Degree Project

Level: Bachelor’s

Rebellions against Society’s Control and Beauty Ideals in Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* Series

How the Pressure to Be Pretty Can Start a Rebellion

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Introduction

“What you do, the way you think, makes you beautiful.”

(Uglies 279)

The Uglies series presents a post-apocalyptic society where everyone turns pretty after their 16th birthday, when they go through a mandatory beauty operation. The main protagonist is a girl named Tally Youngblood and the series follows her and her friends in their rebellion against societal control. The Uglies series is written by Scott Westerfeld and it is a trilogy-plus-one series, with the fourth novel being told from a different point of view. When Tally Youngblood’s new friend Shay runs away to the Smoke, a hidden refuge in the wild, to escape the operation, Tally is brought in by the Special Circumstances, a covert government unit which keeps the city under control. Tally is given a choice; to betray her friends and help find the Smoke or stay “ugly” forever. When Tally finds the Smoke she learns the truth about what a person must sacrifice to become “pretty”. What Tally and most people do not know about the Pretty Operation is that brain lesions are added to specific areas of the brain. The mandatory Pretty Operation is a consequence of a war that happened hundreds of years before Tally’s lifetime. Two of the main reasons behind the war were the extreme exploitation of world resources and heightened conflict among people with different cultures and ethnicities. Conflict among people was still an issue because many continued to view people with different cultures and ethnicities with suspicion. To solve this problem scientists came up with the solution to make everyone pretty because previous research showed that beautiful people lived better lives.
However, conflict still existed and in secret the brain lesions were introduced into the Pretty Operation to make people more compliant and unaggressive. To keep an eye on humanity and to make sure that the same mistakes are not repeated the so-called Specials are created. The Special Operation is not given to everyone, but only to those who can defeat the brain lesions on their own. This operation results in the patient becoming intimidatingly beautiful to get immediate obedience and respect. Over the course of the series Tally and her friends struggle to maintain their sense of self after having gone through both the Pretty Operation and the Specials Operation, all while trying to fight off society’s attempts to control them.

In order to analyze the dystopian society, the notion of beauty and rebellion in the Uglies series a feminist dystopian theory will be used. The main characteristic of dystopian theory that is relevant for this thesis is the use of dystopian fiction as social criticism. M. Keith Booker analyses the subject of social criticism in dystopian novels in his book The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism, where he states that the issues and conflicts in fictional dystopian societies can be directly linked with our real world societal issues (18-9). The subject of social criticism is also discussed in Booker’s study Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide, where he argues how important imaginative literature is for any culture that needs to see how the societies of today should explore new alternative ways to define themselves. This connects with his statement that dystopian fiction critiques the existing social conditions by expanding certain systems and conditions, such as beauty operations and the current pressure to be physically attractive and placing them into different contexts that reveal their contradictions and flaws (3). This aspect of dystopian
fiction is relevant to the thesis since rebelling against society is the ultimate manifestation of social criticism.

That dystopian fiction functions as social criticism is discussed by Raffaella Baccolini in her article “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science-Fiction.” She argues that the science fiction genre, which is the genre to which the dystopian novel belongs, has the potential to make readers think critically about their own society. By envisioning different worlds and societies, the reader can see the differences and injustices of somewhere else, which can move the reader to possibly change and act upon this realization (519-520). In Westerfeld’s series it is Tally who functions as the reader of her own world. She is not able to see how controlling and absurd her society is until arriving at the Smoke. She needs to be aware that different kinds of societies exist in order to think critically about her own society. According to Rosemary Moore-Clement in her essay “Challenging the Gods”, Tally begins rebelling against society even before she started to think critically about it. Tally does not act upon her realization with purpose until she has viewed society from a distance. Shay, on the other hand, has viewed society critically for years and she is aware that her desire to rebel comes from society’s need to control its citizens. This is considered by Ann M. M. Childs in her essay “The Incompatibility of Female Friendships and Rebellion”, where she argues that it is Shay’s social criticism that works as the driving force behind her rebellion against society. In the Uglies series it is Tally’s friend Shay who shows Tally another way of looking at their society. Shay already has a critical opinion about their society, and when she runs away to the Smoke she is acting upon her realization about the society she has grown up in.
In addition to dystopian theory as social criticism another important part of this thesis is the feminist analysis of beauty constructs in dystopian fiction like the *Uglies* series. Beauty constructs and the myth surrounding beauty are discussed by Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth*, where she states that the relationship between female beauty and female liberation is significant (9). Wolf asserts that women become stereotypes by their culture to fit into the beauty myth of the ideal woman by “flattening the feminine into beauty-without-intelligence or intelligence-without-beauty” (59). This is relevant since the New Pretty Operation in *Uglies* does not only turn people into ‘pretties’, it controls them with the use of the brain lesions. This type of social criticism with a feminist perspective is offered by Sonya Sawyer Fritz in her essay “Girl Power and Girl Activism in the Fiction of Suzanne Collins, Scott Westerfeld, and Moira Young”, where she analyzes rebellious acts performed by defiant teen girls in young adult fiction. Fritz argues that Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* series has contributed to the new feminist era and explores the complications that Tally faces for being an empowered young woman and activist. This offers a relevant perspective on the female characters and their rebellion in *Uglies*. Another author who discusses the role of female rebellion and social criticism is Robin Wasserman in her essay “Best Friends for Never”. Wasserman’s essay examines the main protagonist’s best friend, offering another perspective on how social criticism and feminism can shape a young girl’s choices.

