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GENDER IDENTITY AND THE POSTMODERN BODY IN JENNIFER EGAN

Sergio López Sande | Supervised by Dr Laura Mª Lojo Rodríguez | Grao en lingua e literatura inglesas

Líña temática: Literatura en lingua inglesa

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In 2001, 9 years before the publication of the Pulitzer-winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Jennifer Egan released the moderately acclaimed *Look at Me*, an unequivocally ambitious examination of several critical elements of the American society of the turn of the twenty-first century. As the author herself would later state, *Look at Me* aspired to convey the novelist’s attempt “to examine the impact of human culture on human identity” (Egan, “Imagining the Unimaginable”), a claim so onerous that neither Egan nor the academia appear to have achieved a definite answer to the debate regarding the relationship between the two. Nonetheless, I believe Egan’s novelistic examination of American society to be of remarkable interest to both my reading of “human culture” and approximation to “human identity,” particularly so in that it offers a harsh depiction of all the construction, representation, and destruction of selves, whilst evincing how these three processes are—to the postmodern era and the often problematised post-postmodern one more than to any prior period, as I will argue—fundamentally visual.

In the first section of my paper I set out to analyse postmodernism as a cultural construction, as proposed and reassessed over the last decades. I also aim to evaluate more recent approaches to postmodernism, which aim to replace the label “postmodernism” with “post-postmodernism” in their approach to contemporary society and its cultural manifestations. Similarly, I introduce in this section some considerations on the literary canon—or, rather, challenges to the very concept of canonisation—which I believe to be particularly appropriate with regards to postmodernism. This section closes by offering my approach to *Look at Me* as a postmodernist novel, which is justified by the themes of the narrative, and draws on the mechanisms of fragmentation and reappropriation that I find to be present in it.
In the second section, I move on to discussing the concept of the mirror as has been defined by several academics throughout the twentieth-century. Revisiting the literary mirror as a critical source for fictional identities is very much at the core of my reading of Egan, and, as such, its functioning as an element of transartistic usage will prove of vital importance to my analysis. By re-reading the mirror as a “validator of identities” in modern and postmodern times, it becomes apparent that the looking-glass is not just used in the arts as a way to give shape to the self, but exerts that very power in contemporary society. It has often been stated that the work of art is but a mirror, reflecting society in its attempt to help the human being learn something about its condition as “human.” This section’s main objective is to question that statement. If society truly takes after its artistic reflection, I regard it as essential that the initial claim is reformulated in order to acknowledge the ways in which society learns from —and thus mirrors— the artistic. Further, the literary mirror is often employed with the goal of introducing either a greatly reliable depiction of the self, or a representation of an eerie other —rather often one either toxic or direly alienating to the subject. The opposition between the self and the other seems to be problematised by the very existence of mirrors, and hence my interest in how processes such as these come into being, an idea which I develop in the case studies that follow.

In order to frame my reading of the mirrored room in Egan’s novel, I resorted to some outstanding uses of the mirror in literary history. First, I proposed a reassessment of psychoanalytic readings of the tale of *Echo and Narcissus*, which is widely regarded as one of the most famous instances of the use of the mirror in literature. The story offers a very particular depiction of self-love, as it presents Narcissus’ disassociation between his self and the image of himself — misidentified as being a fully-fledged individual in an almost animalistic manner— offered by the reflector, over which he obsesses. I draw on the tale’s use of the mirror to illustrate its value as a
catalyser of otherness, as well as to provide one of the numerous examples on which the theme of duplicity is reinforced or introduced by the appearance of a reflective surface. Conversely, Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* introduces the mirror as a gate to an alternative reality, and the idea of reflection is employed in it as a tool to shape and decontextualize the nonsensical. Carroll’s approach to the mirror in literature shows how the reflector need not serve a mimetic function within a given narrative, nor need it provide the individual with an other, nor introduce the idea of duplicity. In Carroll, the looking-glass functions as the door to a reality which challenges the subject’s by questioning its very governing forces. By exploring this particular case, I intend to demonstrate that the mirror may as well appear as something greater than both character and symbol, and allow for the advent of a haunting, uncanny presence or world whose rules may not be comprehensible to the reader. Lastly, I turn to Virginia Woolf’s “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection,” a short story in which the mirror appears to act as though it were a drastically narrow focalising element, evincing the limitations of a realist approach to writing. By analysing Woolf’s use of the mirror, I offer an instance of an appearance of the reflector which is not strictly connected to the identity of a character, but to the inability of a certain mode of representation to convey that very identity. I view this selection of texts as particularly relevant to a study on *Look at Me*, where the mirrored room very much functions as a daunting presence tormenting one of the novel’s protagonists, as well as conveying a sense of urgency pertaining to the tension between narcissistic love and the way in which it is constructed as a consequence of the biased, opinionated other that—in all its limitations—beholds the subject.

The third section focuses on the symbol of the mirror as it appears in *Look at Me*, drawing on recent theories of identity to attempt to show how the individuals of the novel are constructed in relation to the mirrored room, to how they see others, how they see themselves, and how they
believe that others perceive them. The idea of the self that refuses to be univocally understood terms has been ever-present in both modernist and postmodernist literature, and, through my analysis of Egan’s novel, I offer what I believe to be a remarkably telling example of identities that are shaped not only within image culture, but as strictly dependent on both the physicality of the subject and the gaze of the Other.

Finally, I close my analysis by relating the processes of construction and representation of identities at work within the character of Charlotte Swenson to contemporary readings of the body within the fields of gender, queer, and body studies. The body of a female model would be widely regarded as a clear representative of what image culture encompasses in the postmodern, western world, and, as such, I believe it of great importance to pay attention to how hierarchies of gender value intersect with those that serve to classify bodies as beautiful, thus turning the lives of the subjects within them—as Judith Butler’s contributions to the field of ethics would suggest—into both “unlivable” and “unintelligible” ones.

How the self is seen could be safely labelled as a fundamentally public process, and yet the most private and intimate nuances of our identities appear to be greatly influenced by what others identify to be us. Being seen becomes, in all its passivity, one of the most essential processes in our developing an understanding of identity, and I am optimistic that this dissertation will fruitfully analyse Egan’s *Look at Me* so that my reading of the novel may enhance our ability to interrogate the vastness of fictional—and, thus, “real”—selves.
The defiant rhetoric of postmodernism has been at the centre of multidisciplinary discussion for decades on end. Many academics have accomplished the goals of their research by failing to provide a definition for postmodernism and its elusive nature, seemingly proving the widely-accepted assumption that postmodernism poses an inherent refusal to its own delimitation. Irmtraud Huber, among others, stands in favour of the hypothesis that postmodernism was the dominant movement behind our understanding of society for a period of time in the past; in her view, those decades now seem to be peering over the edge of the century, standing on the verge of the contemporaneity they were unable to reach (1). In claiming that postmodernism has failed its purpose, Huber’s argument offers an invitation to reconsider the movement itself, its beginning and end lines, and its potentially-flawed logic. Rethinking postmodernism from a post-postmodernist perspective might lead us into more essential questions on the true nature of the movement and its meaning within the realm of the humanities. Perhaps postmodernism —as Huber seems to suggest— had been predesigned to fail to live up to its own main premise: shedding light on the endless periphery of a yet-to-be-discovered possibility. However, the greatest success of postmodernism relates to the one thing which Huber outlines as the perpetrator of its foreshadowed downfall: allowing the non-central to outshine the norm. This process has had outstanding
implications for various fields, pushing boundaries towards inclusivity and innovation, revisiting genres of all sorts in search of what had been —either willingly or unintentionally— left unexplored. In doing so, postmodernism defined itself by unfolding as a force against the eye which failed to see, the overly-exploited opportunity, unoriginality, and culturally-enforced normativity. It is only possible to grasp the fluctuant meaning of postmodernism through the analysis of the things it wished to oppose to, and hence the reason why we might speak of a postmodernist rhetoric: a rhetoric of “defiance” of everything which had yet to be questioned before its arrival.

One of the main principles suggested by this defiant rhetoric of reconsideration is the postmodernist quest for innovation. When writing “its interest in the margins now paradoxically occupies the centre” (1), Huber questions the movement’s legitimate right to the metadiscursive claim that postmodernism has no end. The historical norm, understood as the premises supporting the conventions which this postmodernist rhetoric defies, is forced to occupy the perimeter so all that had been deemed unimportant may be relocated at the centre. The flux of peripheral elements towards the centre of this hierarchical, circular system of oppositions should thus continue into infinity, but what postmodernist discourse failed to predict was the appearance of what Huber wittily labels “a specific set of philosophical ideas, thematic foci and aesthetic devices” (1). In this sense, the praise of peripheral perspectives becomes a political statement. These themes, ideas, and reformulations “contaminate” the purity of “the alternative,” and the perpetuation of “the newest” is thus turned into a methodological attempt to remain unique whilst following the guidelines of what uniqueness has meant to others. The canonisation of techniques such as pastiche, universally regarded as one of the main features of postmodernism in the arts, has led postmodernism to deny its own coherency.
Classifying a piece of writing under the label “postmodern” adds a web of significance to our potential understanding of both its form and its meaning. Postmodernism’s transgressive desire to expand modernism, whilst being radically differentiated from it, has led to a considerable degree of ambiguity in some discussions involving the taxonomy of literary works, particularly when the writings clearly seem to belong to one of the two categories. This idea of belonging is often justified thematically, for both modern and postmodern art use their understanding of form and their particular aesthetics to “attempt to conceive the inconceivable, express the sense of the inexpressible, and take the measure of the immeasurable” (Connor, 67). Ultimately, the labelling of a text as postmodernist would have to depend on the intentions and/or interpretations of both author and reader, as Fokkema states: “These [postmodernist] devices are either incorporated intentionally in the text by the author, or recognised as being postmodernist by readers, or both” (16).

