

Degree Project

Level: Master's

Removing the Blindfold and Adding a Fedora

Challenging the Role of Women in Patriarchal Society through the Act of Cross-dressing in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold*. A Feminist/Queer Reading

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Introduction

The Blindfold was published in 1992 and is the very first novel written by the American novelist Siri Hustvedt. Although it did not receive as much critical attention as some of her other literary creations which would later become international bestsellers, such as *What I Loved* (2003) and *Summer Without Men* (2011), *The Blindfold* should not be overlooked when discussing the representation of the female body. On the contrary, Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* should be considered as one of the most powerful, as well as striking, portraits of the modern struggle for the emancipation of the female body.

The Blindfold tells the painful story of a young literature student at Columbia University named Iris Vegan and her problematic search to find her own place in a new and frightening world. The novel skilfully depicts the challenges Iris encounters in the search for her own personal identity in a male-dominated environment in which other, influential characters, impose different roles upon her. This external pressure experienced by Iris finally develops into a personal crisis and leads her into a mental institution. Within its exploration of personal identity, the novel also challenges the limitations of the gendered body through its depiction of Iris's increasing desire to transform herself into a man and explore other parts of life otherwise excluded to her.

The issue of feminism and its connection to the human body is not something that is unique to Hustvedt's first novel but rather a theme that can be seen throughout her literary productions. To be more precise, the connection between the female gender, identity crisis and increasing levels of mental and physical illness is a recurring theme in her writing. This connection between women and the crisis of identity is something that Justine Jordan addresses in her text "*The*

Summer Without Men by Siri Hustvedt: A Review” when discussing the exploration of female identity in Hustvedt’s literary work. In her text she emphasises the fact that “again Hustvedt is exploring projection and hysteria, as she did in her magnificent novel about art and personality, *What I Loved*, and brought closer to home in the quizzical memoir-cum-scientific history-cum-philosophical investigation *The Shaking Woman: A History of My Nerves*” (par.3). Jordan then continues by stating that despite “a brief but spectacular breakdown in a psychiatric unit” (par.1) affecting the novel’s heroine, *Summer Without Men* depicts the different female characters in a “grip of change: the girls, becoming women; Lola, learning to be a mother; Mia, expecting that Change we euphemise with a capital letter; and her mother and friends, facing the final inevitable transformation.” (par.3). For that reason, Jordan argues that it is “selfhood—the limits and lineaments of identity” that “is Siri Hustvedt’s greatest subject: the way it changes over time, the extent to which it is subject to the force of others, and the influence it brings to bear on the outside world” (par.3). Indeed, as Jordan argues, it is the limitations of one’s identity and in particular the limitations of the gendered body that lie at the heart of Hustvedt’s writing.

It is important to note, however, that there is one important area that Jordan overlooks in her analysis of *Summer Without Men*. Namely, that when focusing too much on the elements of mental breakdown experienced by different female characters in Hustvedt’s literature, there lies the danger in sustaining the patriarchal notion of women as neurotic. In other words, by applying too much importance to the psychological exploration depicted in the female characters as a sign of mental instability one can be said to contribute to the perception of women

in a process of change as “madwom[e]n in the attic”, to borrow the expression coined by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979).

Nevertheless, the subject of mental illness remains a popular field of study in relation to Hustvedt’s writing, and the theme has been explored from many different perspectives. In Jerry Aline Flieger’s article “Postmodern Perspective: The Paranoid Eye” Flieger specifically “deals with the relation between paranoia and postmodernism” (87) in Hustvedt’s *The Blindfold* and Raymond Queneau’s *Les Fleures Bleues*. Flieger applies the different perspectives of prominent philosophers such as Jean François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Lacan and their respective understanding of paranoia. In her analysis she specifically argues that “paranoia serves as both theme and mode of Siri Hustvedt’s frightening novel *The Blindfold*” (104). She adds that it is also “a structural device” that is so predominant in the text that it makes the reader wonder “if Paris, and the other persecutors, are projections, figments of Iris’s own fevered imagination” (105). Even though Flieger presents an interesting analysis of paranoia in regard to its theoretical perspectives, as seen in her detailed analysis of “paranoid modality, its relation to the specular and the visible, and hence its relation to the Lacanian Imaginary mode” (88), she does not pay sufficient attention to the importance of linking the theoretical aspect of paranoia as presented by Lacan to the patriarchal world view evident in *The Blindfold*. As a result, Flieger’s reading of the elements of paranoia in *The Blindfold* contributes to an understanding of the novel as “paranoid fiction” (106) and illustrates how “the postmodern condition leads to illness, a system closed upon itself, a state of isolation and a collapse of the intersubjective network, leaving only derisory and ‘pornographic’ shards of distorted reality” (107). By describing the novel as belonging to “paranoid fiction”

and connecting its protagonist Iris with terms such as “illness”, “isolation” and “distorted reality” Flieger’s analysis not only depicts its narrator as an unreliable narrator, it also, and more importantly, contributes to undermining the process of women’s liberation by depicting women such as Iris as paranoid creatures who imagine things that supposedly never existed.

The subject of female hysteria is also explored by Christine Marks in her article “Hysteria, Doctor-Patient Relationships, and Identity Boundaries in Siri Hustvedt’s *What I Loved*”. In this text, Marks specifically analyses “the relation between illness and constructions of feminine identity in Hustvedt’s interpretation of hysteria” (par.2). Even though she primarily focuses on Hustvedt’s *What I Loved* her analysis includes the depiction of female hysteria in *The Blindfold*. Marks argues that “anxiety . . . finds expression in most of Hustvedt’s works: physical thresholds and distinctions between self and other emerge as permeable and unstable constructs” (par.1). This idea of the body as an unstable construct is further stressed by Marks when she notes that “Hustvedt’s interpretation of hysteria” can be described “as an example of a self which has become overmixed with its environment, in which the distinction between inside and outside has become blurred to the point of dissolution” (par.2). According to Marks, the emergence of hysteria as seen in Hustvedt’s body of work should be seen as a result of an unhealthy environment in which a person is prohibited from expressing themselves in a natural way and therefore experiences an identity crisis. This sense of hysteria is further stressed by Marks when arguing that the different female characters in Hustvedt’s work, including Iris, all experience a sense of being “bereft of” their “identity” by the male characters who in different ways intrude into “their privacy” (par.15). This intrusion mentioned by Marks can be