The subject of feminism regarding gender roles and dystopian fiction is considered by M. Keith Booker in his article “Woman on the Edge of a Genre: The Feminist Dystopias of Marge Piercy”, where he states that the subject of dystopian fiction often centers around the concept of sexuality, but regardless of
this very little has changed or challenged the traditional and conventional notions of gender roles in the dystopian genre. Booker argues that most dystopian novels are traditional in their gender roles, they are places where “men are men and women are women, and in relatively conventional ways” (337). He states that this is because Western civilization has such ingrained patriarchal preconceptions about what is female and what is male. Booker suggests that Western civilization has a deep-seated perception about what constitutes beauty and this can lead to dystopian novels that follow traditional Western norms, concerning matters such as gender roles (337-8). These subjects of gender roles and Western beauty standards in patriarchal societies are discussed by Mary Jeanette Moran in her essay “The Three Faces of Tally Youngblood: Rebellious Identity-Changing in Scott Westerfeld’s ‘Uglies’ Series”. Moran explores why society in the Uglies series still has traditional gender roles, even though everyone must go through the mandatory beautification operation and how that relates to a patriarchal structure in society. Another text that explores the subject of gender roles and femininity in the Uglies series is Victoria Flanagan’s “Girl Parts: The Female Body, Subjectivity and Technology in Posthuman Young Adult Fiction.” Flanagan argues that Uglies challenge today’s “contemporary gender politics” with the utilization of the term ‘pretties’ as an adjective that describes both men and women (43). Booker, Moran and Flanagan’s respective texts are of importance for the thesis since they provide an insight into how traditional Western gender roles impact the characters, their actions and the society in Uglies.

Race in dystopian novels is another subject that is affected by Western civilization’s perception of what beauty should be, and this is considered by Mary J. Couzelis in her essay “The Future is Pale: Race in Contemporary Young Adult
Dystopian Novels”, where she examines how whiteness and being Caucasian is privileged in the *Uglies* series. The matter of the standardization of Western beauty ideals in dystopian fiction is also discussed by Sara K. Day in her article “Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels”, where she argues that the norm of the Caucasian female hero is only reinforced by the standardization of Western beauty ideals. Moran also takes part in the discussion of race and argues that Western bias plays a big part in young adult dystopian fiction, especially among the female characters. Another fact that plays a part in the discussion about race and beauty is Moran’s suggestion about the cult of beauty. The cult of beauty is described by Moran as a feeling of being constantly inadequate and undesirable if one is not following society’s beauty standards. Moran argues that the society in *Uglies* not only manipulates the minds of people during the Pretty operation, but that the manipulation of people’s minds starts long before that (132).