It was Jean-François Lyotard’s pioneer claim on the comparison between modernism and postmodernism that sparked the proliferation of a critical understanding of postmodernism which did not study its features as independent from those of modernism, but rather as a continuation of it. Lyotard writes: “The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable” (81). Thus, in Lyotard’s account, postmodernism would not be but a continuation of modernism, particularly in that the former is based in the very same abstractions which were of interest to the latter, but adopts an almost sceptical attitude in what concerns the taste and approach through which to explore, question, and deride those same ideas. Postmodernism twisted the
boundaries of its most immediate predecessor, questioned the ideas at its very core, and overflowed its most foundational limits.¹

In what concerns *Look at Me* (2011) [2001], I consider the novel’s title a significant hint pointing towards the postmodernist nature of the narrative. In her article “Limiting the Postmodern,” Linda Hutcheon writes: “The myths and conventions exist for a reason, and postmodernism investigates that reason. The postmodern impulse is not to seek any total vision. It merely questions. If it finds such a vision, it questions how, in fact, it made it” (“Limiting the Postmodern” 48). The idea of “visually” reflecting on the self suggested by the title operates at different levels. With regard to Hutcheon’s words, one might read the title as a foreshadowing element of the story, not only predicting the novel’s postmodernist, self-reflective nature and its reinterpretation of classic patterns of storytelling, but also as foregrounding the theme of the gaze, our social dependence to the sense of sight, and the fragility derived from constructing our identities upon the image the individual and the Other build of the former’s self. In addition to this, Hutcheon’s “impulse (…) not to seek any total vision” bonds the title to the subjectivity of the three main focalising voices of the novel:² those of the indecisive characters of the novel, who are all incapable of seeing the big picture devised for the reader to merely grasp. In this way, we readers are also invited to question whether there is—or can be, even—a true absoluteness to knowing; to seeing.

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¹ Thus, Frederic Jameson’s “radical break from its [postmodernism’s] predecessors” (53) would fundamentally be related to the postmodernist “approach,” and not so much, in my view, to the movement’s desire to entirely reject prior ideas.

² To this respect, Barry Lewis justifies the presence of multiple voices/plot-lines within postmodernist novels by linking them to the idea of paranoia, and states that that “postmodernist writing reflects paranoid anxieties in many ways, including […] the conviction that society is conspiring against the individual, and the multiplication of self-made plots to counter the scheming of others” (102).
The possibility of conceptualising of a literary canon poses several problems within the context of postmodernism. In my view, a consolidated canon might not yet be delimited within the postmodernist movement, primarily due to the apparent lack of consensus concerning its current validity. A list of particularly relevant masterpieces could perhaps be offered—as demonstrated by, for instance, Barry Lewis—, but these would necessarily lack a solid contextualisation of such artistic productions, expressly so given the theorists’ remarkable determination to still speak of postmodernism by obstinately defining its blurry boundaries. As a result, one might be tempted to challenge the mere possibility of developing any form of postmodernist literary canon. In 1985, Toril Moi reflected on the idea of the “great literary canon,” claiming that the included authors would be those who had represented through their writing “an authentic vision of human life.” However, Moi also outlined the many issues which emerged from such a definition of the literary canon, arguing that the “great canon” would thus only represent the empowered and privileged, also the ones selecting the great tradition: “The literary canon of “great literature” ensures that it is this “representative experience” (one selected by male bourgeois critics) that is transmitted to future generations, rather than those deviant, un-representative experiences discovered in much female, ethnic and working class writing” (77). Postmodernism being a movement pervaded with “un-representative experiences” —many of which have been essential to satiate the authors’ postmodernist thirst for innovative selves—, it could potentially be counterproductive to speak of a literary canon at all. Any distinction drawn between classics and best-sellers is inherently discriminatory if understood in Moi’s terms, and it could thus be inferred that the postmodernist canon is too plural in its voices for the critic to presently understand.

Ihab Hassan writes: “In an age of frantic intellectual fashions, values can be too recklessly voided, and tomorrow can quickly preempt today or yesteryear. Nor is it merely a matter of
fashions; for the sense of supervention may express some cultural urgency that partakes less of hope than fear” (275). Unlike later theorists such as Hutcheon, Hassan drastically opposes the modernist movement to the postmodernist one, often introducing parallel —yet significantly different— reactions to their concerns surrounding human expression, be it through the arts or not. A less transgressive approach is often found in the works of later critics, and, much like Lyotard, late-postmodernism theorists see definitional differences seminal to both movements. Hassan’s idea of expressing “cultural urgency” is much present in novels such as Look at Me, both formally and thematically, for they commonly convey a sense of worry that surpasses their contemporary —sometimes dystopian— themes. Thus, this sense of worry also affects these novels’ aesthetic and formal choices, as they introduce a layer of self-awareness which, though varied in its expression, is inherent to their innovative recycling of postmodernism’s “past self.”

The semantic difficulties surrounding the definition of postmodernism appear to be insolvable, and many positions intersect only to grow separate immediately afterwards, never reaching agreement. However, regardless the many complications raised by the labelling of a novel as postmodernist, my aim is to read Egan’s novel which draws on this “contradictory phenomenon that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (Hutcheon, “Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism” 243). As for formal challenges, I claim that Look at me upsets the essence of linear narration through its use of relevant and striking instances of analepsis and prolepsis. The presence of a first-person narrator who is patiently waiting to leave the narrative for a chapter or two at the turn of the page also supports this claim, thus contributing to the apparent dishonesty of the narrative voices. Simultaneity gazes upon the reader throughout the novel, for we ignore whether the parallels we are obliged to draw between the stories are justified through their occurring at a similar time, and their later merging appears to convey a feeling of blatant
incoherency. In addition, our inability to penetrate the thoughts of both the first and third person narrators — caused by their problematic coexistence — wraps plot events with a sense of unreliability. To the reader’s bewilderment, these all take place within a novel in three parts: *Look at me* presents a three-act structure in the fashion of screenwriting, though all setup, confrontation, and resolution do not correspond to received assumptions pertaining to the meaning of these units.

As the novel unfolds, Egan introduces a diverse array of characters whose stories end up merging at the narrative’s close. The two Charlottes — the namesake protagonists of the story — face significantly different situations in the novel; their alienation from society, in different ways and to different degrees, is the one element through which a connection between them can be easily traced. Egan also introduces a wide range of themes which secondary characters help explore, such as terrorism or surveillance. The older Charlotte undergoes plastic surgery at the beginning of the narrative to have her face reconstructed after a car accident, and the main themes of the novel gravitate around her story, to which it keeps coming back until the very end. The character loses all her aspirations, sense of belonging, and professional stability due to her being alienated from the fashion world of which she had longed to be a part for years. She walks through what used to be her “home” unnoticed, given that most people do not recognise her, and embarks on a journey towards rebuilding her life from this new situation. Going through this process, she illustrates how her physical appearance as a female model was the one and only thing keeping her life together. The younger Charlotte, on the other hand, is facing a hard situation at home as her brother suffers from leukemia, and becomes infatuated with a man much older than her — a terrorist who also plays a central role in the novel. She begins studying history with her uncle, Moose, an academic who had also experienced alienation in the past, and whose story is briefly hinted at in the narrative. The novel’s epilogue finds the older Charlotte finally moving away from the superficial maelstrom
her life had been, but, even after having abandoned the delusional mirrored room, she still seems fairly unhappy. To leave her old self behind is taken to a much more literal sense in the novel than one might expect: Charlotte sells her identity for a great sum of money, for her story is deemed of interest to the wider audiences, and will thus become part of a “Big-Brother-ish” project. All these characters’ alienating experiences, are, in some way, interwove through the image of the reflector, which does not always appear in the same form, but recurs several times throughout the novel. Through imprisoning us in the mirrored room, Egan seems to be inviting her readers to challenge Moose’s claim that “we are what we see” (“Look at Me” 145).

In thematic terms, one might even understand the novel’s use of facial surgery as a nod to the proliferating images of cyborgs and the post-human in contemporary forms of storytelling. Additionally, writing on a model who has lost her ability to sell her looks very clearly points towards alienation; some of the narrative’s alienating structures intersect, introducing several contradictory layers to the characterisation of its individuals. Thus, the reader is challenged as to how to understand the characters and the construction of their identities. Egan’s prioritisation of the themes of superficiality and terrorism over those thoroughly exploited by other postmodernist narratives by, for instance, Don DeLillo or David Foster Wallace, such as consumerism or addiction, offers a different approach to contemporary western society. Egan also introduces the futuristic idea of technology as an evil force, which threatens to end up taking over the characters’ lives, almost in the fashion of Orwell’s renowned dystopia in 1984. These themes convey a feeling of fear in what concerns the protagonist’s relationship with society, as though they were haunting Charlotte Swenson as she tries to overcome her vulnerable position. The construction of Charlotte’s new identities, which necessarily occurs at a later date than the reconstruction of her face, introduces from the very beginning of the narrative the idea that the main character is floating
in between the conceptualisations of who she was and now is, as well as that of what she might become.

It is within this context that I believe the label postmodernist should apply to Egan’s novel. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will focus on the relevance of the symbolic mirror in relation to the characterisation of identity, to later move on to study how gender performativity has found its way into contemporary literature through a case study of *Look at Me*, and hence conclude that there exist some peculiarities between identities in society and those we might demarcate in Jennifer Egan’s novel.
SELF MEETS REFLECTION: JUSTIFYING A NEED FOR THE TRANSDISCIPLINARY STUDY OF MIRRORS

People need to put their mirrors down and begin examining the social psychological implications of being self-aware, in the sense of using one's own experience as a means of employing sophisticated introspectively based social strategies for purposes of more effectively relating to others.

Gordon G. Gallup, Jr.

The history of modern criticism (...) may in some part be told as the search for alternative parallels—a heterocosm or 'second nature,' the overflow from a fountain, the music of a wind-harp, a growing plant—which would avoid some of the troublesome implications of the mirror, and better comprehend those aspects and relations of an aesthetic object which this archetype leaves marginal or omits.

M. H. Abrams

In 1996, Yayoi Kusama presented her “Infinity Mirrored Room - Love Forever” (Plate 1) to the eyes of New York. Her work, built upon the idea of infinity, carefully combined several sources of light and the eternal gaze of pairs of mirrors endlessly replicating the polygonal space they embraced. Far from being alone in envisioning a mirrored room, reinterpretations of the same concept have been relentless in postmodernist art since the mid-20th century. Kusama herself has exploited the idea of infinite reflection multiple times throughout her career, making of her attempts to reach the subjectivity of infinity a series of artistic rooms with mirrors as their major point in common.