seen in the passage where George publishes a photograph of Iris without her consent and thereby gains control over her by “delivering a part of the self to the world in a representation that is beyond the control of the person photographed” (Marks par.15). For that reason, she describes Hustvedt’s “explorations of hysteria as an escape from a society in which women were overpoweringly restricted . . . ” (par.2). In Marks’s view, hysteria is therefore the only suitable reaction for women such as Iris when they have been emotionally violated and society prevents them from exercising another way to express themselves in this situation. As such, the debatable existence of female hysteria present in *The Blindfold*, should not be seen as a sign of paranoia or a form of instability as argued by Flieger. Rather, it should be observed as a woman’s refusal to remain silenced when experiencing injustice.

Previous research has shown that there is no shortage of disagreement when it comes to Hustvedt’s depiction of female identity and its destructive limitations. It is important to note, however, that the majority of the earlier critical studies have almost exclusively concerned her other novels. *The Blindfold* has, despite its popularity, remained relatively unexamined, at least when it comes to addressing issues concerning feminist criticism and queer studies. For that reason, this thesis aims to contribute to the field of academic studies of Hustvedt’s text by looking closely at the characterisation of Iris and her exploration of gender roles through transvestism. In doing so, it will pay particular attention to the motive behind Iris’s turn to transvestism. Equally, this thesis aims to investigate to what extent Iris’s cross-dressing can be seen as an escape from her life and/or an expression of a hidden desire.

Moreover, this thesis will also analyse the changes—other than those relating to clothes—that can be seen in *The Blindfold* when Iris transforms into Klaus. To be

more precise, it will examine to what degree Iris's transformation empowers her position in society. In other words, this thesis aims to deepen the understanding of Hustvedt's *The Blindfold* beyond the existing body of critical work which relates the novel to psychoanalysis, postmodernism and Gothic themes. It is true that, in the novel, one can find a presence of paranoia and other forms of fragmentation often associated with schools of thought such as postmodernism and psychoanalysis. However, this thesis will argue that the presence of paranoia, the instability of identity and the suppression of female sexuality suggest a critical attitude towards the stereotypical and oppressive gender identification present in patriarchal western society.

This thesis will apply theoretical concepts drawn from feminist criticism and queer studies, in particular Judith Butler's ground breaking theory of gender performativity. It will focus on three aspects in relation to the depiction of Iris. The first chapter "Trapped in a Man's World: The Destructive Limits of the Female Body" will focus on Iris's relationships with the men in her life and how they affect her sense of identity. The second chapter "Making 'Gender Trouble' through the Act of 'Undoing Gender': Good Bye Iris, Hello Klaus!" analyses the inner transformation that occurs when Iris 'becomes' Klaus. Finally, in the third chapter "Mental Breakdown or Gender Emancipation" the thesis will explore if the 'mental breakdown' of Iris can be seen as an act of sickness or defiance.

Judith Butler and the Theory of Gender Performativity

One of the most influential critical theorists within gender studies has been Judith Butler. Butler's theory of gender performativity and her revolutionary analysis of the term 'gender' and how it is turned into practice in modern society is

particularly useful when it comes to understanding the identity crisis experienced by Iris in *The Blindfold*.

Already from the beginning of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler makes it clear that her analysis of the term gender will be different from other studies undertaken by earlier feminists. This can be seen in the way she specifically challenges the accepted definition of women made by the feminist movement in which “the term *women* denotes a common identity” (*Gender Trouble* 6). According to Butler, this is the first and most serious mistake of the feminist movement. This is explained by the fact that it is in the silent acceptance of the notion of a common female identity and thereby common female “goals” and a common “political representation” (*Gender Trouble* 3) that feminism can be said to undermine their own political movement when choosing to abide by the patriarchal notion of women as a specific species with common attributes. In other words, according to Butler, in their political campaign for equal rights feminists made the mistake of trying to establish a specific and unifying identity for women, and can therefore be said to reinforce “the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (*Gender Trouble* 5). In doing so, the feminist movement fell into the danger of presenting the specific living situation and goals of women as something unique to them, and thereby seen as a natural outcome of the female experience. For that reason, Butler argues for the need of “a radical rethinking of the ontological construction of identity” within feminist theory “in order to formulate a representational politics that might revive feminism on other grounds” (*Gender Trouble* 8). Butler begins this rethinking by questioning the way feminism has distinguished sex as something biological and gender as a cultural phenomenon. In her gender analysis she demands a new and

improved distinction between sex/gender. By challenging the feminist perspective of the sex/gender system Butler successfully accentuates the existing conflict between feminism and queer theory in regards to the meaning of sexual difference as explored in this thesis.

In contrast to other feminists, Butler challenges the whole idea that there exists a difference between sex and gender since it is impossible to refer to “a ‘given’ sex or a ‘given’ gender without first inquiring into how sex and/or gender is given, through what means?” (*Gender Trouble* 10). She challenges this sex/gender distinction by simply arguing that “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair” (*Gender Trouble* 30). This notion of gender as non-existent is further emphasised by Butler when she argues that gender is simply a fantasy without a proper origin. This idea of gender as something that only exists in our perception is once more highlighted in Butler’s explanation of gender as “a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time” (*Gender Trouble* 22). As a result, Butler argues that gender should not be seen as “a noun” (*Gender Trouble* 33) but rather as a verb since “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (*Gender Trouble* 43-44). It is, however, important to note that even though Butler argues that gender is performative this does not simply mean that “one woke in the morning, perused the closet . . . for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place at night” (*Bodies That Matter* x). Instead, Butler explains that “no ‘one’ . . . takes on a” specific gender (*Bodies That Matter* 232) but rather that our gender