Baccolini discusses another pertinent feminist perspective of the dystopian literary genre in her previously mentioned article, namely the notion of what is normal and what is deviant. In this thesis, the concept of what is deviant and what is normal concerns the issue of how a person should act and look in order to be accepted by his or her peers and the society they live in. Deviance and the concept of the Other is discussed by Virginia Blum in her article *Becoming the Other Woman: The Psychic Drama of Cosmetic Surgery*. Blum argues that the cosmetic operations, such as the mandatory beauty operation in *Uglies*, creates this idea of “the Other Woman”, an ideal model version of one’s self and that beholds the potential to always be superior.
The aim of this thesis is to examine the notion of how beauty is defined in the *Uglies* series and how social criticism with a feminist perspective motivates the characters in the story to rebel against society’s control, beauty ideals and the mandatory beauty operations. The thesis will claim that the character’s rebellion against society’s control and Western beauty standards is driven by their desire to keep their own self-identity and the analysis will be done using dystopian theory that focuses on social criticism with a feminist perspective. The first chapter of the thesis will examine the notion of what constitutes beauty in the *Uglies* series by using social criticism with a feminist perspective to argue from where beauty gets its power and to examine race and gender roles in the *Uglies* series. The second chapter of the thesis will analyze the rebellion against society in the *Uglies series* by exploring how and why the characters rebel against societal control through beauty ideals.

**The Notion of Beauty**

In the *Uglies* series the world has supposedly removed the pressure to be beautiful and attractive by a mandatory cosmetic and beautification operation that turns everyone into the ideal beauty standard. Mary Jeanette Moran states in her essay “The Three Faces of Tally Youngblood: Rebellious Identity-Changing in Scott Westerfeld ‘Uglies’ Series” that Westerfeld uses Tally’s perspective to explore the assumptions about what constitutes beauty, and how society and individuals respond to beauty in the *Uglies* series by focalizing the story through Tally. Furthermore, Moran adds that since the *Uglies series* takes place in the post-apocalyptic United States, beauty is most often portrayed as Caucasian and has a Western bias (124). An example of this Western bias can be found in the fourth
chapter of the first book, *Uglies*. Tally and Shay use a computer program that produces potential pretty faces by making morphological models of their faces. Tally makes a morphological model of Shay’s face and says, “and maybe a bit lighter?” when talking about Shay’s skin tone and chooses a shade that is closer to the Caucasian baseline (*Uglies* 43). This suggests that Tally’s perception of beauty is that a lighter skin tone is prettier than a darker skin tone. Tally does not think about the manner in which her action can be interpreted; she just thinks the way society has taught her. An action like this proves that Tally’s society has a Western-based beauty ideal by preferring a lighter skin tone over a darker one. Sara K. Day also writes about the standardization and racialization of Western beauty ideals in her article, “Docile Bodies, Dangerous Bodies: Sexual Awakening and Social Resistance in Young Adult Dystopian Novels”, where she states that the current norms about race and beauty are reinforced if the female heroes in young adult fiction are portrayed as Caucasian (89). It can be argued that racial differences are completely erased in Tally’s society, since the beautification operation process includes a whitening of the skin tone. Both Tally and Shay, the two most prominent characters in the *Uglies* series, are Caucasian or go through the whitening process. This suggests that the issue of race in *Uglies* is simply removed from society instead of being dealt with.

Furthermore, this correlation of race and beauty is expanded upon in Mary J. Couzelis’ essay, where she states that the notion of beauty is racialized by the privileging of whiteness in the *Uglies* series. She argues that even though the text examines the notion of beauty through the eyes of the character, the characters themselves never ask how race is involved in the act of defining beauty (135). Thus, the characters never realize or even think about the implications of their
actions regarding race. A clear example of this can be found by returning to the previously mentioned scene from the first book, *Uglies*, where Tally and Shay create morphological models of their faces. This tends to suggest that beauty becomes racialized, meaning that beauty is defined by race, in the *Uglies* society. Society’s leaders in *Uglies* claim that racial conflict issues played a considerable role in the destruction of the world and their solution is a simple one: to erase differences among people by making everyone white and thus surrendering to the discourse of the dominant racial group. Most people growing up in Tally’s society during the last decades do not comprehend the implication of changing every skin tone into the same range of Caucasian ones. For Tally, making Shay’s skin lighter is following the norm set by society and she does not see it as doing something wrong. She does not understand that an action like making a person’s skin tone lighter is racist and responds to an ingrained racist perspective.