Kusama’s mirrored rooms seem to have merely an aesthetic purpose, but I believe her concerns with regards to mirrors to be of great significance to any collective reading of “the looking-glass” we might aspire to, particularly so if such a reading is to be connected with a
specific literary movement. Concerning the typical twentieth-century uses of mirrors in the arts, Sabine Melchior-Bonnet writes:

Little by little the exploration of the subconscious, a structuralist game, led to its own dismemberment: both the inflation of images that referred only to themselves and the dislocation of a world deprived of meaning challenged the notion of the subject itself. There are no more autobiographies or self-portraits, but instead randomness, scattered pieces, the anonymity of the impersonal “one,” a shattered or cobbled together self. (264)

The “randomness” and “scattered pieces” suggest that the exploration of the unconscious is, presently, no longer at the core of the artist’s desire to reach the remotely hidden nooks of the mind. As a consequence of this, modernist and postmodernist works have often allowed for the advent of characters which reflect —sometimes through the use of mirrors— on Melchior-Bonnet’s implied concept of the “divided self.” This understanding of the twentieth-century character as a deviant, broken figure —I intend to refer to those characters which are built around the desire to better understand the human mind, but which also evince, as Melchior-Bonnet states, their authors’ refusal to follow a “structuralist approach” to identity— can be related to the rise of Freudian psychoanalysis in the first half of the twentieth-century and to later reassessments, most notably those produced by Jacques Lacan. The modernist writers —who grew, to different extents, in a similar sociological context to that of the masters of psychoanalysis— developed a simultaneous awareness of the complicated nature of the human mind, but often approached these complications differently, as the postmodernist tradition after them would do too, to a certain extent. Whilst Freud and Lacan developed complementary models of the tripartite mind, the “divided self” of the artist was constructed in a much less “architectural” manner; thus, instead of aiming at providing a theory of the self, twentieth-century artists offered vivid and diverse
instances of the self’s infinite complications. “The divided self” is, in my view, a concept which aims at describing this series of phenomena, which ultimately led to the artist’s disenchantment with the self-contained subject. Achieving a seemingly perfect depiction of reality was no longer “meaningful enough,” and as a result, identity was shattered to pieces — or, more precisely, admitted to never have been unbroken in the first place.

Melchior-Bonnet’s “divided self” seems to point towards the thematic centrality of the self in twentieth-century artistic production, relevantly so in that its exploration often goes hand in hand with the image of the mirror. Having been at the core of popular culture for centuries, mirrors and reflective surfaces shelter and validate our identities to the same extent to which they corrupt them, “offering parallels to dimly sensed aspects of new situations,” and hence allowing us “to use the better known to elucidate the less known, to discuss the intangible in terms of the tangible” (Abrams, 31-32). Abrams’ statement brilliantly conveys the idea that mirrors and other reflectors help us better understand our selves, along with a range of other concepts which would fall under the realm of the intangible. Through his reading of the mirror as a “metaphorical archetype,” Abrams draws on one of his previous ideas, which described mirrors as continuous similes which would help the conscious self understand the Other through comparison, often leading us to assume the unquestionability of that on which we are basing our comparative impulses. In relation to this, we may want to associate this assumption that the image that the mirror conveys is virtually “perfect” to Jacques Lacan’s discussion of the mirror stage. Lacan’s child, “still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence” (“The Mirror Stage” 72) succeeds at instituting the apperception of the imago of itself conveyed by the mirror, which is thus assumed to be an outward, perfect representation of the child’s physical self. This “Ideal-I”— as Lacan labels the child’s conceptualisation of its “double” (which is to watch over its ego)— is not to be questioned, for the
individual would be questioning their primary “source of secondary identifications” (“The Mirror Stage” 72). Going back to Abrams’ argument, it only makes sense that our comparative impulses appear to be “unquestionable,” assuming that, as Lacan suggests, the comparative urge to demarcate “self” from “other” is restructured upon (and dependent on) our first meaningful encounter with reflection.

The artistic interest in the broken, sometimes absent self that we encounter in contemporary art is, in several ways, another reflection of twentieth and twenty-first century society. Within this context, that the validation of our identities nowadays appears to have more to do with Abrams’ idea of reflection than one might think: it is through the metaphor that lies beyond the nature of the looking-glass that we shed light on the intangible aspects of being ourselves, and it is also through such an illumination that we might see in literature the same flipped image of society the mirror conveys for us: “In the encounter with literature, seeing ourselves in the other may not be reduced to a mere appropriation of the other’s image nor to a narcissistic self-reflection. Instead, this encounter constitutes an experience that transforms the very boundaries between self and other” (Schwab, “Preface” 17). Gabriele Schwab’s statement draws a parallel between the function of the mirror and the role of literature as a cultural product, an association which will prove of vital importance to my analysis, as will be subsequently argued. Relating the function of the mirror — an aesthetic device which might serve different purposes within the realm of literature — to the function of the work of art in society poses the inevitable question of whether art reflects our understanding of the world, as if it were a polaroid picture related to a specific set of concerns within a time frame; or, on the contrary, the world is that which inspires the artist to develop an artistic product to enlarge the readers’ understanding of their surroundings. One might see this question as inherently paradoxical, for, if we understand our selves through the Other — which
would largely explain the cultural functionality of mirrors—, and the arts introduce an array of tales and images concerning such Otherness, where lies the transgressive power of including, nurturing, and validating new voices?

I do not think it is the purpose of art to provide an idea of the Other which might define us through comparison. Drawing on Moi’s conceptualisation of the literary canon, I believe that the idea of a body of canonised literature serves the completely different purpose of providing privileged readers with a sufficiently similar Other to identify with. It is comfortable, safe, and, ultimately, ‘classically’ organised to define the self through a similar other — much like we do when seeing ourselves in the mirror— without gazing at the Other beyond our limited scope of reality. In my view, there lies the true transgressive power of representation, for it is through the inclusion of marginal identities and experiences that the writer may invite the beholder to abandon their zone of comfort, embarking in a journey towards a broader understanding of the differences between the self, the others, and the Other. This should explain both the modernist and postmodernist interest in the (broken) mirror, for it is only through thematically delimiting an abstract Otherness that it becomes possible for the reader to truly reflect on their own identity and experience. Hence, the mirror would not be but that same Other: the context within which we oppose our selves to other beings, to those who are different. Its presence across the artistic spectrum is well-justified by both the artist’s and the theorist’s inability to truly convey the intangible through anything other than the symbolic.
It is certain that the many concerns surrounding the self have progressively taken a different route throughout the twentieth century—as can be seen across virtually all forms of human expression—but this has, oddly enough, only made the task of understanding identity more complex, perhaps revealing our identities’ true, dishevelled nature. In their study on face surgeries, Carla Bluhm and Nathan Clendenin stated that identity-related disorders were the most common threats for patients of face transplants. In their work, they argue that the nature of “the self” is—still today—“often explained in a drastically simplified manner” (18). This excessive simplicity is present in research across fields—for instance, in psychology, sociology or medicine—, and evinces a widespread lack of awareness in what concerns the issues of the self. Being the human self both our greatest artistic interest and the one idea whose entangled, complex nature we seem to deliberately ignore, it can only be through the exploration of these numerous cultural manifestations that we might face the challenge of better understanding our infinitely complicated identities.
BUILDING LITERARY CHARACTERS THROUGH MIRRORS: THE CASES OF NARCISSUS, ALICE & ISABELLA TYSON

‘Who in the world am I?’ Ah, that’s the great puzzle

Lewis Carroll

From mirror after mirror,
   No vanity’s displayed;
I’m looking for the face I had
Before the world was made

W. B. Yeats

Of all the literary images humans have resorted to with the ambition of capturing reality, mirrors are one of the most prolific in meaning. From self-assurance to self-loathing, self-importance to self-effacement, literary characters have been defined as being both full of themselves and selfless through the mirror. The looking-glass in literature has shaped the reality of the individual and served as an entrance to different, alternative realities, many of which have revolved around the very conflicts of the human mind. One might find in both the expansion and alteration of the characters’ understanding of the actuality of the plot they are involved in, be it introspectively or extrospectively, a persistent pattern reflecting the authorial desire to go beyond the ignorance preceding their encounter with the magic of reflection; a fervent urge to convey a form of superior knowledge to that which their readers have had access to, along with an unconventional, innovative reading of its nuances.

In the three case studies below, I provide what I believe to be remarkably significant instances of the use of reflective surfaces in literature. Egan’s Look at Me shares critical ideas with
the three, as will become apparent by the end of my analysis. Much like Narcissus, the character of Charlotte Swenson in *Look at Me* is constructed upon the tension between narcissistic love and self-alienation, being these two forces the very product of the environments of the two protagonists, who are perceived as canonically beautiful, and, regardless some discrepancies in meaning, do not truly “know themselves.” As it happens in Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, the mirrored room in Egan is depicted as other-worldly; as though its uncanny, governing presence could not possibly be understood by means of reasoning, but rather, may only be comprehended by not seeking to do so. The eyes of the mirrored room in Egan bear the weight of ideology, for they are those of society; thus, comprehending their functioning would deny the mirrored room its power, and hence why it must remain an eerie, ununderstood presence. Lastly, I set out to analyse the reflector in Virginia Woolf’s “The Lady in the Looking-Glass,” a short story in which the mirror appears to evince the contrast between the reflective depiction of a scene or action and the identity of the character performing it. In Egan as in Woolf, the inner self of a given character exists beyond the mirror’s reach, as there is a critical underappreciation of the self by the Other outside the individual’s mind, symbolised in Egan, as I will argue, by the mirror.

“*Echo and Narcissus*”

This story is one of the most renowned appearances of the image of reflection in literature. Narcissus provides a particularly significant instance of the use of reflective surfaces in the history of literature,\(^3\) being the thematically-central pool common to the several versions of the myth which have lived on to the present. The climax of the story, identical in both Ovid’s and Parthenius’

\(^3\) For the purpose of my analysis, I will be drawing on Stanley Lombardo’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses.*
interpretations, introduces the notion of the mirror as an item with the power to corrupt the human ego to the point of disrupting the workings of the mind and leading it towards insanity and death.

Plate 2. John William Waterhouse, *Echo and Narcissus* (1903)

A reading of Narcissus’ tale in relation to Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage is due, for both Narcissus and Lacan’s child reach a precise moment in their lives at which their self-awareness “matures.” This process is, in both cases, fundamentally visual. Lacan’s child, much like Narcissus, could not conceive a non-abstract image of itself before entering the so-called “mirror stage;” this enables it to establish the connection between its “self” and the image reflected by the mirror, an association which is, in Lacan’s terms, a process of identification by which it assumes an image provided by an external source to be representative of its own *imago*, thus turning its prior, abstract understanding of its ontological self (*Innenwelt*) into an outward “reality” (*Umwelt*) (71-72) — something which might occur, according to Lacan, as early as at the age of six months (71).

