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Judith butler performative acts and gender constitution analysis

If you can only see these words, then you require a newer version of your web browser, one that is capable of viewing frames. Read the instructor's introduction Read the writer's comments and bio Download this essay In her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," feminist philosopher Judith Butler writes that gender is "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief" (520). Many of Kurt Vonnegut's writings, especially his 1956 short story "Miss Temptation" and his 1961 novel *Mother Night*, explore personal identity and performative acts in a way that relates to Butler's reading of female sexuality and gender. This performance, examined closely by Butler in works such as *Gender Trouble*, is shown by Vonnegut through his female characters. Although these characters have been largely forgotten by most literary critics and scholars, they are nuanced and deserving of the same analysis as their male counterparts. Their absence in critical commentary, combined with Vonnegut's focus on identity and performance, make them prime candidates for analysis using Butler's philosophies on females, gender, and sex. Vonnegut's depictions of Helga Noth Campbell's role as an actress and sexual muse, Resi Noth's communist ruse, and Susanna's status as the object of Norman Fuller's desire creatively mirror Butler's concepts of the hyper-feminine drag queen performance, the inability to change one's identity at will, and the objectification that results from the pressures of the feminine sexual masquerade. I. The Noth Sisters and Identity Performance In *Mother Night*, Vonnegut introduces the Noth sisters, two German women that play significant roles in Howard Campbell's life. Helga, the eldest, was an actress, his wife, and his reason for living. She was his muse both on the stage and in the bedroom, and his most treasured works are inspired by this other half of his "nation of two" (42). These works include his plays and his diary, *Memoirs of a Monogamous Casanova*, which records the "six-hundred and forty-two" sexual encounters he had with "all the hundreds of women my wife had been" (*Mother Night* 127). Helga's position as a performer in all aspects of her life is accentuated by the fact that Vonnegut never develops her into a character independent of Campbell or his fantasies. The only inkling of identity she has is as an actress, a role which bears resemblance to a drag queen. Butler writes of drag queens as demonstrating "three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.... In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" (*Gender Trouble* 187). Similarly to the way in which drag queens imitate gender, actresses imitate reality by adopting identities created for them by someone else. Helga, by being an actress, is molded throughout the novel to be whatever Campbell remembers her as and wants her to be, making her drag-like figure in Campbell's memories and fantasies. Whenever she is referenced, it is often as "my Helga," a phrase that strengthens her place as an image perpetuated and manipulated by Campbell's desires. Most often, he imagines her as "the angel who gave it [love] to me. Copiously.... the nation of two my Helga and I had—its territory... didn't go much beyond the bounds of our great double bed" (*Mother Night* 42). Because her identity is shaped by her ability to perform as whatever Campbell imagines her as, she exists to the reader only as a pornographic, hypersexualized imitation of a woman, rather than as a human being with a real sense of identity. Resi Noth, Helga's younger sister and communist spy, also struggles to develop an identity of her own. Instead of developing an individual identity, she impersonates her sister. Although the disguise is intended to lure Campbell to the Soviet Union, she plays the part astonishingly well and appears to gain satisfaction from impersonating Helga. The root of this expert performance is her lifelong love for Campbell. During an encounter with Campbell at the age of ten, she tells him "I mean I really love you.... When Helga was alive and you two would come here, I used to envy Helga. When Helga was dead, I started dreaming about how I would grow up and marry you and be a famous actress, and you would write plays for me" (*Mother Night* 104). Even at an early age, she wants to be her sister. She has always envied Helga's marriage, career, and life, and her performance as a communist spy allows her to finally live as the person she has always wanted to be, to the point where she struggles to accept the fact that she is not really Helga. Butler said in an Artforum interview with Liz Kotz that, with gender, one cannot "get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today" (83). In this same vein, Resi could not simply decide one day that she was going to be Helga. Although she possesses a natural sisterly resemblance, alters her appearance to appear older, and is so genuinely in love with Campbell that she gives up her life for him, she remains Resi. The most she could hope to achieve is something along the lines of wearing a costume, albeit a convincing one. Resi, however, insists on resisting the impossibility of switching identities. When Campbell questions why she posed as his wife, she exclaims, "It's who I am... It's who I am. I'm Helga, Helga, Helga. You believed it. What better test could I be put to?" (*Mother Night* 137) She does not defend her performance by giving a rational explanation. Rather, she begs him to see her as the person she wants to, but cannot, be. Additionally, no matter how much Resi wants to be Helga, she has her own traits that set her apart and make it impossible to actually become her sister. Physically, Resi has naturally honey-blond hair that she elects to grow out again after dyeing it white for her performance, and her laugh is much livelier than her sister's, a difference significant enough for Campbell to note. These are small things, but they make Resi uniquely herself. Unfortunately for Resi, her wish to be her sister and take over that identity merely create well-executed imitations of the real Helga, reinforcing the idea that identity cannot be changed at will. Resi's inability to cope with the impossibility of switching identities is most aptly shown in her death scene. Before this scene, Campbell tells Resi that he used to live for love, but no longer has that, or anything else, left to live for. His words make it clear that Resi cannot replace Helga or win his love. Resi, who has spent her life fixated on obtaining what Helga had, is left without an identity of her own. This lack of identity, when the persona she has assumed for so long comes crumbling down, leads to the realization that she has no purpose or reason to live. Unable to deal with that reality, Resi, when faced with arrest, states, "I am sorry I have nothing to live for.... All I have is love for one man, but that man does not love me.... I will show you a woman who dies for love" (*Mother Night* 230) and then commits suicide by swallowing a cyanide pill. II. Miss Temptation and the Feminine Sexual Masquerade