The nature of beauty in the *Uglies* series can be viewed as subjective, since the story is focalized throughout Tally’s perspective and her opinions about her world. Already in the beginning of the series Westerfeld displays subjectivism in *Uglies*, which is evident in the very first line of the first book when Tally is watching a sunset and describes the sky as being “the color of cat vomit” (3). She soon realizes that it is her impatience about having to wait until her 16th birthday before she can go through the Pretty Operation that causes her to see the sunset as ugly instead of beautiful. It can be argued that the beautification of everyone reinforces how important it is to be beautiful, instead of being the solution to problems like racial tension or war. It was intended that a beautification operation would remove the pressure from young people to meet society’s beauty ideals, but it had the opposite effect instead. The kids and young adults in the *Uglies* society
continue to identify themselves and those around them as “uglies”, which causes people to feel inferior from childhood. Already in the first chapter of *Uglies* Tally makes several comments about how everyone is longing for the opportunity to finally lose their flawed physical attributes, which reinforces the idea that in the *Uglies* society people believe that they are born ugly. Tally has been taught that people automatically look for certain markers, like symmetrical features or full lips, when meeting someone. “A million years of evolution had made it part of the human brain” (*Uglies* 16), is how she explains her assumptions that everyone is ugly because they have physical flaws before going through the Pretty Operation. It can be argued that this feeling of being inadequate and unattractive before going through the Pretty Operation is a consequence of the “cult of beauty” concept that Moran discusses in her previously mentioned essay (132).

Relating to the cult of beauty is Naomi Wolf’s concept surrounding the beauty myth which she discusses in her book *The Beauty Myth*. If a person thinks or feels that they are ugly, it does not matter what they look like according to Wolf (272). The subjection to society’s absurd beauty and aesthetic ideals begins already during childhood, so the people in Tally’s society are already manipulated into thinking that society’s norm for beauty is the only correct one. This is evident in Tally during the first part of *Uglies*, where she states multiple times how everyone is ugly before going through the Pretty Operation. As Wolf puts it “one must feel and society must agree that some parts of the body are not worthy of life, though they are still living” (266). An example of this is when Tally and Shay are arguing about how society has programmed people into thinking that anything else but society’s beauty norm is ugly. Tally states that “it’s not programming, it’s just a natural reaction… now everyone’s ugly… until they’re pretty” (*Uglies* 83). The
brain lesions that are inserted into the brain of pretties are only one part of the manipulation of how people view beauty in the *Uglies* society. Growing up, Tally is surrounded by pretty adults. Her parents, her teachers and everyone else whom she meets in society, except children under 16, have gone through the Pretty Operation. Thus, a specific type of beauty canon is ingrained in Tally’s mindset since birth. This can clearly be seen in the first book *Uglies*, when Tally cannot believe that David, a native Smokie and a so-called ugly, finds her to be beautiful and an object of desire without her having gone through the Pretty Operation (*Uglies* 276).

Westerfeld’s choice to use a female protagonist reveals that it is mostly women and girls who are affected by the expectations of beauty, as Moran argues. She states that when viewing the world that exists in the *Uglies* series it seems like it has made some advances toward gender equality (127), because both women and men are required to go through the mandatory beautification operation. That the society in *Uglies* has made advances regarding gender equality is agreed upon by Victoria Flanagan in her article “Girl Parts: The Female Body, Subjectivity and Technology in Posthuman Young Adult Fiction.” Although, Flanagan states that “this has not produced the type of gender equality feminists might have hoped for.” She makes the argument that generally feminine terms, such as “pretties” or being pretty, applies to the male characters in *Uglies* as well as the women (43). An example of this can be seen when Tally breaks into New Pretty Town to see her childhood friend Peris for the first time after his operation. Tally uses broadly feminine expressions when describing him, “… he was pretty now… The big eyes and lips said: I’m young and vulnerable, I can’t hurt you, and you want to protect me” (16-7). Traditionally, these traits are seen as feminine by society and when
Tally uses them to describe Peris, who is male, it places men into the same category as women rather than producing a sense of gender equality. The society in *Uglies* remains patriarchal, with its leaders in the traditional role of a man and the pretties in the traditional role of a woman. However, since several of the key characters in the *Uglies* novels are female it can be argued that the negative consequences of the operation are of feminine concern primarily. The fact that Tally is the main protagonist who focalizes the story also reinforces the argument that it is women who must conform to society’s beauty standards the most.

