

*“Inscrutable Intelligence”*: The Case against Plastic Surgery in the Works of Jean Stafford and Sylvia Plath

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**Abstract:** Jean Stafford’s short story “The Interior Castle” (1946) and Sylvia Plath’s “Face Lift” and “The Plaster”, written in the early 1960s but published posthumously in *Crossing the Water* (1971), dwell on a theme which is rarely tackled in Postwar American literature: plastic surgery. Using a markedly mnemonic tone, both authors trace in detail the passive submission of female bodies to male (re)construction. While the history of women in early Cold War America is usually associated with the patriarchal mystifying of housewifery, the myth of ideal, domestic femininity was also intimately related to bodily beauty. The demand for physical “perfection” which resulted from constructing women as, primarily, objects of male desire was mirrored in popular magazines, such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, which endorsed women’s seeking medical aid to model themselves into “ideal” sexual mates (Meyerowitz in Meyerowitz ed., 244). Women’s submission to the notion that they should use any means necessary to become aesthetic objects to be appraised by men was thus represented as desirable. In this paper, I shall trace how both Stafford and Plath adopted a confessional style of writing in the abovementioned pieces in order to denounce the cultural construction of women as passive bodies to be moulded at will, instead of as active, thinking subjects. I shall argue that by reproducing the recollections and thoughts of the women being stitched, sewn and bandaged in their pieces, both authors articulated an alternative profeminist aesthetics based on the beauty of what Stafford described as “inscrutable intelligence”.

**Keywords:** Postwar American Confessional Literature, (Re)Construction of Female Bodies, Profeminism

we lie under anaesthesia  
our wit and wonder snuffed  
in our routine operations  
our own beauty not enough  
(Suzanne Vega, 2007)

According to Virginia Blum, “imperfection is inevitable for the postindustrial, twenty-first century Western woman who is always evaluating her appearance (intimately bound up with her identity) in relation to some standard that must be *Other* in order to function as a standard” (104). Hence, many women seek to mould themselves into the “ideal woman” according to patriarchal standards, and allow themselves to be (re)constructed primarily for the benefit of the heterosexual male gaze (Blum 107).

In this paper, I would like to focus on early Cold War American women's literary representation of female figures who subvert the routine acceptance of male (re)construction of female bodies, or who sometimes even rebel openly against such a chastisement of female corporeality for the sake of male complacency. In particular, I will analyze Jean Stafford's "The Interior Castle" (1946) and Sylvia Plath's "Face Lift" and "In Plaster" (early 1960s), arguing that, in these texts, the authors seek to make a case against plastic surgery, by attempting to redefine female beauty, making it transcend the material limitations of the body, and finding its origin in the intellect. Thus, I contend that they articulate a protofeminist agenda: a defence of the importance of the life of the female mind over the material consumption of the female body.

The period encompassing from the mid-1940s to the mid 1960s, when Stafford and Plath wrote their texts, was characterized in the United States by what Alan Nadel has termed "containment culture", "a period [. . .] when 'conformity' became a positive value in and of itself" (4). What, then, was considered to reveal an adequate sense of conformity in women? Domesticity, sexual containment within marriage and, very importantly, adequacy to expected standards of feminine beauty (Meyerowitz in Meyerowitz ed., 232). In the deeply heterosexist scenario which succeeded the gender ambivalence of the Great Depression and, above all, the Second World War, no amount of effort was spared in convincing women that the "Rosie the Riveter" days were over. If, as Judith Halberstam notes, "female-born people have been making convincing and powerful assaults on the coherence of male masculinity for well over a hundred years" (15), never were those assaults more fully sanctioned by the United States government than during the armed conflict against fascism, when women were encouraged to join the "Home Front" by undertaking professions traditionally reserved for men, and to mould their bodily image accordingly (Tyler May, 23-37). However, as soon as the war was over, the accepted, mainstream definition of womanhood shifted radically: a model American woman's sense of achievement was now to be defined not by how she worked to build up her country's economy, but by how she strived to (re)construct her bodily image for the sake of her husband's enjoyment.