roles in society should be seen as “a form of social power” or a “norm . . . that is acted out in social practice and reidealized and reinstated in and through the daily social rituals of bodily life” (*Undoing Gender* 48). As we have seen, it is Butler’s view that gender is a performative act performed by our bodies but she emphasises the need to understand that this “kind of doing” is not something that should be seen as “automatic or mechanical” or something that one is doing “alone” (*Undoing Gender* 1). On the contrary, Butler points out that “one is always ‘doing’ with or for another” since “the terms that make up one’s own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author” (*Undoing Gender* 1). This notion of gender as something that is forced upon a person is further elaborated upon in Butler’s theory of gender as regulated by society, that is a system that “makes (certain things) regular” through the different modes of “discipline and surveillance” (*Undoing Gender* 55). Nevertheless, Butler believes that these modes of discipline by society are not enforced through a legal system but can rather be seen as social norms presented by society as something to be pursued. Butler informs us that it is not until someone rejects these gender norms that one becomes aware of their consequences.

Butler’s theory of gender performativity can be applied to the characterisation of Iris and the gender fluidity that is being explored in *The Blindfold*. It not only helps to bring attention to the regulatory gender norms present in Iris’s life but also, and more importantly, helps to illustrate the consequences of this social regulation in the increased level of illness and medical treatment experienced by the protagonist.

Trapped in a Man’s World: The Destructive Limits of the Female Body

The novel mysteriously begins by referring to a man unknown to the reader who has affected Iris in a very powerful way: “sometimes even now I think I see him in the street or standing in a window or bent over a book in a coffee shop. And in that instant, before I understand that it’s someone else, my lungs tighten and I lose my breath” (Hustvedt 9). This quotation is of importance for the discussion concerning Iris and her relationship to men and how this affects her sense of identity, since it shows that, even after her relationship with this man has ended, he still has the power to affect her to the point that she is unable to breathe properly. If this shortage of breath should be seen as a sign of fear or a strong sense of passion—or both—is a matter of interpretation; nevertheless, it does demonstrate how Iris has been affected by the men in her life to such an extent that, even after the relationship has ended, she still feels haunted by it. It also hints at the fact that the novel refers to the unknown man before introducing the protagonist herself, who is supposed to be at the centre of the story. This can be seen as the first indication of the male-centred world in which women play the role of second-class citizens. The clearly hierarchal system of male domination and female subordination evident in *The Blindfold* is explored by Tracy Johnson in her article “The Fear Industry, Women, Gothic and Contemporary Crime Narrative”. In her article Johnson argues that “the novel draws attention to the nature of gendered identities as productions within shifting societal power structures, looking at both feminine and masculine readings of the self” (54). This connection between power structure and construction of the gendered self is visible in the portrayal of the relationship between Iris and Mr. Morning.

Mr. Morning is the first person to be properly introduced in the novel and already from the beginning it becomes obvious that the professional relationship

between Mr. Morning and Iris is anything but equal. This unequal power structure is first seen in the way Iris retells the way she was treated by Mr. Morning the very first time they met in person: “Without any apparent reserve, he looked at me, taking in my whole body with his gaze . . . I felt assaulted and turned away from him . . . ” (Hustvedt 11). At this point, one can clearly feel the sexual objectification of Iris in the way Mr. Morning, in an uninhibited manner, and without any hesitation, views Iris as an object for him to assess, instead of as a fellow person to respect. This scene specifically shows the “social practice” in patriarchal society “which reproduces women’s bodies . . . within gendered power relations” wherein the “common-sense view of women’s bodies as an object of the gaze” (Blood 37) is normalised as a male privilege as illustrated by Sylvia K. Blood in her book *Body Work: The Social Construction of Women’s Body Image*. Another significant factor to consider in relation to the quotation cited above is the effect this sexual objectification of Iris has on their future relationship. It not only, as Blood argues, “reproduces gendered power relations via” Mr. Morning’s gaze on Iris’s body, but it also contributes to the fact that Iris starts to view herself as “an object of . . . [her] own gaze” (37). This gendered power relation is seen in the way Mr. Morning is the one in control of the situation through his superior position as the employer, a privilege he enjoys for his own entertainment. This conclusion is supported by looking at Mr. Morning’s oppressive behaviour, such as the way he plays with Iris by withholding important facts: “Be patient, and I think you’ll begin to understand me’. He was smiling” (Hustvedt 23), and also in the way he inhibits her from making significant contributions to the project by interrupting her: “I began to speak, but he stopped me” (22). This technique of withholding information is not restricted to Iris’s interaction with Mr. Morning. It

can also be seen in her previous romantic relationship with Stephen. This power play is noticeable when Iris examines what went wrong in their relationship: “our love affair was fitful and uneasy. Stephen was secretive. He enjoyed withholding information—the identity of a caller, the place of an appointment, the name of an old friend, even a book title . . . Stephen rationed his body, too, holding it back . . . as I lived in a state of constant longing” (41). These quotations demonstrate how these different men make a habit of withholding information from Iris in an attempt to maintain their superior position by excluding her from the situation, thus making it impossible for Iris to gain control, let alone maintain some level of independence. This is a view supported by Alise Jameson in her article “Pleasure and Peril Dynamic Forces of Power and Desire in Hustvedt's *The Blindfold*” in which she argues that: “if it is impossible to ascertain whether one is in control of a situation, then it also becomes impossible to consider oneself a unified subject, centered around a solid core” (422). Thus, one should not view Iris’s passivity as a sign of acceptance but rather as a result of her exclusion.