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4 This particular aspect of Lacan’s theory has been challenged by other academics, and an agreement appears to have been reached with regards to the invalidity of Lacan’s statement (the age of six months seems to not be a stage of development at which the child might actually recognise itself in a mirror).
Narcissus’ “mirror stage” cannot be understood as a stage of development, nor can his experience of reflection be read in strict relation to that of a child who first recognises itself. The latter, however, might be applied to Narcissus’ story to reveal the hardly-imaginable consequences of only reaching the stage of identification years after being mentally prepared to do so, defying our preconceived assumptions pertaining to the inescapability of reflection. Narcissus, depicted as a man so beautiful he could drive himself mad, is only able to drown in his desire for the unattainable after instituting a disassociation between his ontological “self” and the reflection which is presented to him in the waters of the pool —in Freudian terms, “the subject’s narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which […] finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value” (79). The mirror is, in this case, a magnifier of the tale’s reality, the one element which allows for the moral of the story to be present. Narcissus was a vain man, but he was only vain to the extent to which one might be without being given a strictly-physical reason to justify such vanity; in other words, his superego’s functioning had been altered by the social response to his presence, but it was only through the “validation” provided by the waters that he was able to project his own “self” into his external, limited scope of reality. Hence, his reflection in the pool functions as a magnifying glass, not only to the character, who is only forced to face insanity after being given an outward “I” whom he may love to desperation, but also to the reader, for it is through the reflector that we are provided with a vivid instance of egocentrism which divorces the lover and the loved; the vain and the reason for his vanity; the man and his reflection.

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5 In connection to this, there seems to be an element of “psychoanalytical fantasy” to the myth of Narcissus—at least in what concerns Lacan’s discussion of the mirror stage—for it is uncertain how his psyque was instituted, having the character not reached the stage of identification at any prior point within the tale. Proof of this are Tiresias’ words: “When Tiresias was asked if the boy would live / To the ripe of old age, the soothsayer replied: / ‘If he never knows himself” (Ovid, 76).
In Freudian terms, the superego would be that which, within the tripartite mind (id, ego, superego), strives to impose the social and moral codes one acquires through their development in a certain environment. The superego would often antagonise the id in that it seeks to provide the individual with immediate pleasure, much like its counterpart, but aspires to do so in accordance to what the individual knows to be socially adequate. In Henk de Berg’s reading of Freud, “the superego is an absolutist. It accepts no transgression, however small, no slip-up, however accidental, no exception, however temporary, no compromise, however well-intentioned” (53). Thus, the superego’s desires must not strictly antagonise the individual’s actions, for such actions would cause for the superego to “punish us by making us feel bad, guilty, weak, or inadequate” (53). On the other hand, Freud introduces the ego, which, unlike the id and the superego, operates exclusively within the realm of consciousness; this implies that it “has at its disposal both “realistic problem-solving methods,” and “methods that deny, falsify, or distort reality”” (51). Drawing on Freud’s model of psychoanalysis, I argue that narcissism, as depicted in the myth of Echo and Narcissus, is the consequence of the malfunctioning of the superego’s social understanding of the role of the individual (caused, in this particular case, by the input of a series of positive, distinctive, and exclusive reactions to the individual’s presence), which leads Narcissus’ unnaturally instituted ego to manipulate and distort his perception of reality (as a result of the superego’s abnormal functioning, the reality which the individual perceives is no longer governed by the conventional standards common to those around them), thus causing the imbalance between what Lacan later labelled the totality of the ego, on the one hand, and the fragmentation of the body, on the other (“The Mirror Stage” 74). Having the functioning of the two antagonistic forces been disrupted, the inescapability of self-alienation is taken to either extreme, leading to the disjointedness which
triggers Narcissus’ complete disassociation between man and reflection, and causing the tale’s inevitably fatal ending.

Consequently, the reflector in Narcissus’ tale must be something other than a magnifier of the character’s narcissistic disorder —as we would presently label his condition. As much as it rather significantly institutes a turning point for both the protagonist and the reader, the pool’s duality is remarkably more symbolic than it is diagnostic. Its presence evinces, as I have attempted to demonstrate, that Narcissus’ inaccurate perception of the world around him alienates the character to the extent of making him disobey our vague understanding of social adequacy to the extreme, something which could only happen had he lost his ability to filter reality through society’s most basic codes. He sees in his reflection something other than himself, and, through his being mistaken, exemplifies the necessary subjectivity in any reading of the images conveyed by mirrors across all academic disciplines. In so doing, Narcissus also provides a justification for the array of deviances from a perfect representation of reality —“the double”— to which the mirror’s literary use has been subjected.

*Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*

In pronounced opposition to the pool which saw the end of Narcissus, the mirror of literary nonsense challenges —rather than distorts— the very foundations upon which we understand reflection. The genre of literary nonsense, much like the postmodernist literary movement, appears to lose any form of clear boundary as early as one moves beyond its “core,” when it becomes a blurry amalgam of potential predecessors and successors to the two Victorian masters of nonsense: Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll. Victorian literary nonsense is commonly regarded as a genre seeking to “stag[e] a protest against realistic modes of representation in order to create a different
reality” (Antonelli, 14), and the mirror is not but the one symbolic element which, in what concerns the selected narrative, supports and allows for the advent of this “different reality,” serving as both an entrance to its alternative functioning and an implicit invitation for the reader to attempt to decipher it.

In Gabriele Schwab’s approach to the genre in “Nonsense and Metacommunication: Reflections on Lewis Carroll,” she writes: “Like all experimental literature, literary nonsense seems to draw its energies from an antimimetic effect. Refusing to serve as a “mirror of nature,” it thrives in the delirious space of the looking-glass world in which language no longer “re-presents” but mocks its very foundations and speaks on its own against rhetorical conventions, rules, and codes” (157-158). Schwab’s use of the verb “to mock” seems to suggest a parodic effect inherent to the literature of nonsense: literary nonsense — as can be argued with regards to postmodernist literature— aspires to reverse the very guidelines which the reader expects the literary work to follow. However, nonsensical writings appear to do so through something other than pastiche or parody, devising equally nonsensical conventions which take pride in “bringing confusion into order by setting things upside down, bringing them into all sorts of unnatural, impossible, and absurd, but not painful or dangerous, combinations” (Strachey 515). Furthermore, literary nonsense, unlike fantasy, does not aim at reconstructing reality by relocating the pieces which shape our understanding of the world; instead, it attempts to shatter the very mirror of mimesis, and, in so doing, redo any societal or natural puzzle upon pieces which would otherwise have never been read as foundational to the inner workings of any form of fiction. Carroll himself seems to acknowledge the functioning of the literary genre he would help consolidate, as is implied in his narrative: “The books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way; I know that, because I’ve held up one of our books to the glass, and then they hold up one in the other
room” (“Through the Looking-Glass” 8-9). The image of the words going the wrong way brilliantly conveys the logic of pleasant incoherency to which literary nonsense aspires, and does so through, of all things, language, which is “frequently a topic in nonsense, especially in that of the Carrollian kind” (Tigges, 77). In addition to that, this sheds light on the actual function of the nonsensical mirror, which is suggested to not only reflect a fragmented version of diverse elements from “the real world,” but to do so in a language similar to the reader’s, but not quite governed by the same rules: it is recognisable, but fundamentally different; hardly “understandable” — in a rigorous reading of the adjective— and yet strangely kin. This mixture between the familiar and the strange is closely related to Freud’s understanding of the Uncanny: that which evokes a sense of familiarity in spite of being fundamentally unsettling. Within this context, one might see in Carroll’s mirror the point of convergence between “the real world” and “the nonsensical,” regardless the rules the latter might comply with.

To this respect, it can be surmised that Carroll’s literary nonsense is primarily concerned with ideas; abstraction; the very nature of thinking. Action is reduced to conversation and spatial transition, being the former the platform for the exploration of the abstract concepts which the novel seeks to deprive of “sense,” and the latter its main tool to shift from one to the next whilst remaining sufficiently narrative; not too alien. Within this fictional, unconventional reality, the mirror of nonsense serves, among plenty of others, the purpose of reinforcing the centrality of the theme of reflection. Thus, Carroll’s looking-glass would be the motif on which the duality between conventionality and nonsense converge. One enters the anti-mimetic world of the nonsensical through the mirror, but it is precisely the ideational appeal of reflection what also frames the exploration of the concepts which dwell in this same world, where the magnification of the flawed nature of the reflector is interconnected with the many other abstract elements required to “make
sense of nonsense.” In this way, the odd reality offered by the narrative mirror is not but a mediated version of the readers’ reality, where time becomes paradoxical, ideas are rethought for the sake of aesthetics, and the English language loses, after bouncing back from the looking-glass, control over its own linguistic principles.

“The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection”

The mirror in Virginia Woolf’s short story “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection” (1929) explores themes which several of Woolf’s novels and essays deal with. For my purposes here, I will be reading the short story in relation to a much narrower set of texts than it could potentially be connected to. It is of great interest to me to discuss Woolf’s short story immediately after Lewis Carroll’s novel, for I read in both of them a fervent attack to the ancient concept of mimesis as traditionally understood in many literary studies. However, Woolf’s use of the mirror need be read as fundamentally different from Carroll’s, whose nonsensical world appears to seek a challenge by addition, whilst Woolf’s fiction aims to, I argue, “evince by deducting:” Woolf’s mirror provides no magnified version of reality, no altered language, no new rules. As a matter of fact, the looking-glass represents, in various ways, a lack: it conveys a less faithful version of “reality” —the “reality” that was of interest to modernist writers— than that which the writer should —and can, as Woolf well demonstrates— aspire to explore. The reflection shown in the mirror is, to Woolf, remarkably different to that which is real; that which should be the subject of art; that which matters most. The mirror gazes at the world like most Edwardian writers do, as Woolf herself states: “They [Edwardian writers] have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature” (“Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” 28). Hence, its scope is notably limited, for it is incapable of infiltrating the mind of the one character who is
of interest to the narrative voice. Through the dismissal of the inner workings of the mind, everything that is of interest to the modernist writer is deemed to stay beyond the mirror’s reach, and it can thus be construed that this short story deals with the theme of reflection in a very different way to the two previous narratives. Woolf does not “empower” or mystify the mirror, but, instead, relates it to the state of “wilful disempowerment” of the artist, who appears not to see what truly should be, in Woolf’s view, relevant to the arts: the identity of the human being, and what each one filters through their individual perception of reality.