This state of affairs meant that women were culturally indoctrinated with the idea that "individual effort, careful consumerism, and *reliance on experts* could bring any woman success, even in the realm of beauty and appeal" (Meyerowitz in Meyerowitz ed., 245, my italics). Thus was born the myth of the "self-made beauty" whom, with a little surgical help if necessary, could embody any heterosexual man's desires. The insistence of popular culture on beauty and heterosexual marriage is, at the very least, conspicuous. Women's magazines, such as *Harper's*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Woman's Home Companion* sought to teach women how to *be* women, that is, suitably beautiful and chaste. Articles like "She Turned Herself into a Beauty" (1954), interestingly penned by a woman, Dawn Crowell Norman, dwelled on how women's efforts, and medical aid, could lead a woman to such "achievements [as] weight loss, better grooming, and medical help for acne, a deformed nose, and a bent back". Needless to say, the objective sought through these efforts, both of will and of monetary expenditure, was to become a pleasing aesthetic object for male consumption and, eventually, a pleasing sexual mate within heterosexual marriage (Meyerowitz and Meyerowitz ed., 244-245, 259). Other popular cultural products, such as pulps or movies, provided foils to those ideal women and constructed threatening messages for

women who deviated from the norm. Pulp novels repeatedly paralleled women's sexual freedom with their eventual suffering of violence and with their meeting an untimely death. One only needed to look at their lurid cover art to experience vicariously and learn (Server 67). Likewise, *film noirs* like Fritz Lang's "The Big Heat" (1953), starring Glenn Ford as Sergeant Dave Bannion and Gloria Grahame as Debby Marsh, did not augur a pleasant time for women who made an unlawful use of their physical beauty. Debby, whose affair with mob member Vince Stone, played by Lee Marvin, ensures her material luxury, also ends up winning her a gruesome facial disfigurement when the villain thinks, erroneously, that she has betrayed him to the police. Clearly, women who did not wish to use their beauty in order to secure a heterosexual marriage, or who simply did not wish to marry for that matter, did not receive very inspiring messages from the entertainment industry.

Undoubtedly, the prevailing discourse on how women should appear before society in early Cold War America, and how this was connected with their sexual behaviour, constituted a tight-knit, heterosexist matrix which operated with a fine scalpel upon women's bodies and controlled the uses they were put to. This was so because, to use a Foucauldian term, a particular discursive formation on womanhood, that is, a set of statements containing a certain regularity, as to form and content, in terms of establishing who was considered a woman, became the mainstream discourse on the issue. Thus, it assumed a regulatory function, ensured that female individuals followed suit (2006, 41). In her introduction to *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Judith Butler inquires how it is possible that the heterosexist, social delimitation of suitable corporeality may lead to the appraisal of certain human lives, while denying others acknowledgement:

How, then, can one think through the matter of bodies as a kind of materialization governed by regulatory norms in order to ascertain the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the formation of what qualifies as a viable body? How does the materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which, in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? (16).

Clearly, in Cold War America, a suitably beautiful and chaste female body was a body that mattered, whereas other forms of female corporeality were considered abject lumps of flesh ready to be deformed and/or killed. Notwithstanding, if discursive formations hold in their performative function as language the power to produce certain types of subjects (Foucault 2006, 54), according to Foucault, every discourse is always "a space of multiple dissensions" (2006, 173). Since the narrative on women's adequate corporeality, and concomitant sexual behaviour, was an especially narrow discursive site in early Cold War America, it can be argued that it was a paradoxically fertile ground for contradictions. This explains its blatant need for reaffirmance in popular culture, and the existence of literary texts, such as Stafford and Plath's, which unequivocally question and subvert its main tenets.

In her brilliant article "Between Mother and History: Jean Stafford, Marguerite Oswald, and U.S. Cold War Women's Citizenship", Kate A. Baldwin analyzes why the role of female counternarratives played such a key part in the disruption of the period's heterosexist status quo. Theoretically developing on the belief in the power of language so characteristic to early Cold War America, Baldwin highlights what she terms "the

performative force” of written discourse (87): “what narrative is “doing” is dialogue: it is effecting an intersubjective relationship between at least two characters – an author and her audience, a text and its public, etc.” (85). As she goes on to point out, “critics have been relatively silent on the interruption of [Cold War] metanarratives by performative displays of dissent and/or difference” (87). Indeed, Stafford and Plath operate such a textual interruption of the Cold War metanarrative on plastic surgery, which presented the undergoing of medical intervention on one’s physique as a desirable process for women by focusing only on the ultimate effects of the operation, never on the subjective experience of the patient. By using a markedly mnemonic tone, both authors pay attention to the subjectively lived experience of surgery and its psychological corollaries.