In addition, these passages also shed light upon the fact that the aforementioned men enjoy, or at least find some pleasure, in manipulating Iris. This indicates a social system where the male characters in *The Blindfold* rely on their superior position as the experts when constructing their identities. Mr. Morning’s belief in his own superiority is further highlighted when he specifically addresses his important position in society: “I know. I’m a specialist. I want to keep you pure and her nameless . . . I’m not fooling you. I need your help and if you know too much, I’ll lose you” (Hustvedt 28). In this instant, Mr. Morning specifically draws attention to the patriarchal system evident in Hustvedt’s text. More precisely, a system in which “women are not dominated or repressed by ‘power’, but are

subjected, educated and solicited by concerned professionals” that present “psychological ‘truths’” as something universally known (Blood 91). In other words, in its representation of the hierarchal relationship between Iris and Mr. Morning the text illustrates “the paternalistic tone” of Mr. Morning as an example of “the relation between the authority . . . and the (subordinate) women they address” (Blood 92) in which the “women are positioned in relation to the ‘expert’” (87) that is supposed to know more about women than they “do themselves” (92). This depiction of men as well-intentioned experts who want to help the clueless women is noticeable in the way Mr. Morning refers to himself as a ‘specialist’ whereas he uses words like ‘pure’ and ‘nameless’ when relating to Iris and other women. Moreover, the perception of women as something that men can possess is emphasised in the way Mr. Morning refers to them as ‘pure’ or ‘nameless’ objects that he can ‘keep’; in doing so, he depicts women as if they were some sort of service that he can dispense himself of or demand whenever he is in need.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out the fact that Mr. Morning is not alone in regards to his behaviour as the superior authority. Evidence of this ‘paternalistic voice’ mentioned by Blood can also be found in Iris’s relationship with George, a relationship that Iris describes at best as self-destructive where she gives and George takes. This is something Iris reflects upon when she looks back at their many conversations: “George has a way of talking to me as if he knew me better than I knew myself . . . George appeared open and frank, but in fact, he gave very little away . . . ” (Hustvedt 43-44). Yet again, Iris finds herself in another dysfunctional relationship with a man where she exposes herself as a willing patient ready for the men to dissect in the way they see fit. Yet, the men never

return the favour. Instead, their superior position as the examiner increases whereas Iris's role as the patient is sustained until the point where she finally becomes totally helpless. However, what also becomes obvious is that this system relies on the fact that women themselves help to reinforce this authoritarian social system in which men are the experts and the women the patients in need of help.

This depiction of men who need women to conform in order to sustain a hierarchal position is highlighted in different relationships Iris has with men. This becomes noticeable when Mr. Morning ends his relationship with her by requesting: "there's one last thing. Before you go, I want you to leave me something of yours" (Hustvedt 37), as well as in Paris's demand to see Iris's hair: "I think I want to see your hair . . . Take off your hat" (128). Both these demands reveal a specific need for men to possess certain parts of Iris for their own gratification. They also show how the men view their demands as something ordinary, something that they are in their rights to demand from women. This 'natural right' experienced by the men exemplifies the practice "within patriarchal society" of viewing women's bodies, and not men's, as if they are "'up for' discussion, dissection and display" regardless of women's participation (Blood 101). Even though Iris first refuses to comply with their demands by simply saying "no" (Hustvedt 37) or challenging the request: "I don't understand what you want" (129), towards the end she submits to both men's requests. Thus, attention is drawn to the fact that women such as Iris help to reinforce the objectification of women by accepting the role of female subordination.

However, this compliant behaviour leads to a sudden feeling of fear. Evidence of this fear is seen in the way Iris feels forced to escape a scene, away from these men: "avoiding his eyes, I looked away and swallowed hard. The gesture provoked

some mysterious emotion and I felt my mouth tremble . . . I turned around and began to push my way through the crowd” (Hustvedt 129) and “I imagine that he stood . . . and watched me rush to the stairs . . . I ran down one flight after another . . . I ran away . . .” (37-38). The situation that exists between submissiveness and fear experienced by Iris can be explained by looking at Simone de Beauvoir’s description of the construction of female identity. In *The Second Sex* she argues that “for the young girl, erotic transcendence consists in becoming prey in order to gain her ends. She becomes an object, and sees herself as object; she discovers this new aspect of her being with surprise: it seems to her that she has been doubled; instead of coinciding exactly with herself, she now begins to exist *outside*” (361). de Beauvoir further explains this by claiming that “there is from the beginning a conflict between her (a woman’s) autonomous existence and her objective self, her ‘being-the-other’; she is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object . . .” (308). This discussion of women being complicit in sustaining the unequal power hierarchy is also stressed by Butler in her analysis of the ‘heterosexual matrix’, in which she argues that the notion of “the masculine subject” as the one “to originate meanings” in society “requires that women reflect that masculine power and everywhere reassure that power of the reality of its illusory autonomy” (*Gender Trouble* 57).

The reality of women’s silent acceptance of this objectification observed by de Beauvoir is illustrated in *The Blindfold* in the way Iris continues to relinquish control in order to please the men she is surrounded by. This complete surrender is brought to the reader’s attention through Iris’s demeaning reasoning: “we shook hands and then just before I walked through the door, he [Mr. Morning] patted my arm. It was a gesture of sympathy and I accepted it as if it were owed to me”

(Hustvedt 24). It can also be seen in the silent acceptance by Iris of being ignored in her relationship with Professor Rose: “old men think they own the truth . . . his presence made me shrink, and though it irritated me, I also looked forward to that sensation of being dwarfed . . . ” (140-141). In these examples, one can not only sense the subconscious belief in Iris that she is somehow expected to accept men’s dominance but also that she finds satisfaction in complying with their requests. In doing so, Iris reaffirms the notion that women need to please men in order to fulfil a specific role ‘given’ to her as a woman in society and can thereby be said to support Butler’s notion of gender as something that is forced upon people through the act of social regulation.

However, the novel also depicts this female tendency to objectify themselves in Iris’s own experience of the dating scene as a young female student. Just as in her other relationships, there is a clear hierarchical system based on male dominance and female submission: “the warm weather made the boys eager. They were all in search of an object . . . their styles varied . . . the daring ones attacked me bodily, grabbing me in the hallway . . . planting big wet kisses on my lips . . . ” (Hustvedt 145-146). Not only does the novel depict men as aggressive and demeaning, thereby confirming de Beauvoir’s depiction of a society that teaches boys to establish their identity through actions whereas girls accept the “full abdication . . . consenting to become object in submission and adoration” (315); it also, and more importantly, alludes to the objectification of women by actually claiming that the male gender wants objects, not women.