In Woolf’s story, the looking-glass is able to provide an alarmingly accurate depiction of the situation before it in the fashion of realist novelists—or, as Woolf suggests to call them, materialists. These writers “[were] concerned not with the spirit but with the body,” (Woolf, “Modern Fiction” 158) and, consequently, aspired to approach the art of writing in a drastically different manner than that which sparked the interest of Woolf and other modernists. In this short story, the mirror appears to function as a focaliser of sorts, an “inanimate body” which frames the reach of the narrator’s eager consciousness. The impersonal thinker gazing at Isabella’s possessions aims for some truth pertaining to the character’s personality, but cannot quite grasp who she essentially is, for the narrator’s scope is incapable of reaching the content of her letters—which would be pointedly relevant in this regard, for they are “invested with a new reality and significance and with a greater heaviness, too” (Woolf, “The Lady in the Looking-Glass”)—nor the workings of her mind. In Laura María Lojo Rodríguez’s account, she maintains that “[the narrator’s] field of vision is limited, he is an intruder, an outsider detached from Isabella’s mind. He is only a voyeur that must adhere to what can be seen from the dark angle where he is hiding” (293). Significantly, the presence of the mirror frames the narrative from a spatial point of view: “Isabella Tyson […] had vanished, sliced off by the gilt rim of the looking-glass. She had gone
presumably into the lower garden to pick flowers” (Woolf, “The Lady in the Looking-Glass). The
narrator’s point of view would thus coincide to that of the mirror, and so would do its limitations
(he assumes her actions and motives), as well as the flaws inherent to its attempt “to transcend […]
reflection, to do away with it in order to get to the person itself” (Lojo-Rodríguez, 290).

In “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection,” stillness is often opposed to movement,
and change. In relation to this, Woolf elucidates that it is not just the narrator who perceives the
stillness, but rather, both itself and the looking-glass, which evinces the latter’s function as the
focaliser of the story. The reader is thus presented with a hollow description of the scene because
of a mirror-like description of surfaces; had the mirror not been gazing at the room, a world of
wonder would unfold: one which may only exist beyond the voyeuristic approach to the scene
derived from the impersonal narrator’s obsession over capturing Isabella’s “truth.” Hence, one
may oppose passages such as: “In the looking-glass things had ceased to breathe and lay still in
the trance of immortality,” to: “[A] room […] full of shy creatures, lights and shadows, curtains
blowing, petals falling – things that never happen, so it seems, if someone is looking” (Woolf,
“The Lady in the Looking-Glass”). This dichotomy introduced by Woolf, which opposes the
ignorance inherent to the narrator’s approach to the room (resulting in an illusion; a fake) to the
truth which actually dwells in it, is introduced relatively early in the story, when Woolf writes: “It
was a strange contrast — all changing here, all stillness there” (“The Lady in the Looking-Glass”)
conflicting the narrator’s unkempt consciousness to the stillness of the world beyond its mind,
being the latter not even remotely as complex as the former. The narrator’s consciousness, much
like Isabella’s, encompasses the “truth” which the narrator seeks, but its approach to it is incapable
of reaching such truth —or, even, of spotting its presence—, an idea at the core of the figurative
function of the looking-glass in the short story.
Quite remarkably, Isabella does not face the mirror in the narrative. Instead, both the narrator and the mirror stand before the room, missing out the true nature of things, as well as Isabella’s most authentic version. The idea of imperfect reflection is the central axis allowing the story to unfold; the narrative voice laments that the looking-glass, much like us, cannot even grasp the true essence of the living being inhabiting the house it captures. Thus, this short story appears to embody one of the statements posed by Woolf herself in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown:” “We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition” (32). Isabella Tyson’s truth is utterly inaccessible for us. The realist, classically mimetic writing style of many of Woolf’s contemporaries could potentially prove to be incapable of shedding light on anything truthful, as this short story seems to suggest.

Hence, we may conclude that the looking-glass in Woolf’s short story offers a dramatically different instance of the uses of the reflector in literature than those explored earlier in this section. Woolf’s mirror is not characterised by a distorting feature, nor is it enhanced by a magnifying power of any sort. Instead, the looking-glass stares at the world as the realist author would do, and, after failing to achieve an understanding of the human mind, its task “becomes unfulfilled, unsatisfactory” (Lojo-Rodríguez, 295). As such, and drawing on Woolf’s own understanding of these writers’ work, I argue that her mirror’s reflection is imperfect and incomplete to a much greater extent than those I have previously studied, for this one intends to evince the imperfection and incompleteness which are, in her view, inherent to the way in which the realist tradition had characterised its individuals. The looking-glass is merely the frame to the impressionist canvas where Woolf depicted Isabella’s room. Oddly enough, the literary mirror, which is very often intertwined with different understandings of the characters’ identities, can be here opposed to
Woolf’s looking-glass. It is precisely what is most central to characterising identity (the inner workings of the mind and the individual’s thoughts) that Woolf’s looking-glass cannot aspire to see or comprehend.

The three brief case studies that I have provided in this section offer significantly diverse instances of the many different uses which have been associated with the mirror throughout literary history. Their functioning will frame my reading of characterisation in Egan’s *Look at Me*, whose development I will be exploring in strict relation to the symbol of the mirror in the following section. I believe Egan’s novel to be representative of most of the concerns outlined above, particularly so to the extent to which they relate to issues regarding identity, fragmentary selves/narratives, and the human dependence on the realm of the visual. I am optimistic that a diachronic contextualisation of the image of the looking-glass in literature, limited as it may be, will contribute to a more enlightening approach to Egan’s “mirrored room,” whose abstract nature I will discuss in the pages that follow.
CHIMERAS IN THE MIRRORED ROOM: A CHARACTER-ORIENTED READING OF JENNIFER EGAN’S *LOOK AT ME*

*When the range of discourses in the therapy room is too limited and ignores the points of view of those subordinated by race, gender, class, age, sexual preference, ability, and the like, therapy becomes the pursuit of self-replicating images. These images provide the illusory glitter of truth in the mirrored room.*

Rachel T. Hare-Mustin

*There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he (sic) is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against himself.*

Michel Foucault

*Postmodern character is, in the most general sense, caught up in power relations. (...) The novels may testify to a deteriorating situation, resulting in madness or in the increasing power of a public identity. Often, however, there is no real change in the forces that constitute power. The struggle to dominate oneself and others is infinite.*

Aleid Fokkema

Postmodernist characters often challenge the literary theorist to reconsider the assumptions upon which “character” and “characterisation” have been read. In the lines of social constructivism, one might question how basic concepts pertaining to our critical understanding of “character” might be flawed universals, both central to our rationalisation of the cultural experiencing of art as well as reified models for reading the character, the validity of which is seldom examined. By doing so, one adventures into approaches to character that not only pay attention to the fictional individual’s roundedness, but rather, undertake the great challenge of confronting the entwined associations which are established between human beings and their “fictional” counterparts. Aleid Fokkema elaborates on this idea, and claims that “for a long time, nothing seemed more natural than to take
it for granted that characters represented human beings, that novels were about people, and that psychological motives sustained plots” (“The Tradition” 18). Fokkema questions whether statements like these have ever been truly pertinent to the study of any form of fiction, and concludes that, even though modernism, postmodernism and other more recent approaches to story-telling have made it evident that there is more to characterisation than one is often led to believe, assuming these moulds to be completely valid would ultimately lead to the simplification of a much more complex, universal process to be found in literary works across periods. By questioning these statements’ applicability, the infinite complications pertaining to the bond between a character that is “human” and a “real” human being are, to the interest of a wide range of disciplines, made obvious.

In this vein, Fokkema states that “characters do not only represent humanity but are seen to be derived from actual human beings” (“The Tradition” 19). In her account, this understanding of character is imperfect inasmuch as it reads character as a mimetic unit whose purpose within a given narrative is merely that of mirroring “the human.” As a response to this, Fokkema goes on to offer a different reading of “character,” and argues that “character does not only represent human beings. It gets out of hand, leads a wilful life of its own, is created as an autonomous being and seems a friend rather than a textual entity” (“The Tradition” 20). Her claim drifts away from the character who “re-presents” the human being —be it the author herself, a person whom she knows, the Other, or the result of hybridising two or more of the author’s understandings of these categories— and, instead, understands character as a living entity filtered through the eyes of the artist, but not as strictly conditioned by the artist’s vision as more structuralist readings appear to assume. Upon surpassing the author in one measure or other, characters reject the possibility of
being read as mere fictions, and thus “come alive” and begin to truly exist as relatively self-sufficient beings.

In Bernard J. Paris’ approach to characterisation, he draws on the work of Karen Horney to establish a set of rules, directly related to her theories of psychoanalysis, through which he believes that the study of character should be approached. Horney’s model supports the idea that “inconsistencies are as definite an indication of the presence of conflicts as a rise in body temperature is of physical disturbance” (“The Basic Conflict” 35), which Paris applies to the text. This line of thought appears to echo some foundational claims behind Derrida’s later theory of deconstructive criticism and his ambition to “reverse dichotomies” —binary oppositions which undergird our dominant ways of thinking— whilst “attempting to corrupt the dichotomies themselves” (Reynolds, “Jacques Derrida”). Hence, the endless complications and contradictions at the core of any literary text become both the cause and the effect of the conflictive nature supporting the writing of fiction, and, subsequently, its characters. In later works, Horney herself introduces a dichotomy through which we may understand human/character development, and discusses how self-realisation and self-alienation function as opposing forces which determine whether we will be successful in achieving a healthy adherence to society (“The Search for Glory” 17). Thus, her claim would lead to the conclusion that the interest of the artist in the alienated individual is but a natural process, by which our internalised understanding of Horney’s validating and alienating forces leads us to develop a sense of “fascination” in the Other, irrespective of how it might be expressed.