Jean Stafford’s short story “The Interior Castle” (1946) is a case in point. The text is based on the author’s own experiencing of facial reconstruction after a car accident suffered with her husband, the famous confessional poet Robert Lowell. The main character, Pansy Vanneman, undergoes a medical intervention on her nose which is described in gruesome detail along with the physical pain it occasions. Such a first-hand account of the experience of plastic surgery was nowhere to be found in popular appreciative accounts of the wonders it performed on women. She writes:

He [Dr. Nicholas] had now to penetrate regions that were not anaesthetized and this he told her frankly, but he said that there was no danger at all. [. . .] He began. The knives ground and carved and curried and scoured the wounds they made; the scissors clipped hard gristle and the scalpels chipped off bone. It was as if a tangle of tiny nerves were being cut dexterously, one by one; [. . .] The pain was a pyramid made of a diamond, it was an immense light; it was the hottest fire, the coldest chill, the highest peak, the fastest force, the furthest reach, the newest time. It possessed nothing of her but its one infinitesimal scene [. . .]. (193).

Interesting in this passage is the use the narrator makes of metaphors to describe the pain which Vanneman endures, thus highlighting what Ann Hulbert terms “the role of language [in Stafford’s text] in linking the mind to physical and metaphysical reality” (128). Actually, despite the focus on the material conditions of surgery and the physical pain it entails, Stafford’s text concentrates precisely on the metaphysical aspect of Pansy’s experience, particularly, her preoccupation with the preservation of her priceless mind. Before the operation, “she thought, quailing, of those plastic folds as palpable as the fingers of locked hands containing in their very cells, their fissures, their repulsive hemispheres, the mind, the soul, the inscrutable intelligence” (185). That is why, for Pansy, the physical pain inflicted by the doctor never possesses her real self, never mars her true source of beauty, her brain. The corporeal versus intellectual duality which structures the text is further highlighted by the author’s juxtaposition of the inner thoughts of doctor and patient. In this way, while Dr. Nicholas focuses exclusively on Pansy’s exterior, pondering over the damage wreaked on the physical appearance of his patient’s “pitiably skull”, and patronizingly feeling sorry for the woman’s loss of beauty and “joy in herself” (187), Pansy is exclusively concerned about her interior: “What Pansy thought of all the time was her own brain. [. . .] It was only convention, she thought, that made one say “sacred heart” and not “sacred brain”” (183). In this way, the male (re)construction of the female body is posited by Stafford as an exclusively

masculine obsession, projected and enforced on women by the pervasive heterosexist discourse on what constitutes female beauty.

Plath's "Face Lift" and "In Plaster" (early 1960s) develop this point of view on plastic surgery by omitting the male perspective on female beauty. Interestingly, Plath's journals reveal that she had Stafford's "The Interior Castle", a text she describes as "a lurid, terrifying recreation of intolerable pain" (Kukil ed. 508). The diaries also show Plath's preoccupation with external female beauty – a preoccupation which echoes Stafford's will to redefine it as being the consequence of intelligence and, for Plath particularly, of artistic creativity. For instance, on January 7, 1959, Plath wrote:

Nose podgy as a leaking sausage: big pores full of pus and dirt, red blotches, the peculiar brown mole on my under-chin which I would like to have excised. Memory of that girl's face in the Med School movie, with a little black beauty wart: this wart is malignant: she will be dead in a week. Hair untrained, merely brown and childishly put up: don't know what else to do with it. No bone structure. Body needs a wash, skin the worst: it is this climate: chapping cold, dessicating hot: I need to be tan, all-over brown, and then my skin clears and I am all right. I need to have written a novel, a book of poems, a LHJ [*Ladies' Home Journal*] or NY [*New Yorker*] story, and I will be poreless and radiant. My wart will be non-malignant. (Kukil ed., 457).