This social dilemma depicted in women viewing themselves as objects is further illuminated in the text in the way Iris completely absorbs herself in the objects given to her by Mr. Morning, until the point where she cannot distinguish

between herself and these belongings. When examining the different objects, Iris experiences different levels of estrangement. This increasing degree of personal alienation can be seen in the experience of familiarity with each of these objects. When she puts on the gloves she has “the uncanny feeling” of seeing “the same glove on another hand” (Hustvedt 17). In examining the mirror she is incapable of focusing on anything else but her face. This level of identification with strange objects leaves Iris “overwhelmed by a feeling of disgust” like she has “intruded on a shameful secret, that I had seen what I should have not seen” (25). Johnson explains this “problematic representation of femininity . . . through the interpretation of disembodied artefact” depicted in *The Blindfold* as a representation of Iris’s mental destabilisation. She supports this by referring to the fact that Iris is: “confusing the . . . identity [of the different objects] with her own in a manner that becomes characteristic throughout the narrative as her sense of self is continually destabilized” (54). However, in solely viewing Iris’s connection to these objects as a sign of “psychological disturbance” (Johnson 54) Johnson overlooks the way the text displays these objects as a metaphor for Iris’s own objectification. Evidence in support of this can be seen in the way the details of the objects “disappear” throughout the examination until the point that Iris is unable to distinguish between the difference between herself and the objects. As a result, one can claim that Iris and the different objects have turned into one and the same thing.

This idea that Iris and the objects are one and the same is further strengthened by looking at the way the text presents the objects as non-existent, and bereft of an identity. Just like Iris, these belongings do not matter to the world, or in this case Mr. Morning. Instead, they only function as a useful tool for Mr. Morning to use

for his own possessive need to keep the memory alive: “I boxed them to keep them untouched . . . I feel sure that those things carry her imprint—the mark of a warm, living body on the world” (Hustvedt 13). This connection between the objects and Iris is emphasised in the scene where Iris describes the mirror as: “its surface was unscratched; it had no discernible odor; it was the same time a full and empty thing, dense with images in one place, vacant in another” (33) when the reader knows that she was unable to see anything else but her own reflection when examining it. This confusion, evident in the description of the objects as lacking a specific essence and its connection to Iris’s own identity crisis, can be explained by looking at Butler’s analysis of formless femininity. Butler argues that throughout history “the notion of the female body” has not been properly acknowledged “as a human form” (*Bodies That Matter* 53). This is based on the fact that at the same time the “feminine” is seen as something “permanent”, it is also viewed as “formless . . . without a body”, “non-living, shapeless non-thing which cannot be named” (53), as a result, Butler argues that “women can never ‘be’, according to this . . . precisely because they are the relation of difference . . . that cannot be understood as the simple negation or ‘Other’ of the always-already-masculine subject” (*Gender Trouble* 25). Drawing on Butler’s view of the female body as a non-existent entity in society, there exists a clear link between the emptiness seen in the objects and the objectification of Iris as seen in her relationships with different men. The inability of Iris to distinguish between the objects such as the mirror and herself is not just a sign of mental instability. On the contrary, it should be seen as a representation of the objectification of women. Iris is not just describing the mirror but, through her identification with the mirror, she is describing herself. She is the one who is full and empty at the same time, and

lacking in odour. The ‘imagined’ disappearance of the glove is also the realisation of Iris’s own disappearance.

Making ‘Gender Trouble’ through the Act of ‘Undoing Gender’: Good Bye Iris, Hello Klaus!

It can be seen from the previous chapter that Iris shows clear patterns of conforming to the patriarchal notion of the submissive woman by turning to men “for fulfilment or escape” (de Beauvoir 352) and, thereby, she ‘acts’ according to the role she has been given by society. It is also shown that this destructive behaviour exhibited by Iris contributes to her identity crisis, which can be seen in her increasing awareness of her own disappearance.

However, this submissive behaviour changes when Iris transforms into Klaus. In her analysis of the female characters in Hustvedt’s novels, Marks describes this turn to transvestism as “a strategy to gain freedom” (par.18). This perception of female empowerment argued by Marks is contrasted to Johnson’s interpretation of Iris’s change as merely a “costume” as well as a “parody” since it fails to achieve the element of empowerment needed to escape sexual oppression (58). Jameson, on the other hand, has approached the subject of transvestism from the perspective of sadomasochism explaining Iris’s cross-dressing as “an embodiment of sadomasochistic desires” (429). However, these analyses do not take into account that Iris’s turn to transvestism is an attempt by Iris to challenge the ‘given’ gender roles in society by ‘undoing’ her submissive role ‘given’ to her. This transformation is finally set into motion as the result of one event: the rape of another student. This conclusion is supported by looking at a scene where Iris specifically comments on why she started to dress like a man:

In the middle of June I was robbed . . . A week later, a young architecture student named Louise Hartwig was raped in the elevator by a man wearing a ski mask . . . the police . . . never found the man who hurt her . . . not long after the rape, I started wearing the suit . . . after work I would change into this disguise and take the subway home. I wore the hat . . . tucking my hair underneath it. My cohorts at Rudy's teased me about this new habit, but I had a reasonable explanation. 'No one bothers me . . . In the dark, people think I'm a man'". (Hustvedt 163-164)

As can be seen, her creation of Klaus is an attempt to protect herself from becoming a victim of a sexual assault. This can be seen in the fact that the burglary was not the event that made her dress as a man. It was the rape in her building that finally made her realise that it could have been her in that lift, and the realisation that the rapist could have entered her home with the intent to hurt her. The idea that Iris uses the suit as an act of defence is further strengthened in the way Iris defends her choice to wear the suit as a piece of camouflage, protecting her from being seen as a vulnerable target for men.