The society in *Uglies* reinforces the inferiority among people who are ugly and have not gone through the Pretty Operation yet, according to Moran. She connects this lack of beauty with women’s subjugation in a patriarchal society by showing how Tally’s feelings before her operation reflects those of women in general who live in patriarchal societies (125-6). The feeling of being inadequate and ugly shows itself in pre-operation Tally when she sneaks into New Pretty town, the area of the city in which all freshly made pretties live. Tally worries about being run down by autonomous vehicles since she is invisible to their scanners without a special sensor, called an interface ring; “…Tally was nothing here… Worse, she was ugly” (*Uglies* 7). Here Tally literally says that being ugly is worse than being invisible and nothing at all. Tally’s longing to going through the Pretty Operation is so strong that she cannot enjoy her life pre-operation, even though it is just a few months away.

Throughout the *Uglies* series Tally struggles with idea of belonging, more specifically it is the concept of being normal as opposed to being deviant, which Tally has trouble grasping. For Tally, being so-called normal is defined as fitting into the accepted beauty canon of her society. The notion of what is normal versus
what is deviant is discussed by Baccolini in her article “The Persistence of Hope in Dystopian Science-Fiction”, where she states that what is normal or deviant is determined by the culture of the society one lives in (519). Several examples of how the culture in *Uglies* determines what constitutes normality can be found throughout the series and Tally’s struggle with wanting to be normal and not deviate is palpable in the beginning of *Uglies*. Tally believes that becoming a Pretty is the only option for her and she does not know that society uses the operations as a means of control. It seems completely normal for her to go through with the operation and she can barely wait for her 16th birthday. Tally has not been taught that there is any alternative to undergoing the operation, so when she meets Shay and learns that Shay plans to run away to avoid turning pretty Tally’s view of society changes. Being ugly was always the deviant alternative for Tally, since everyone around her over the age of 16 was pretty and followed society’s norm. However, when Tally later arrives in the Smoke and decides to stay, the culture there is that everyone is so-called uglies. In the Smoke, not going through the operation is the norm, and all of a sudden, the deviant is being pretty. The concept of what is deviant and what is normal changes throughout the series, because Tally goes through so many changes. Virginia Blum also deals with this subject of deviance in her article “Becoming the Other Woman: The Psychic Drama of Cosmetic Surgery”, where she states that cosmetic surgery creates an internal rivalry with the Other Woman (110). In Tally’s case, who the Other Woman rival is shifts throughout the series at the same pace as Tally’s view of what is normal and deviant. In the beginning, Tally’s Other Woman figure is herself after the operation and she represents the ideal woman for Tally. However, when Tally’s life changes and she is shown more alternatives, her inner image of the Other
Woman shifts. Tally’s perception of what is deviant and what is normal changes because Tally starts to understand her society and the whole world in a new way. This suggests that culture affects the individual’s perception, or in this case Tally’s perception, of what is deviant and what is normal.

**Rebelling against Society**

Tally’s rebellion starts before her operation, when she performs different pranks and tricks that go against society’s rules. Moore-Clement argues that Tally is already breaking the rules the moment the reader meets her (95). Already in the second chapter of the first book, *Uglies*, Tally is sneaking into New Pretty Town, crashing a party and then stealing a bungee jacket to escape by jumping off the rooftop. Clement-Moore describes Tally’s action as a “daring boundary-breaking move” (95) since all these actions are strictly against society’s set rules. This can be seen as the start of the rebellion against the *Uglies* society, since Tally’s actions impact on so many people throughout the city. People would hear rumors of the “ugly” who sneaked into New Pretty Town and broke the rules set up by society.

Tally’s first act of rebellion against society’s beauty standards is when she chooses to stay in the Smoke and join the rebels living there. Sawyer Fritz states that for Tally, the running away to the Smoke is not the rebellious act, it is the choice to stay that matters (20). She is forced by the Special Circumstances to find the Smoke and goes there with the intent to expose the rebels living there, but Tally begins to feel sympathy for the rebels in the Smoke and makes the choice to sever her ties to the Special Circumstances. She decides to believe in what she knows to be true, instead of what society and the Special Circumstances have told her. This is where Tally starts to view her society critically, instead of believing in
what she is being told. In addition to this being viewed as Tally’s first rebellion against society’s beauty standards, her choice to stay “ugly” in the Smoke and to not have the Pretty Operation can also be seen as the start of her continuous rebellion against societal control.