To this respect, Paris argues that artists “must choose between allowing their characters to come alive and kick the book to pieces or killing their characters by subordinating them to the main scheme of the work” (10), maintaining that a fictional individual that is fully round can never
be entirely submitted to the author’s idea of either character or work. This is, in my view, the idea at the core of the literary character. The literary individual gains the autonomy that she needs to come alive by shattering the glass frame in which the author had devised to imprison her. Regardless how extensive the author’s knowledge concerning this fictional human being might be, it can hardly be comprehensive enough for any writer to develop an epistemology of character. I consider this to be so because, to fully understand character, one would first be required to understand the ideas surrounding human nature and society upon which such a character might be based, and many of these often escape the author’s awareness, given the inevitability of their internalisation. If such a premise were correct, one would face a second problem: provided that the study of character cannot be approached as if fictional individuals were capable of explicitly embodying the entirety of human complexity, it would be essential to develop a theory of character that would pay attention to the systematic relations between “fictional” and “real” human beings. These relations have been repeatedly proven to be deciduous across literary history (see, for instance, how characterisation was approached in drastically different manners in the realist and modernist traditions, being the two not overly distant in time), as well as being deeply influenced by our synchronic understanding of the human condition in society. Hence, I do not believe that any theory of character could possibly be regarded as a universally valid model on which to base our approach to the literary individual. Every round character has come to exist beyond the author’s, the reader’s, and the critic’s appreciation of it, and, as such, cannot be fully understood by either of the three. To believe so would also imply claiming to possess the ability to tackle the two problems I have outlined above, which, as of now, appears to be too ambitious a claim. Notwithstanding the foregoing, I intend to introduce a reading of some of Egan’s characters in
Look at Me which draws on these individuals’ “plural” depiction of their fictional identities, particularly so with regards to the novel’s protagonist: Charlotte Swenson.

Charlotte’s attempt to build an identity after the loss of her older self is reflected in the cyclical nature of the novel, in terms of how it portrays her struggle. At the beginning of the narrative, she is about to be exposed to the new situation from which the events unfold: her physical appearance after the facial surgery. Because of this drastic change, she is rendered incapable of fulfilling her timeworn desire to reach “the mirrored room,” which still haunts her. At the end of the novel, she is again someone different, but has been successful in leaving the entirety of her older self behind. Therefore, we may speak of three different “Charlotte Swensons,” in the sense that they all struggle with their identity in a different manner, and are successful in becoming who they think they are to different extents. First, we encounter the Charlotte of the past, the one to whom the second Charlotte will look up and envy; this Charlotte is not only an accomplice to her own reification (a “product” devised by the media which she embraces and aspires to mimic), but also finds herself integrated in the fashion, social circles, of which she will have a drastically different opinion by the end of Look at Me. The second Charlotte, on the other hand, is a ghost of her older self, full of obsessions and unsatisfied desires. She does not conceive any positive form of existence after the loss of the image which she had previously learnt to embrace. Her never-to-return physical appearance was vital to both her understanding of her identity and the establishment of the one aspiration which she confesses to have had: entering the mirrored room. The symbol of such a room and the ideas which Charlotte may associate with it are never made explicit in the novel, but, as Irene Maitlock—one of the characters—maintains: “We get it without getting it” (Egan, “Look at Me” 315).
To the eyes of society—the mirrored room’s—, Charlotte’s facial surgery turned her into a different person, and, in so doing, rendered her unable to still remain herself in a broad, social sense. Her struggle with superficiality and identity is also provided with a gender dimension, for her character as a “woman” is questioned to its very core in a drastically different manner than it would have been had the same thing happened to a “man,”6 as I will explore in the last section. Charlotte herself exhibits some degree of awareness in what concerns these issues, as can be seen in several passages throughout the novel. In page 194, for instance, we may read: “I was fascinated by the way he spoke to me: genderless, respectful, as if I were a man. So this was power, I thought. This was what it felt like” (Egan, “Look at Me”).

Charlotte’s claim to have sold her second self for less money than it was worth (“I sold Charlotte Swenson for a sum that will keep myself and two or three others comfortable for the remainder of our lives, although not […] for nearly what she was worth” (Egan, “Look at Me” 513)) introduces a third Charlotte, and puts up further distance between the three as separate, seemingly independent identities. The third Charlotte is not constructed upon retrospection, unlike the second one, and gradually leaves her older selves behind even whilst still identifying with both of them—she repeatedly uses the first and third person pronouns to refer to her past selves throughout chapter 20. The reader does not get to know for certain whether she has managed to move away from the dire need for the mirrored room and the power fantasy that it conveys. The second Charlotte, in spite of having been left behind, is said to be a chimera filling the mirrored room; a shell of what the third Charlotte used to be. Having been sold to a project which will turn her existence into a public matter, it only makes sense for her to finally believe that she has fulfilled

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6 The challenges pertaining to the definition of these two concepts greatly surpass my purposes here, but they need not be read as absolutes neither here nor in the pages that follow.
her aspiration of entering the mirrored room. However, this realisation comes in the most bittersweet of ways, provided that Charlotte no longer regards the identities within the mirrored room as such, but as mere ghosts of former, truer selves. It is in this moment that she appears to understand that the second Charlotte had not become a shell upon being given away, but rather, had always been one, punitively deprived of both social and personal validation; chained to ideas which were not truly hers, but societally imposed.

The cyclical path of change that we find in the novel is mirrored in the younger Charlotte and her experiences. Her studies with Moose and his interest in the history of glass production are a direct link between the two plotlines, established thematically via the advent of different types of reflective surfaces that work as symbols, of which Charlotte Swenson’s “mirrored room” would be the most central. In page 135, we may read:

It transfixed Moose to imagine those early years of quickening sight made possible by the proliferation of clear glass […]—mirrors, spectacles, windows—light everywhere so suddenly, showing up the dirt and dust and crud that had gone unremarked for centuries. But surely the most shocking revelation had been people’s own physicality, their outward selves blinking strangely back at them from mirrors — this is what I look like; this is what other people see when they look at me. (Egan, “Look at Me”)

Seeing and being seen are both central themes in each of Look at Me’s stories, given that the characters of the novel —and, most notably, Charlotte Swenson— are shaped in relation to their understanding of these two ideas and the effects they have on them. As suggested by Žižek’s

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7 See how Moose himself refers to Jacques Lacan’s essay on The Mirror Stage in page 135 (Egan, “Look at Me”), hinting at many of the themes which the novel’s characters will be haunted by in relation to the reflector.
reading of Lacan, the web of cultural and discursive structures that constitute the capitalised Other (the symbolic order) “prescribes to the subject the matrix of his or her desiring, inclusive of the possible forms of “transgression’” (167). Therefore, the weight of ideology as symbolised by the eyes of the mirror of society can both validate the subject’s identity and deem it a punishable challenge to the compulsory matrix signified by the Other’s gaze. In this sense, it can be surmised that Charlotte’s desire for recognition had been satisfied up until the moment when she found herself unable to remain the object of desire of the Other —as Žižek suggests, the desire of the Other had at this point become that of the subject (167). However, Charlotte could no longer find herself in a position from which she would remain capable of becoming that object of desire, which negated her prior, only source of validation.

This process of alienation from society occurs precisely because of other people seeing someone other than Charlotte’s idea(lisation) of herself (Lacan’s Ideal-ego) when they look at her. Drawing on John Steiner’s contributions to Kleinian psychoanalysis, one may understand Charlotte’s suffering as the result of the downfall of a pathological organisation of the narcissistic kind, which, after the “collapse of admiration” leaves the subject’s self-pride to be replaced by “feelings of embarrassment, shame, and humiliation” (6). Thus, “they [the subject, or patient] feel naked and exposed and that they are being observed in a critical, condemning, and often terrifying way” (4). Steiner’s discussion is crucial to Egan’s novel, where, in a remarkably postmodernist manner, characters often incur in paranoid ideas pertaining to the possibility of seeing, being seen, and understanding “seeing.”

The symbol of the mirrored room appears to echo the female voices present in the novel, burdened with high physical expectations having to do with their appearance and behaviour, overly demanding standards of beauty, an obsessive focus on body-image, and, rather centrally, their
struggle for self-identification and self-acceptance. Charlotte Swenson’s three “selves” emerge precisely as the result of the character’s inability to reconstruct who she is in a social sense, and thus appear to introduce the motif of the ghost, the selfless entity: Charlotte had once existed as a fully-fledged being, capable of understanding and reflecting on her identity as one is expected to do in society. After her “death” —that of her first self— she is left to wander through the remainders of the life that she had once lived, alienated from the social circles which had formerly shaped her. Charlotte not only is denied the right to enter the mirrored room, but the ontological right to exist as the being she had believed to be, for she appears no longer to be worthy of being “looked at” by any potential Other. She is thus deprived of a major opposition by which to satisfy the comparative impulses that had previously allowed her to self-satisfy her need for an understanding of her identity. As her body becomes less intelligible to her social circles, a part of that very identity ceases to exist.

In some ways, the narrative appears to be working towards proving itself and its characters wrong, as we see in, for instance, page 145, when Moose wittily speaks his mind by saying that “we are what we see” (Egan, “Look at Me”). This view of identity is destructive towards the older Charlotte, and separates the two narratives as much as it links them together, primarily by proving the character to be incoherent to the extent to which she is constructed, in many of her dimensions, upon what others see in her and the effects their perennial gaze has (Moose, middle-aged man, being the active beholder, and Charlotte, young female model, the observed). In page 53, for instance, she urges one of her dates not to leave immediately so that she may ask: “How do I look?” (Egan, “Look at Me”). His replying by telling her that she looks tired causes Charlotte to feel relieved, and yet his comment had not necessarily been a positive one. However, he had acknowledged her validity as a human being, fully entitled to experiencing tiredness, and not an
emaciated version of a former, better self. Her friend Oscar, on the other hand, is not particularly kind on her when she tries to get back to her position as a public figure (“Relaunch me, […] because […] no one recognizes me” (Egan, “Look at Me” 46)), and sharply labels her “an old dog” at twenty-three, claiming to have expected her to have thought of some alternatives to modelling, given her current situation. Even in page 179, having been hired to do a photoshoot where she would be cut in the face to “get at some kind of truth, in this phony, sick, ludicrous world,” she considers sacrificing her abused, fragile face for the sake of reclaiming the power she had felt when everyone was looking at her (Egan, “Look at Me” 180). Charlotte’s only fantasy of power involves becoming a commodity, the object to the subject who would see her and approve of the sight. We could thus surmise that Charlotte Swenson is not “what she sees,” but rather, a product of her opinionated beholders. This is manifestly applicable to the three selves I have referred to in this section.
LOOK AT ME: GENDER THEORY AND CONTEMPORARY READINGS OF THE BODY