Having considered the motive behind Iris's transformation into Klaus, it is also reasonable to look at the behavioural changes that can be detected as a result of the change of gender. Already from the very first time Iris wears the suit one can notice a sudden change in her demeanour. This can be seen in the way she is suddenly more confident in her own body: "the suit brought for me was right for my tall, thin body . . . I was startled by the change in my appearance . . . the clothes created an image of sexual doubt . . . as I walked through the streets . . . I lengthened my stride in imitation of a man's step and pushed my hands deep into

the trouser pockets” (Hustvedt 123). This inner confidence suddenly exhibited by Iris is directly linked to the suit, and thereby demonstrates the fact that without the suit she lacks this bodily confidence necessary for a strong identity, or as argued by de Beauvoir: “not to have confidence in one’s body is to lose confidence in oneself” (355). This connection between gendered bodies and confidence or lack thereof is depicted in the transformation from Iris into Klaus, wherein Iris lacks the bodily confidence that Klaus inhibits. However, from the first moment Iris puts on the suit and realises that people might think of her as a man, she suddenly starts to act like one. This could be explained by looking at Butler’s explanation of femininity/masculinity as something that should not be seen as “the product of a choice” but rather as a “forcible citation of a norm” (*Bodies That Matter* 232), which causes people to behave a certain way after being labelled as being a girl or a boy. In other words, Butler explains that “in order to qualify and remain a viable subject” (*Bodies That Matter* 232) people conform to the gender roles ‘given’ to them by society, thereby explaining Iris’s imitation of traits connected to the male gender.

This increasing level of confidence in her own body is further stressed in the way Iris is able to stand up for herself when she is being insulted: “I had never said those words before. The insult had come easily, naturally, and . . . I thought: It’s the suit. The clothes were more than armor. They transformed me. Another person had leapt forward and spoken . . . I’m a new man, I thought to myself” (Hustvedt 164). This confidence can also be seen in the way Iris suddenly feels comfortable with her original dialect that she has worked hard to erase: “I even spoke differently as Klaus. I was less hesitant, used more slang, and favored colorful verbs. The Midwestern accent . . . returned” (170). As can be seen, when putting

on the suit and ‘becoming’ Klaus, Iris is in the act of ‘doing’ or ‘performing’ a specific role, that of the male body. This notion of doing the role of a man is emphasised in her own words when she describes how she is imitating “a man’s step”, or how she becomes a “new man”, thus indicating that she leaves her female gender behind. This depiction of the transformation from female till male gender supports Arthur Flannigan’s theory of the creation of masculinity as a “development” that “consists of rerouting . . . of the encoded female and . . . consists of imposing a male pattern” (243), which thereby leads masculinity to a state of “becoming” and “something to be achieved” in relation to the female state of “being” (241). Moreover, the behavioural change evident in Iris’s transformation into Klaus can further be explained by looking at Butler’s theory of gender as performative in the sense that “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (*Gender Trouble* 33). In other words, when Iris dresses in her suit and behaves like a ‘man’ she ultimately ‘becomes’ a man, as can be seen in her exclamation “I’m a new man” (Hustvedt 164).

This transformation of the gendered body “functions as a tool of deconstructing gender” (145), as argued by Sheila Koenig in her analysis of drag kings, that is, women who perform as entertainers by “caricaturing stereotypically masculine men” but still identify themselves as women (“Drag King”). This also, and more importantly, brings attention to the fact that gender is a performative act, as argued by Butler, by illuminating the fact that: “male masculinity . . . can be performed not just by male bodies but also by female ones, undermining in this way the notion that masculinity is inevitable and naturally inherent to men” (Aragón 136). This notion of masculinity as open to women challenges the idea of gender as

either masculine or feminine by presenting another option: the possibility of being both male and female, at the same time. This depiction of a ‘fluid’ and performative gender act in *The Blindfold* can be connected to Butler’s idea that “the parodic repetition of gender” as seen in Iris’s imitation of the male body “exposes . . . the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance” in its depiction of gender as “open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism . . . that reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (*Gender Trouble* 187). As a result, the text can be said to engage with the notion of multiple gender roles.

This interpretation of gender as fluid is highlighted by Iris’s specific distinction between Iris and Klaus as two separate beings: “I knew that from then on, the nights belonged to Klaus” (Hustvedt 166). The novel once more stresses the possibility of possessing both male and female genders at the same time when Iris explains how this affects her:

the gap between what I was forced to acknowledge to the world—namely, that I was a woman—and what I dreamed inwardly didn’t bother me. By becoming Klaus at night I had effectively blurred my gender. The suit, my clipped head and unadorned face altered the world’s view of who I was. (170)

In this passage, Iris draws attention to the social regulations of gender roles experienced since the naming of her as a “girl” (*Bodies That Matter* 232) when she is discussing how the social expectations placed upon her as a woman conflict with her own inner desire. It also emphasises a duality experienced by Iris, in which she fantasises about another reality. This inner desire of Iris to be something else than

a woman can be seen as an inner wish to be a man, and as such this is susceptible of being seen as queer or transsexual.

It is important, however, not to overemphasise the need to identify Iris as experiencing from identity and/or sexual difficulties by claiming that she belongs to the world of queer, and thereby potentially ignoring the social and sexual hierarchy that causes this situation. Even though Iris displays a fascination of the male persona throughout the story, it is always in relation to the social level of freedom limited to the male body. In other words, Iris exhibits a wish to experience the freedom of being a male in a patriarchal society, not the wish to have a male body. This desire to experience the degree of freedom enjoyed by the male gender is exemplified in a discussion between Iris and George where she gives voice to her longing by saying: “My God . . . you go climbing up fire escapes in New York City, snooping in the windows of strangers. You could be arrested, murdered . . . what would it be like to be a man? I thought” (Hustvedt 45-46). For that reason, it is important to emphasise that Iris should not be labelled as queer in the sense that she should not be included in the group of gay, lesbian and other sexual minorities. This opinion can be supported by looking at Butler’s discussion concerning the encounters between queer theory and feminism where she challenges the notion that “the analysis of transsexuality is best served within the frame of lesbian and gay studies” (“Against Proper Objects” 13), since this only derails the focus from the social norms which govern the assigned gender roles. This desire to label Iris as queer also draws attention to the different perspectives of gender identification and definitions of anti-normative behaviour between feminism and queer theory, in which the sexual binary established by feminism fails to include people such as Iris who do not share the ‘common’

experience of a specific gender into their analysis of gender roles, thereby contributing to the marginalisation of certain groups of society.

