. They also need to accept that any man or woman who judges them with the male gaze and does not treat them with the respect they deserve is not to be taken seriously. In the end of The Beauty Myth, Wolf describes how women should reclaim beauty for themselves as women. I think that her statement is the perfect advice, motivation and ending to our discussion of the male gaze. Wolf begins by asking women:

How do we begin? Let's be shameless. Be greedy. Pursue pleasure. Avoid pain. Wear and touch and eat and drink what we feel like. Tolerate other women's choices. Seek out the sex we want and fight fiercely against the sex we do not want. Choose our own causes. And once we break through the change the rules so our sense of our own beauty cannot be shaken, sing that beauty and dress it up and flaunt it and revel in it: In a sensual politics, female is beautiful. (291).

Women, never forget that we are beautiful and incredible individual human beings who deserve every happiness this world has to offer. Listen to the words of these female poets and never forget.

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