The rebellious acts committed by Tally are not only physical ones, they are also mental since Tally is able to fight off the governments brain lesions without any help from the medication. In Pretties, the second book in the series, Tally is a New Pretty and Fritz describes her as being “gorgeous, vapid and docile” (20). This change in Tally’s personality makes it seem as if she is a brand-new protagonist, and not the same Tally that was introduced in the first book, Uglies. Tally’s behavior is an effect of the brain lesions that were put in her brain during the Pretty operation. However, the real Tally “lurks beneath the surface” (21) as Fritz describes it since Tally can fight off the hindering brain lesions by staying so-called “bubbly.” “Bubbly” is a term that is used in Scott Westerfeld’s trilogy by the characters when they describe something positive or favorable, but Tally and her friends use it as a code-word for staying in control of their own selves. Tally’s ability to stay bubbly and clear relates to her ability to view society from a critical perspective, meaning that Tally can see the wrongdoings of society and react to it. Tally made the choice to go through with the Pretty Operation so that she could be the test subject for an experimental cure against the brain lesions and as a pretty she does not remember this but is convinced by a letter she wrote to herself pre-operation. It can be argued that Tally has the ability to heal herself without the help of the cure, since Tally herself states that “she’d always been bubbly, somewhere inside” (Pretties 347). Tally made herself see and think about how
society was doing something wrong, which led her to make conscious critical choices against societal control.

This repeats itself again in Specials, when Tally is forced to go through her second operation, the so-called Special Operation when she is transformed into a Special and is able to break free from under her government’s control. This tends to suggest that Tally will not let herself be manipulated by others, and that she eventually will always fight her way back to her independent and empowered self. Tally’s resistance to the brain lesions and societal control is discussed by Moran in her essay where she states that Tally’s ability to heal herself from the brain lesions without the help of the cure, regardless whether she is a Pretty or a Special, is the “ultimate act of rebellion” (135). Although Tally does not need the cure to heal herself from the brain lesions, she believes that she needs her loved ones around her to stay clear and free from the brain lesions. Therefore, it can be argued that nothing that Tally has done can measure up to the fact that she is able to fight society’s rules just by being herself. For Tally, just being herself is the ultimate act of rebellion against societal control.

The motivation behind Tally’s rebellion is a “desire to care for and protect others” (27) according to Fritz, who links Tally’s rebellion with feminism in her essay. An example of this can be seen at the end of the first book Uglies, when Tally is willing to sacrifice herself by turning herself in to undergo the Pretty Operation while David, a male character, refuses to do so. She does this so that she can be the test subject for the cure to the brain lesions, which suggests that Tally is willing to risk losing her identity in order to save her friends. It can be argued that Tally is more caring, emotional and sensitive than most of the male characters in the novels, which is supported by Fritz in her essay where she states that Tally has
various attitudes that are associated with women and the construct of what is feminine (27). It can be argued that Tally rearranged the meaning of the feminine attitudes when she decides to take on the responsibility of protecting the world’s natural resources in the so-called post-pretty society at the end of the third book Specials. The first book ends with Tally and a pretty Shay returning to the city and letting themselves be caught by the city wardens. The last line of the first book Uglies is Tally identifying herself: “I’m Tally Youngblood… Make me pretty” (Uglies 425). Tally feels such a strong responsibility for her friends and to do the right thing that she is willing to lose herself in the process. This tends to suggest that Tally never stops trying to bring down her society’s leaders even though she might lose her self-identity, her memories and her freedom.