Nevertheless, the word 'queer' is still of importance for this thesis in the discussion of transvestism since *The Blindfold* depicts another way of life in Iris's transformation into Klaus that Judith Halberstam refers to as "queer time". She describes this as "new ways of understanding the nonnormative behaviors that have clear but not essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects" (8). This portrayal of queer time is seen throughout the story in Iris's turn to transvestism since it portrays "subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgendered embodiment" (Halberstam 1), otherwise impossible to explore. This definition of the term queer as transgressing the ascribed gender roles and not as a sexual orientation is further explored by William B. Turner in his book *A Genealogy of Queer Theory*, in which he challenges the narrow understanding of the term 'queer' by arguing that queerness is not exclusive to the gay community. This can be seen when he is claiming that "queerness indicates merely the failure to fit precisely within a category, and surely all persons at some time or other find themselves discomfited by the bounds of the categories that ostensibly contain their identities" (Turner 8). These re-definitions of the term queer are important for the discussion surrounding Iris's desire to cross-dress, since this draws attention to the fact that queerness should simply be connected to Iris's 'failure' to conform to the gender role 'given' to her by society. Claiming that Iris suffers from a crisis of sexual identification would only reaffirm the social norms that govern these gender roles and thus sustain the patriarchal view of women such as Iris who do not 'fit into' their given roles as 'unnatural'.

Mental Breakdown or Gender Emancipation?

It becomes evident throughout the story that Iris undergoes radical behavioural changes as a result of her transformation into Klaus. One should not overlook the fact that Iris does suffer from illness throughout the story. However, it is important to point out that this illness is merely physical in the form of recurring migraine headaches. Indeed, she does not show any signs of suffering from any mental illness leading to paranoid illusions as argued by Flieger or a destabilised mind as proposed by Johnson. Nevertheless, what is of interest for this discussion is not Iris's specific medical condition but rather the treatment she receives as a result of her disease. It is no coincidence that Iris suffers from migraine, a condition that causes headaches, nausea and increasing sensitivity, symptoms usually associated with the issue of female hysteria. As a result, her illness is not seen as a medical condition by society but rather as a sign of her own mental instability; a situation Iris is aware of when discussing her time spent in a mental institution:

as a migraineur, I had low status . . . they [the nurses] rarely spoke to me. They seemed suspicious . . . because I was guilty. It was clear to me that I had made the headache, created the monster myself, and just because I couldn't get rid of the damned thing didn't mean I wasn't to blame.
(Hustvedt 91)

Thus, a clear connection is made between Iris's medical condition as a migraineur and the notion of female hysteria as a mental condition caused by women themselves.

This question of female hysteria is further highlighted by *The Blindfold* in the

way it depicts the relationship between the doctors and Iris where the doctors “watch and judge, they record and chart, and thus assign meaning to hysterical identity” (Marks par.10) and show no interest in the stories of their patients: “I had tried to tell my story to six less famous physicians, and each time, I had lost my tongue. I felt that if only I could articulate my illness . . . but my words were always inadequate . . . he . . . interrupted me . . . and summarized my complaints . . .” (Hustvedt 92-94). This portrayal of Iris’s experience of her treatment once more depicts “a ‘classical’ allocation of the female as the objectified target of the male gaze” (Marks par.10). Thus, the emphasis is not only on the way women are subjugated into an inferior position by “concerned professionals” (Blood 91). Once more, attention is drawn to the male-centred world where women are primarily reduced to useful objects to be examined in order to please the men’s desire to feel superior, as already illustrated in Iris’s relationships with other men such as Mr Morning and Paris. Thus, to reduce Iris’s medical condition to a sign of mental breakdown is not merely a failure to see the regulatory norms mentioned by Butler which cause this “social punishment” in the form of “the medical and psychiatric pathologization” (*Undoing Gender* 55) of Iris; continuing to view Iris’s medical condition as a mental destabilisation also contributes to a reinforcement of these norms by once more viewing women such as Iris as hysteric.

There is also, however, a further point to be considered in relation to the discussion of Iris’s mental health. When confronted by Paris about her nightly adventures as Klaus, Iris seems to experience a sense of confusion: “When I undressed, I said to myself, It’s all over. It has to stop. The decision gave me some relief. Before I went to work the next day, I stood in front of my open closet eyeing the suit . . . I wasn’t ready. To hell with Paris” (Hustvedt 169). This passage

draws attention to the inner conflict seen in Iris throughout the text by depicting her inner struggle to conform to society and its notion of how women should behave and her own inner desire to transform into Klaus. The novel further stresses the consequences of the regulatory norms of society by showing how Iris grows increasingly unstable after being confronted by Paris: “I began to stay out later and later to put off returning to my . . . rooms. When I was home, I unplugged the phone, dreading a call from Paris” (169) and “I would sleep all day . . . my life had shrunk . . . I didn’t feel well . . . I suffered dizzy spells and would sink to my knees in an effort to stay conscious” (171). This suggests that the “destabilisation” of Iris’s “sense of self” (Johnson 54) should be seen as a direct result of Iris’s decision to go against the gender norms and not as evidence of a mental illness. According to Butler’s theory of gender it can be argued that by continuing to dress like Klaus, Iris is responsible for ‘undoing gender’ by challenging the notion of a strictly male or female identity and thus “becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability” by the way she “no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes . . . [her female body] fully recognizable” (*Undoing Gender* 3). In addition, in the process of ‘undoing’ her gender Iris can also be said to function as an example of those individuals who exist in a space referred to as ‘queer time’ by leaving “the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity . . . safety, and inheritance” (Halberstam 6) behind for a life of “strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric . . . practices” (1). As such, Iris’s deteriorating health is not a sign of a mental breakdown, but a consequence of the emancipation of the female body.