Writing is revealed in this diary entry to be a healing, cleansing and beautifying activity. Interestingly, in her poems, she deconstructed the prevailing mythical discourse on female beauty and its beneficent social function, creating an alternative counterdiscourse where, for example, female beauty is exclusively the source of her bearer's enjoyment, as in "Face Lift", or where a perfect physique is derogatively compared to the allure of the intellect, as in "In Plaster".

Narbeshuber argues that "Plath's poetry reacts against the absence, especially for women, of a public space, indeed a language for debate, wherein one might make visible and deconstruct the given order of things" (185). In my opinion, Plath sought to open such a debate on the female body as a site of social containment in "Face Lift" and "In Plaster" – an issue which, as has been shown above, worried her and affected her everyday life. Narbeshuber contends that:

Transforming the conventional female body of the 1950s into a kind of transgressive dialect, Plath makes her personae speak in and to a public realm dominated by male desires. [. . .] [H]er poetry confronts the mentality of the status quo that accepts the ideology of the individual and notions of the natural, or even the personal, self. She unveils and critiques the private, the hidden, and the normalized by parodying various public discourses of power (gendered male), while portraying her personae as objects of those discourses and, thereby, both the agents and the spectacles of punishment. (185-186).

Such is the case of "Face Lift" where plastic surgery is presented as a form of punishment which a woman inflicts on herself, thus perpetuating the rejection of the aging female body so peculiar to patriarchal notions of the aesthetic:

Now she's done for, the dewlapped lady  
I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror –  
Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg.  
They've trapped her in some laboratory jar.  
Let her die there, or wither incessantly for the next fifty years,  
Nodding and rocking and fingering her thin hair. (250, 252)

Thus, the female persona in the poem dissociates herself from the abjectness which age has forced upon her body, parroting the prevailing mainstream discourse of the time about the ease with which women could, and should, abandon the physical features which marked their identity. Plath's persona, ends her poetic statement triumphantly, the sole spectator of her rejuvenated self: "Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze, / Pink and smooth as a baby" (252).

If "Face Lift" has been read as one of Plath's poems where "the poetic voice is one of the utmost address to others: a call, an invocation to the reader to see, recognize, assemble, and act" (Wolosky, 499), the same agenda can undoubtedly be traced in "In Plaster", a poem whose sardonic style is even more blatantly subversive. In the text, the female persona has a bifurcated personality, that of intelligent but ugly speaker whom we read, and that of the silent but perfect bodily beauty. The female persona compares her own imperfect body to that of her other perfect self, who is taking care of her by hiding her ugliness: "There are two of me now: / This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one, / And the white person is certainly the superior one" (272). Conscious that her body will be found wanting, the female persona soothes herself reflecting that her perfect other "had no personality" and eventually comes to realize that "it was I who attracted everybody's attention, / Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had first supposed" (272). However, Plath takes her subversion further, ending her poem with a clearly vengeful spirit, showing how the intelligent, uglier part of herself, will surely destroy the empty-headed, beautiful one, since an individual without an intellect is nothing but a lump of matter:

Now I see it must be one or the other of us.  
She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,  
But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit.  
I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her,  
And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me. (274)

Of course, Plath's cynicism resides in the fact that her perfectly beautiful self *is* a lump of matter, a plaster cast which covers her own body. Thus, the author exposes the hatred of real female corporeality behind the endorsement of the idealization of female beauty.

To conclude, as I have attempted to prove, Stafford's "The Interior Castle" and Plath's "Face Lift" and "In Plaster" can be read as complementary texts which, in exposing the mythical nature of female physical perfection and the perverseness of (re)constructing the female body for male consumption, point to what Baldwin has described as "a

reconfiguration between narrative and performative displays of female selfhood” which took place in the early Cold War era (87). It seems to me that in the wake of such cultural phenomena as *Nip/Tuck* and *Extreme Makeover*, their attempt at redefining female beauty as residing in women’s “inscrutable intelligence” (Stafford 185) is well worth revisiting.

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