In the Uglies novels Shay functions as an unrecognized leader of the rebellion against society. Shay has this role since she is the one who leads the way in most of the rebellious acts, and Tally mostly follows in her best friend’s footsteps. Ann M. M. Childs states in her essay “The Incompatibility of Female Friendships and Rebellion” that Shay functions as Tally’s “negative ‘what if’” alternative (248). Regardless of this, it can be argued that it is Tally who plays the essential part of the rebellion while following in Shay’s footsteps. This means that Shay stands in Tally’s shadow throughout the novels, even though Shay deserves to stand beside Tally. Almost everything that Shay does in the novels is turned around on her and affects her in a negative way, in contrast with Tally who almost never suffers from her actions. It can be argued that Shay works as a catalyst for Tally’s rebellion against society by making Tally think about why Shay wants to run away to the Smoke and avoid the mandatory beauty operation. The fact that Shay lays the way for Tally but does not get the recognition for this is discussed by
Robin Wasserman in her essay “Best Friends for Never”. She states that Shay is much trickier than Tally when the reader is first introduced to her in *Uglies* (21). Shay already knows how to move outside society’s strict rules and she shows Tally how to do it too. Furthermore, it is Shay who tells Tally the truth about how their society really functions. Shay as Tally’s mentor figure continues in *Pretties*, because it is Shay who introduces Tally to The Crims, a clique of pretties who perform tricks and break the rules of society. Shay is also able to think her way around the dimness caused by the pretty operation, and this is supported by Wasserman’s statement that, “Shay needs only herself” (22) to be able to cure her brain.

It can be argued that Shay is more likely to rebel on her own accord than Tally, since Shay already views society critically. It is Shay who runs away to the Smoke first, and she is also one of the first rebels from the Smoke who are forced to go through the Pretty Operation. This is supported by Moran who claims that Shay represents a bigger risk of rebellion than Tally, even though Tally is the main character (132). It can be argued that society removed Shay’s ability to take the cure when she was offered it, because she had already been put through the beautification process. When Shay learns how to stay bubbly and keep her mind clear she realizes that Tally is to blame for many of the negative consequences in her life. “Perhaps, thanks to every terrible thing that Tally Youngblood had ever done to her, Shay would find her own way to a cure” (*Pretties* 148). Throughout the novels, Shay who gets much more drastic punishments for her own or Tally’s actions than Tally ever does. One example of this can be found in the first book, *Uglies*, when the Smoke is invaded by Special Circumstances and Shay is forced to undergo the Pretty Operation against her will while Tally is able to escape. Shay
eventually turns to self-harm and starts to cut herself in an attempt to take control over her own mind and body. Shay cutting herself becomes a form of agency against society’s beauty ideals and her way of getting some of her identity back. Shay forms another clique called The Cutters where the members cut themselves in order to fight off the brain lesions, and when Shay makes the decision to become a Special she and the other members of The Cutters are recruited into a special task force of the Special Circumstances. According to Moran, Shay functions as Tally’s dark double (133), as Shay always seem to stand behind Tally in the shadows. It can be argued that Shay is more rebellious than Tally, it is just the fact that she is not getting any real recognition for it.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that Tally’s and Shay’s rebellion against society’s control and its beauty standards is driven by their desire to stay true to themselves and not be manipulated by their society. This is realized by the use of a feminist dystopian theory that focuses on the *Uglies* society’s view on beauty and the rebelling against those views. Both Tally and Shay manage to rebel against their society several times throughout the series, in more way than one by thinking critically about their society and acting upon their realizations.

When the readers first meet Tally, she is not aware of the effect her society has upon her and the image of beauty that is presented is very subjective to Tally’s perspective and opinions. Tally’s eagerness to turn pretty is palpable in the beginning since her society has made her believe that she is ugly from birth and the impact of this is a feeling of inferiority and worthlessness, which manifests itself in Tally and her peers. Moran’s concept of the cult of beauty and Wolf’s
concept surrounding the beauty myth fits perfectly into Tally’s world, where people have been subjected to an absurd beauty ideal from childhood so that the only way to be considered beautiful and to be accepted is to undergo the mandatory beauty operation. Tally’s feelings of inferiority and being inadequate can be connected to a woman’s place in a traditional patriarchal society and since the key characters in the series are female it indicates that the negative consequences of the beauty ideals are of feminine concern primarily. When it comes to gender equality in *Uglies* some advances have been made, but rather than women being seen as equals to men, the beauty operation redefine men as something feminine.