Despite the criticism put forward by earlier critics that *The Blindfold* cannot be considered a truly “feminist” novel (Jameson 422) since it “throws the

representation of feminine subjectivity further into question rather than proposing resolutions” (Johnson 54), a perspective based on the fact that “despite her masculine ‘suit’, Iris remains a victim” (58), the depiction of transvestism should be seen as a sign of female empowerment. Evidence for this position can be seen in the fact that Iris continues her transformation into Klaus after being confronted by Paris. This indicates an act of defiance on Iris’s behalf against the regulatory powers that imprison the female body into a specific place in society. Furthermore, Iris’s turn to transvestism can also be seen as a sign of gender emancipation in the way it empowers her to go against the stereotypical gender roles in society and do things she would never have been able to do in her female body. The connection between transvestism and female empowerment is best exemplified by Iris when she explains how her transformation into Klaus gives her the freedom to explore the urban environment: “I grew more daring as time went on, stopping in bars I wouldn’t have entered alone in the past, striking up conversations with strangers I would have once avoided” (Hustvedt 165) and “the nights were dangerous. I walked where I shouldn’t have walked alone, but my recklessness pleased me. I sang loudly in the darkness, whistled at strangers” (181-182). The idea that Iris would not have been able to go through with her nightly adventures if she would not have been dressed as a man can be supported by looking at Janet Wolff’s analysis of the forgotten phenomena of the *flâneuse*. In her text, Wolff argues that throughout history women have not been able to “adopt the non-existent role of a *flâneuse*” (41) since the “freedom to move around in the city” (40) has always been the prerogative of the male body. For that reason, she argues that “the central figure of the *flâneur* in . . . literature . . . can only be male” (37). Wolff further argues that since women cannot adopt the role of the “person on the margins of

society” whose home is that of “the streets and arcades of the city” (40), the disguise of the male body in the form of transvestism makes the “life of flâneur available” to women (41). This connection between transvestism and female emancipation is depicted in Iris’s nightly adventures as Klaus where she explores a world otherwise impossible to explore in her female body. By embodying the male persona through the act of cross-dressing Iris not only demonstrates the destructive limits of the female body. She can also be said to reclaim her right to the city. This notion of transvestism as a tool for female empowerment is a view supported by Marks in her analysis of the female characters in Hustvedt’s novels where she argues that “cross-dressing must be seen as an act of rebellion against the discursive pressures weighing on the female subject” (par.18). For these reasons, the transformation of Iris should be viewed as an attempt to struggle for the emancipation of the female body.

Conclusion

The Blindfold relates a story of female identity in its characterisation of Iris Vegan and her struggle to find her own identity in a male-dominated world. This powerful portrayal of the female gender, identity crises and different levels of physical illness has previously been overlooked by critics who view Hustvedt’s text as merely a story of a mentally ill woman suffering from paranoid illusions, a view put forward by Flieger. Nevertheless, this reading of the novel not only discredits Iris as an unreliable narrator, it also, and more importantly, does not take into account the social norms in patriarchal society which ultimately cause this

identity crisis. In addition, it also contributes to a reaffirmation of the regulatory gender norms by depicting women such as Iris who refuse to fit into their assigned gender role as paranoid.

Iris's 'mental destabilisation' is thus interpreted as a representation of the existing objectification of women in society which develops into an internalised objectification in women. This is seen in the novel in Iris's different relationships with men, and further developed in her continuing identification with the objects given to her by Mr Morning. As a result, the instability of identity and the increasing levels of confusion seen in the characterisation of Iris should be seen as a criticism directed towards the highly stereotypical and oppressive gender identification present in patriarchal western society as illustrated throughout the novel in Iris's unequal relationships with different men, where she is constantly being assigned different gender roles to fit each man's individual purpose. This is further emphasised in the way the novel challenges the restrictive gender role assigned to women by society when portraying the medical treatment of Iris as another opportunity for society to force women such as Iris into female subordination.

By addressing the question of sexual identification in relation to Iris's multiple gender, it was revealed that Iris's desire to transform herself into Klaus is not a sign of a hidden desire within her but rather a deliberate choice to escape from the restricted limits of the female body by performing the gender role typically assigned to the male body. Evidence in support of this can be found in Iris's decision to create Klaus as an attempt to protect herself from becoming a victim of a sexual assault. In other words, by analysing Iris's dual identity as both Iris, the submissive female, and Klaus, the dangerous flâneur, another reality has been

presented, in which there exists a possibility of fluid or even multiple genders as seen in the transformation of Iris into Klaus. This exploration of Iris's transformation has also revealed that there exists a clear connection between the possibility of multiple genders and female emancipation. Indeed, Iris's gender transformation clearly challenges the hierarchal structure of male dominance and female subordination by refusing to fit into her assigned role as a woman. Although her transformation into Klaus does not exclude her from social punishment as evident in her time spent in a mental institute, Iris's transformation into Klaus should still be seen as a sign of female empowerment. This can be supported by Iris's decision to continue her gender transformation despite being confronted by Paris which under the circumstances should only be seen as a form of defiance against the regulatory powers that imprison the female body.

This interpretation has not only contributed to the field of feminist studies of Hustvedt's text by challenging earlier readings of the novel. It has also, and more importantly, established a connection between female empowerment and transvestism in its analysis of the representation of 'fluid' gender roles, thereby bringing the question of queer theory into the discussion. However, even though words such as drag kings, queer time, transsexuals and flâneuse have been discussed in regards to the concept of transvestism, to label Iris in accordance with these terms should be avoided since such a categorisation would only draw attention away from the social and gender hierarchy evident in patriarchal society. Nevertheless, by drawing attention to these concepts this thesis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of alternative lifestyles depicted in *The Blindfold* in its discussion of Iris's transvestism, and thereby inspire other critics to view the novel

from a queer perspective, and thereby challenge the accepted notion of gender within feminist theory.

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