Vonnegut's "Miss Temptation" is almost entirely dedicated to the portrayal of female performance and reception. Susanna, the story's Miss Temptation, is "as startling and desirable as a piece of big-city fire apparatus" ("Miss Temptation" 75). This is Susanna as viewed by the male townspeople and by repressed, sexually-frustrated Norman Fuller. As a woman, she is the object of their gaze. She embodies the ultra-feminine, appealing, ideal woman. For Fuller, Susanna's perfection is unbearable. She reminds him of a sex symbol, specifically "the professional temptresses who had tormented him in Korea, who had beckoned from makeshift bed-sheet movie screens, from curling pinups on damp tent walls, from ragged magazines in sandbagged pits" ("Miss Temptation" 80). Fuller, who is ashamed of his sexuality but cannot escape from it, cannot handle a woman like Susanna. She is the physical embodiment of his overwhelmingly erotic thoughts, so he berates her to compensate for his feelings. Fuller's treatment of Susanna both cements her unfortunate position as an object and reinforces the impact that her performance has on men. Outside of the male gaze, Susanna is far less mesmerizing. When Fuller goes to visit Susanna in her apartment, he fantasizes about finding a gorgeous woman in a seductive nest, "dark and still, reeking of incense, a labyrinth of heavy hangings and mirrors... with somewhere a billowy bed in the form of a swan" (85). Rather than seeing his fantasy, he is surprised to find a vulnerable girl that lives in "a dirt-cheap Yankee summer rental" ("Miss Temptation" 85). Despite her failure to meet Fuller's expectations, her childlike appearance and lack of a sultrier residence do not change her status as a temptress. However, left alone in her apartment, Susanna is not required to give the same ostentatious performance. By herself, she can exist without having to perform as anything in particular. Outside, she is subjected to a male audience that expects her to please them. The behavior that results from this expectation relates to the concept of the feminine sexual masquerade, which Butler explains in *Gender Trouble*: On the one hand, masquerade may be understood as the performative production of a sexual ontology, an appearing that makes itself convincing as a "being"; on the other hand, masquerade can be read as a denial of a feminine desire that presupposes some prior ontological femininity regularly unrepresented by the phallic economy. Irigaray remarks in such a vein that "the masquerade... is what women do... in order to participate in man's desire, but at the cost of giving up their own" (64) By applying this concept to Susanna's behavior, it can be concluded that she behaves provocatively in public not out of her own volition, but in an attempt to accentuate her femininity due to pressure from male spectators who expect this sort of behavior. Vonnegut reflects this pressure through his description of Susanna's attire, which includes "chains with little bells on them" ("Miss Temptation" 75) around her ankles. These chains evoke the image of a slave. By wearing chains around her ankles, Susanna can be read as behaving as slave to the male gender. The bells that adorn the chains further this idea. The bells' ringing beckons to potential male spectators, letting them know Susanna is around for them to ogle and objectify. These chains, both literal and metaphorical, keep Susanna bound in her role as a temptress. Susanna, unfortunately, is unable to break free from this masquerade, as she ends the story in the same place she started. After her argument with Fuller, she asks him to "welcome me back to the human race" ("Miss Temptation" 88) as retribution for his actions, but it is more a moment of resignation than one of happiness. Although she received an apology from Fuller, and effectively won their quarrel, her reentry into society continues the feminine masquerade that Butler describes. Her performance as a temptress has become a solidified identity, and changing it would be nearly impossible. For Susanna, being a part of the human race means performing this role. She has been conditioned by male expectation to believe that her performance is her place and her identity, and as a result she cannot help but make herself carry on playing the part of the temptress, regardless of whether this masquerade aligns with her personal desires. III. Conclusion Butler's conception of female gender and sexual identity, as it relates to appearance, performance, and social pressures, is reflected in Vonnegut's *Mother Night* and "Miss Temptation" by Helga Campbell, Resi Noth, and Susanna. Helga's caricatured version of femininity and desirability reflect that of Butler's drag queen, as Vonnegut never makes her more than a performer in Campbell's mind. Resi's attempted assumption of Helga's identity and her desire to be someone that Campbell can love recalls Butler's argument that one cannot change their gender nor their identity at will. Susanna's position as an object subjected to the male gaze relates back to Butler's idea of female masquerade, where a woman's identity is shaped for men at the cost of her own wants. Generally, Vonnegut's works were not meant to detail women or how their actions, personalities, and relationships exist in relation to gender and sexual performance. Rather, Vonnegut's female characters were often swept under the rug, existing only as bit players who are overshadowed by his complex male leads. However, in his broader examination of performativity and personal identity, he managed to create interesting female characters that warrant the application of Butler's philosophies. Still, some readers might wonder if these characters only become interesting when viewed alongside Butler's ideas. Vonnegut's female characters are notoriously shallow, to the point that he even describes several of them using the same wording. For example, Susanna is described as having "hips like a lyre" and a body that makes men "dream of peace and plenty" ("Miss Temptation" 75). In his later novel *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut recycles this description for Mona, a young woman whose "hips were a lyre" that inspire the narrator to feel "[p]leace and plenty forever" (140). The interchangeable nature of Vonnegut's female characters causes them to become one-dimensional, seemingly verifying the idea that Susanna, Helga, Resi, and Vonnegut's other fictional females can only gain complexity through Butler. Yet, it is their emptiness that makes them so compelling. Their apparent lack of identity invites unique perspectives and theories about their characters; if Vonnegut had not written these women as empty vessels, the application of radical ideas like Butler's would not have such a striking impact on the way readers interpret them. Works Cited Butler, Judith. "The Body You Want" Interview with Liz Kotz, Artforum, Nov. 1992, pp. 82-89. —. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of the Subject*. Routledge, 1990. —. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4, December 1988, pp. 519-531. JSTOR. . Vonnegut, Kurt. *Cat's Cradle*. Dial, 2010. —. 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