In the *Uglies* series, it is demonstrated that Western-based beauty ideals are preferred by Tally’s society since the mandatory beauty operation includes whitening of the skin tone. The preference for a Caucasian skin tone is nothing that Tally or other characters in *Uglies* think twice about, instead whiteness is privileged by the society in *Uglies* and the subject of race is simply erased. Tally cannot comprehend that her opinion regarding race and beauty is wrong, because she is just mimicking what society has taught her to be the beauty ideal. It is the culture of a society that determines what constitutes normality, as Baccolini states, and in this case, what constitutes the beauty ideal. Tally’s struggle to come to terms with what is normal and what is deviant can be seen throughout the series, as she goes through changes and her surrounding shifts so does her opinion of what constitutes normality. Blum’s concept of the Other Woman also plays a part of Tally’s struggle to understand her position regarding what is deviant and what is normal, and the Other Woman image gives Tally a rivalry inside herself that pushes her towards her own self-realization.
Tally’s self-realization makes her aware of her surroundings and that causes her to be able to think critically about the society she lives in. Although Tally had a rebellious nature even before everything happened, which can be seen when she sneaked into New Pretty Town as an ugly to see her friend Peris or the tricks that Tally uses to break society’s rules. This is the starting point for Tally’s rebellion against society, which later escalated when she joined the Crims, a clique of pretties that broke rules set by society in order to break out of the societal control. In the beginning of the story, Tally does not view the tricks and pranks that she performs as a rebellious act that fights against societal control because she is not able to view her own society critically since it is the only reality that she is aware off. Tally’s choice to stay in the Smoke and not go back to her city is her first conscious rebellious act against societal control, because Tally is able to view her society critically which lets her see its flaws and wrongdoings. Tally’s ability to view her society with critical eyes ties in with her inner and so-called mental rebellion against societal control, where she manages to break free from the brain lesions put into her brain on her own and without the help from any medication.

When the reader meets Tally for the first time in the second book, Pretties, it can seem as if the story has a completely new main protagonist and this is caused by the brain lesions that have changed Tally’s brain. Tally’s ability to fight off the brain lesions and cure herself without the help from any pills or drugs is the first mental rebellion against her society’s control. Tally’s ultimate act of rebellion, as Moran describes it, is Tally’s ability to break away from society’s control even when she is a Special and is supposed to be an agent for her government. Although Tally performs many physical rebellious acts to oppose her society’s control and leaders, it is her mental rebellion of not letting herself be controlled that is her
most momentous conquest. The driving force behind Tally’s motivation to rebel against society is her desire to stay in control over herself and to protect those around her, which is shown in Tally’s willingness to risk losing herself in order to protect her friends’ self-identity. Although Tally want to stay in control over herself it can be concluded that Tally’s main concern throughout the series is not on herself, but on those around her as she fights against societal control and for people’s rights to be how they want to be.

Shay’s place in the *Uglies* novels is complicated, because she is both Tally’s best friend and functions a darker alternative to Tally. Throughout the books Shay can be seen as a sort of mentor figure to Tally, since it is Shay to takes the lead in most of the rebellion with Tally following in her footsteps. Already from the beginning, Shay is much trickier than Tally and she is also the one that shows Tally the truth about their society. The driving force behind Shay’s rebellion against society’s control is her desire to stray true to herself and keep in touch with her self-identity, and no matter what consequences her acts of rebellion have, she never stops fighting. Moran states that Shay is Tally’s “dark-double”, and this shows itself throughout the novels where Shay often gets punished more drastically than Tally. Shay is used as a tool of repression by her society and her rebellious acts are instead turned around on her with a negative effect. This suggests that Shay’s fate functions as an alternative to Tally’s fate where things tend to work out in Tally’s favor. The *Uglies* series does not give Shay the same recognition as Tally in regard to Shay being able to think herself out of society’s control and performing the ultimate act of rebellion against society on her own. The motivation behind Shay’s rebellion is nothing like Tally’s and instead of being
motivated by protecting others, Shay’s driving force is her anger and resentment towards Tally.

Both Tally and Shay succeed in performing the ultimate act of rebellion when they think their way out of the brain lesions and therefore society’s control and they manage to do this by thinking critically about the world they live in. The primary motivation that drives Tally and Shay to rebel against their society’s control and biased beauty ideals validates their desire to keep their self-identity and to, simply put, be allowed to be themselves in whatever way they want.

Works Cited