Human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems. The belly’s hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine. (...) We never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it
Gayle Rubin

If a performative provisionally succeeds (...), then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices
Judith Butler

Whether having out feet broken and shaped into 4-inch ‘lotuses’, or our waists strait-laced to 14 inches, or our breasts surgically stuffed with plastic, we ‘do it to ourselves’, are our ‘own worst enemies’. Set in cultural relief against this ‘thesis’, the feminist ‘anti-thesis’ was the insistence that women are the done to not the doers here, that men and their desires (not ours) are the ‘enemy’, and that our obedience to the dictates of ‘fashion’ is better conceptualised as bondage than choice
Susan Bordo

At the core of decades of scholarly discussion on gender and sexuality, the body still remains a troublesome institution, reluctant to any fixed definition. Recent debates over the body have led some scholars to coin the term “body studies” in an attempt to comprise the ever-growing discussion over the diverse understandings of the bodily unit that keep intersecting in contemporary academia. This newly-born field is fundamentally interdisciplinary — as are the problems from which the label germinated —, and, to a certain extent, its very nature requires this to be so. Body studies are grounded on vastly diverse understandings of the self-contained subject, each of which aim at proving remarkably different hypotheses in their exploration of the body as scientific, social, human, and non-human. In Margo DeMello’s introduction to body studies, she elaborates on a wide range of these perspectives, circumscribing the human body to labels
subordinated to several such views, ranging from sociocultural to scientific, among many others. In spite of the extension of her list, none of the disciplines which would find these realms to be of interest can be said to strictly study the body as an unmediated unit, not even those pertaining to the health sciences. The body, as suggested by the citation by Rubin with which I have opened this section, can never stand on its own; it may never exist if deprived of the array of cultural, social, and biological nuances which attach meaning to it. Further, I argue that the body requires of these very nuances to exist, or, at least, to do so as we know it, if it may at all be conceived differently. A dissociation between the body and its given meanings may never occur inasmuch as the very process of thinking the body—as Judith Butler stated with regards to the impossibility of conceiving a body in dissociation with the constitutive constructions of sex and gender—is subrogated to the moulds which allow for the ways in which it is understood to be unconsciously agreed upon.

Writing on the body, as acknowledged by Butler in the preface to Bodies That Matter (2011) [1993], is preordained to drive us into discussions that depart from a strict, material understanding of the corporeal unit. Her discussion on the connections which may be drawn between sex, gender, and the body sheds light on how sexual difference—which, as she argues, is not biological, unlike sex, in spite of being often used to perpetrate the naturalness of sex beyond the category’s actual scope—allows for the body of the subject to be socially intelligible; socially functional. Butler elaborates on how the construction of gender as she had delimited it in Gender Trouble (2007) [1990] not only constitutes a system by which to gender bodies in itself, but establishes a compulsory maxim that enables society to think what is human. A body which denies

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8 In spite of my use of the verb “to gender,” I do not intend to refer to the process of gendering a sexed body as one which is undertaken by an active, individual subject, but rather, to one which is unconsciously imposed on the collective subject via mechanisms of repetition and perpetrated social unquestionability.
itself the solace of being classified in terms of sex, sexual difference, and gender\textsuperscript{9} may never be substantial, for it is, ultimately, one which may not be \textit{thought}. Thus, it may be surmised that it is through performatively gendering the body that the subject to which it is ascribed truly begins to matter.\textsuperscript{10}

In \textit{Gender Trouble}, Butler maintains that “[…] [I]t becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (“Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” 4). Could the body be one such intersection? Would the body not be, precisely, the intersection to which any other intersectional power struggle is subordinated to? In her discussion on the possible subject of feminism, she suggests that “gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and […] [it] intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (“Subjects of Sex/Gender Desire” 4-5). In this same vein, her work in \textit{Bodies That Matter} offers a discussion on Foucault’s reading of power relations which might lead us to consider the body as the materialisation of that intersection; or, rather, the very reason why an intersection of this nature comes into “being:” “The prison is \textit{materialized} to the extent that it is \textit{invested with power}; or, to be grammatically accurate, there is no prison prior to its materialization” (“Bodies That Matter” 9). The body’s matter is only material to the extent to which it is subordinated to power; \textit{substantialised} through power: it may only be read within the power schemes which frame its very existence. These power schemes exist in both their effects and in the imposing discourses which allow for those effects to exist. Thus, the body, brought to existence as the fighting pit where power relations become material, exists —as in, is conceived; thought— merely as an effect to the

\textsuperscript{9} I speak of gender here to refer to the gendered ideas which are illegitimately attributed to the sexed body, as if they pertained to the physiological instead of the social.

\textsuperscript{10} Here “[…] “to matter” means at once “to materialize” and “to mean”” (Butler, “Bodies That Matter” 7).
cause that is power itself. As suggested by Foucault, “its [the body’s] very materiality […] [is] an instrument and vector of power” (“Torture” 30).

In what appears to me an odd choice of words, DeMello categorises the bodies that constitute the norm in terms of beauty and size as “privileged,” but labels gender, race, colonial history, sexuality, and class as sources of “difference,” and attempts to map those differences onto the body. This is so, presumably, because she intends to circumscribe the latter privilege hierarchies to the body without directly subordinating them to materiality. To this respect, “body privilege” would only pertain to the bodies which are societally considered as beautiful. However, and drawing once more on Butler’s work, I believe it of the utmost importance to acknowledge how the power struggles to which DeMello denies the word “privilege” in their intersection with body studies not only are circumscribed to the body, but need be studied as directly mediated by it. All race, gender, colonial history, sexuality, class, neurotypicality and ability are inscribed in the body —they might be mapped onto the body, as DeMello suggests—, but they also originate from the very body to which they are subordinated: they may only exist, as Butler argued with regards to gender and sexuality, if articulated through bodily acts and embodied by the physicality of a given subject, be such subject individual or social. Thus, the nature of power struggles need be read as ultimately material, and hence why I believe DeMello’s classification to ask for further inquiry. I consider it more reasonable to speak of “body privilege” within all the above fields of study, and to do so via the exploration of both the ways in which hierarchical systems of opposition function through the body, and the ways in which the body makes it possible for privilege to be
embodied by the one Other who may truly exist,\textsuperscript{11} irrespective of whether it does so as beautiful, male, white, coloniser, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class, neurotypical, and/or able-bodied.

Butler writes on the feminine: “She will be neither the one nor the other, but the permanent and unchangeable condition of both” (“Bodies That Matter” 16). Charlotte Swenson, in this very regard, may neither be one nor other, not only due to her being female —“embodies” the feminine—, as Butler maintains, but also because of the ways in which the reconstructive surgery had politicised her body to the point of having lost its readability on several other levels. In this vein, Charlotte is turned into an unintelligible body within society; one which had once been privileged in terms of beauty and age but is gradually stopping to be so. The unintelligibility of her body is fundamentally intersectional:\textsuperscript{12} on the one hand, her identity as a woman dooms her to be thought within society as the “nonthematizable matrix” to which the masculine may be opposed to; a catalyser of intelligibility; the Lacanian grand Autre. On the other, however, Charlotte has to be understood in relation to her facing the shock of having once inhabited a “canonical” body-type which is no longer believed to be so. Her experience in this regard is fundamentally alienating. Unlike the privilege pertaining to gender identity or race, that to do with her being beautiful can be very easily gone, as she comes to understand in the novel. However, in spite of being denied the possibility of being either “one” or “other,” Charlotte Swenson functions as the necessary condition allowing for the advent of the two. Butler labels the function of the feminine in this regard as a “formative principle:” by not being socially conceivable to the extent to which the

\textsuperscript{11} In doing so, the subject ceases to be an/the Other. I speak of “to exist” as Butler does, meaning, roughly, “to be socially thinkable/conceivable.”

\textsuperscript{12} I speak of unintelligibility following Butler’s own discussion on the worthiness of life and the less-than-human subject(s), for I believe Charlotte to turn into one such entity as Look at Me unfolds, primarily so by being deprived of recognition, approval, and —in quite a remarkable manner— visibility.
privileged subject is, his unprivileged opposite becomes the matrix that makes possible for a spectrum to appear, and for privilege to be ascribed to a specific “area” within that very spectrum.

A study on a character such as Charlotte Swenson, as a fictional, female model, will necessarily have to pay attention to the centrality of the ideas of body and beauty in her depiction, and to how they play a particularly relevant role in how both women in society and the character in the novel are exposed to compulsory ideals related to the intersection of the two. Irene believes Charlotte’s experience as “a model whose appearance has changed drastically” to be the “perfect vehicle […] for examining the relationship among image, perception and identity,” and judges it so “because a model’s position as a purely physical object – a media object, if you will, […] is in a sense just a more exaggerated version of everyone’s position in a visually based, media-driven culture, and so watching a model renegotiate a drastic change in her image could provide a perfect lens for looking at some of these larger—” (Egan, “Look at Me” 92). Her enthusiastic explanation is cut off by Charlotte, who confesses to have found it bewildering, perhaps because of Irene’s insightful understanding of what she had considered to be an autonomous existence.

In this regard, we may surmise that Charlotte had embraced the beauty standards of her society to the point of becoming numb to their constraining nature, hoping to find validation and power in reaching “perfection” (entering the mirrored room), and never realising that even the beauty ideal which she had hoped to attain would ultimately not be her own, but for her to give away so that others would keep on validating it as a social institution. Thus, “beauty privilege” need be understood as one which may only be embodied as a concession, hence no longer instituting a purely privileged position inasmuch as the subject to which it is “conceded” is female: a point that I will develop in the pages that follow. Perhaps an ideal such as the one symbolised by the mirrored room is never to be attained in contemporary society. To this respect, DeMello writes:
Standards of beauty today are so unrealistic that even supermodels cannot achieve them. It’s well known that even the most beautiful and highly paid models’ photos are heavily photoshopped before the public sees them […]. Sometimes the photoshopping is so overdone that the results no longer look realistically human. (177)

In the same vein, Andrea Dworkin maintains that

In our culture, not one part of a woman’s body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement. […][F]rom head to toe, every feature of a woman’s face, every section of her body, is subject to modification, alteration. This alteration is an ongoing, repetitive process. It is vital to the economy, the major substance of male-female role differentiation, the most immediate physical and psychological reality of being a woman. From the age of 11 or 12 until she dies, a woman will spend a large part of her time, money, and energy on binding, plucking, painting, and deodorizing herself. (113-114)

As Charlotte herself admits: “[of her life as a model] I enjoyed […] [its] inconsequence even as I scorned it for being nothing; I enjoyed it because it was nothing” (Egan, “Look at Me” 165). As her thoughts unfold, she reflects on how being observed felt like an action, the central action – the only one worth taking. Anything else I might attempt seemed passive, futile by comparison. […] I was aiming for the mirrored room. There was nothing more essential in the world; nothing that failed, when placed beside it, to disappear completely. (Egan, “Look at Me” 165)

The vanishing of her aspirations in favour of the mirrored room parallels her own disappearance after the surgery, which had left her in the midst of a world where she would no longer pass for the woman whom she had believed to be. Her urge to be seen is present throughout
the novel, but so is her dire questioning of it: from the moment when she is proposed that she should become a part of the project to which she ends up selling her identity, a gradual awakening begins to take place. Even though she refuses to do so at first, she eventually appears to realise that there is not too big a difference between her previous role as a model and her agreeing to the commercialisation of her entire existence. Furthermore, Charlotte does not seem certain that she has an identity which she may give away, being her one wish to be reified. Her inability to comprehend who she is originates from the realisation that, as I have previously argued, she cannot think herself as an active subject, and may no longer exist as the passive object of desire of the capitalised Other.

The first process of Charlotte’s self-alienation had reached a stage at which she had begun to displace her agency onto other beings, gradually and inadvertently consenting to her own reification. As Susan Bordo states, “these are practices [the “feminine practices” pertaining to our social understanding of female beauty and the female body, which also induce in the female subject the want to embody these ideals] which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being experienced in terms of “power” and “control”” (27). In spite of not being alienated from society, the Charlotte of the past had already ceased to fully exist — she had been deprived of power; forced into powerlessness, and yet she had felt as though “entering the mirrored room” would have made her more powerful, and, ultimately, allowed her to remain in control of a life which had never belonged to her. Thus, it can be gathered that Charlotte Swenson had ceased to fully exist as both female and beautiful. The autonomy which would be expected of her as a being with agency is absent because of her function as a “media object” (Egan, “Look at Me” 92), whose purpose is expected to be purely passive (“Stop talking. It’s harder to see you when your face is moving” (Egan, “Look at Me” 165)). After being denied
the chance to remain submissive by having her company decide to do without her, she progressively realises that she no longer knows how not to be so. Having lost the eyes of the mirrored room which enabled her to stay passive, she comes to understand that she had only existed in their gaze. In this vein, Egan writes: “I saw nothing strange in the fact that being discovered, rather than discovering something myself, should prove the decisive event of my life. Being discovered felt like a discovery” (“Look at Me” 165). Thus, the second Charlotte adventures outside, hoping that she will be “rediscovered,” only to find out that the mirrored room had closed its doors on her, and, consequently, that the validation that she seeks will not be found neither in the public eye nor in the evasion of reality through alcohol consumption or other means, but within. It is uncertain whether she learns this lesson as the plot unfolds, but it is likely that she does so, for, as the narrative closes, she reflects on how “life can’t be sustained under the pressure of so many eyes [the mirrored room’s]” (Egan, “Look at Me” 514). However, it is highly unlikely that she should find a source of validation other than ideology, for, much as she develops an awareness of her position—hence no longer wishing to satisfy the desires of the Other—, her existence remains circumscribed to the unseen system which she had once fervently sought to please, and which had caused for her unprivileged position to be so in the first place.

What I have previously referred to as Charlotte’s second self stands in the midst of uncertainty, and she is consequently forced to question the very boundaries which had been constraining her as a woman, of which she had been unaware due to their allowing her to belong to the select few whose appearance is subject to “exclusivity” (as well as “exclusion;” “otherisation”13) and “canonisation”—much like it occurs with literary works—to the detriment

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13) My use of “otherisation” mirrors that of Kathleen Eleanor Taylor in her 2009 study on human cruelty. In her book, *Cruelty: Human Evil and the Human Brain*, she draws on the renowned work of Edward Said to conceptualise “otherisation” as the series of mechanisms which, resulting from our experience in society, determine whether
of a diverse range of Others. To this respect, Judith Butler draws on Julia Kristeva’s and Iris Young’s works to argue that “the operation of repulsion can consolidate “identities” founded on the instituting of the “Other” or a set of Others through exclusion and domination” (“Subversive Bodily Acts” 376). In this same vein, one could read in the process of dehumanising and canonising the body the critical purpose of “expulsing”—be it introspectively or socially—the incarnation of the idea of bodily perfection, displacing it to a newly-conceived “Other” who understands their condition as an able-bodied, beautiful individual as inevitably alluring.

As previously stated, the work of art has been historically canonised by privileged male critics to convey a sense of agreement as to what they found the most representative, aesthetically pleasing writings. In my view, this phenomenon shares a common core with what male-dominated industries such as modelling—as depicted in Look at Me—do to the female body, creating the illusion which Charlotte’s first self had associated with the image of the mirrored room. I would synthesise her illusion as follows: there is power in embodying the norm, for the normative is authoritative enough to infiltrate the mind, and can thus force the individual to conceive it as the most desirable (“the mirrored room:” also conveying an epitome of superficial, canonical beauty). However, the idea which the novel seems to convey is rather different to that which Charlotte had embraced at first, scilicet: the only true power lies with those who build/t the hierarchy, irrespective of how highly their hierarchy might regard a specific non-selector.14 This is illustrated by the somewhat superior position which Charlotte seems to embrace in the novel, claiming to have the

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14 In this regard, DeMello argues that “Standards of beauty, at least in a contemporary society that is dominated by advertising, were largely created by men, but men are not defined by them” (177).
ability to gaze into other people’s “shadow selves,” which would represent their innermost truths. In this way, Charlotte would be seeing the “true reflection” of those around her. This ability fails her repeatedly throughout the narrative, and, to an extent, leads to the protagonist’s selling her identity, thus leaving the first Charlotte’s fantasy of canonised beauty in the mirrored room. By doing this, the character is suggested to have moved away from her idealised understanding of “perfection,” which, as she appears to finally understand, would have never played in her favour.
CONCLUSIONS

The mirror as has been transculturally used in diverse artistic and non-artistic manifestations is frequently employed in so wide a range of ways that it becomes a difficult task to accurately describe its function. Nonetheless, and as I hope to have proved through my brief analysis of the looking-glass in literature, its uses are most notably connected to characterisation, and, quite remarkably, to how the identities of characters are depicted, altered, or shattered. By exploring how drastically different instances of the literary mirror have conveyed diverse ideas throughout history, both the vast array of symbolic uses of the looking-glass and the inexorability of the identities which are often given shape before it were made obvious.

As has been pointed out by several academics, literary characters are relatively alive within fiction. They surpass categorisation as round or flat; transcend the author’s conceptualisation of them and become living beings upon being read time and time again. Their complexity is beyond our comprehension in that they embody internalised beliefs and assumptions whose totality necessarily remains unknown to any writer. As evinced by Paris’ application of a Horneyan approach to literature, alienating and integrating forces can be understood as opposites leading characters to their destinies as they venture through societies, regardless how similar these might be to our own. However, if by “character” we understand self, Egan —as other postmodernist authors have done— necessarily complicates the idea of the wandering character who seeks a place in their world by breaking her own down into several, different disposable identities, evincing how our human attempts at defining and redefining our selves are critically performative.

In Egan, the eyes of the mirrored room are ever-present, functioning as though they were a form of inner knowledge conveying the “wishes” of society. And yet, much as they overpower
the human being by collectively imposing ideas on each and every individual, they have also been proven to be ruthless in the selected narrative, invalidating those who are incapable of satisfying the compulsory demands of ideology. Were Charlotte Swenson to receive the mirror’s approval, she would find fulfilment in becoming a living commodity, for her goal would suddenly become attainable; however, the life-changing results of her failing to embody that beauty ideal invite us to question whether such an ideal should ever be labelled as desirable, and, if so, in what ways it might be so. Charlotte develops a zealous urge to be reified, so much so that her desire to become her idealisation of her own reflection turns into her one and only ambition. This, however, proves to be learnt behaviour; the product of a society where the illusory power inherent to beautiful bodies is as appealing as can be toxic.

As I have proposed through my analysis of Charlotte Swenson, her role as a female model is depicted in *Look at Me* as a site for gender and bodily exploitation. Charlotte’s autonomy as a being with agency is remarkably and inadvertently limited: she cannot think of herself as anything other than a shell to be measured in certain ways so that the ideological forces sustaining our social—and gendered—understandings of beauty will deem her worthy to be “visually consumed” by the Other. However, her being beautiful can only be read as bestowed privilege. That is, her privilege is not fully so, but rather, a fictional allowance: men set the beauty standards for women, which Charlotte has swallowed to the point of only being capable of finding happiness in fulfilling them. Her privilege as “beautiful” ends up being subordinated to her oppression as a woman: she cannot own her body in that the beauty in it can never be hers, but belongs to those who branded her as beautiful in the first place. Possessing such an ideal would require an active possessor, and her innermost desire to enter the mirrored room would inevitably lead her to become fully passive,
rendering her a “possessed” commodity; a living, moving picture of an ideal, with no say in how her allegedly-privileged position functions.

My analysis of the mirrored room in Egan offered an approach to both the figurative meaning it conveyed within the narrative and its contribution to the shaping of the characters that appear in it. However, the process also demonstrated how the universalisation of an understanding of the literary mirror would most definitely not be possible, provided the outstandingly diverse uses which have been attributed to the looking-glass in fiction. As a consequence of this, the spectrum of the mirror’s symbolic uses unfolded as predictably wide-ranged, and, as such, still asks for further inquiry. It would most certainly be pertinent to widen the range of texts in which the mirror is explored in another study of this nature, thus engaging in a more ambitious attempt to reassess looking-glasses in literature. An analysis such as this should, in my view, not only aim at a more comprehensive discussion on mirrors as they have appeared in literary works, but also aspire to broaden of our understanding of the identities to which they are commonly connected, hence narrowing the distance between a whole consideration of the self and our imperfect capacity to gaze into the looking-glasses before us.
Works Cited


