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Beyond Dystopian Tragedy: Louise O'Neill's Dystopian Martyrs as Models of Resistance to the Beauty Myth

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Abstract

Louise O'Neill's *Only Ever Yours* is received as a young adult dystopian novel which, through its fatalistic depiction of women's oppression, functions as a cautionary tale about the normative beauty discourses conveyed by contemporary popular media. Without questioning the effectiveness of the dystopian tragic scenarios to warn and educate, this article investigates whether the martyrs of O'Neill's dystopian regime embody resistance. Through the lens of Naomi Wolf's theory of the beauty myth, it examines the politics of O'Neill's characterisation and argues that, though grounded on dystopian fatalism, O'Neill's portrayal of women goes beyond mere dystopian tragedy to serve as a model for resistance to dominant beauty ideologies in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. While the character of isabel [sic], through her defiant eating and dressing habits, demonstrates a rejection of consumerism and the aesthetic conformity, freida's [sic] critical awakening offers a confessional narrative that encourages readers to question internalised beauty standards.

Résumé

Le roman de Louise O'Neill, *Only Ever Yours*, est perçu comme un roman dystopique pour jeunes adultes qui, à travers sa représentation fataliste de l'oppression des femmes, fonctionne comme une mise en garde contre les discours de beauté normative véhiculés par les médias populaires contemporains. Sans remettre en question l'efficacité des scénarios tragiques de la dystopie pour avertir et éduquer, cet article examine comment les martyrs du régime dystopique d'O'Neill incarnent la résistance. Prenant appui sur la théorie du mythe de la beauté de Naomi Wolf, il examine la politique de la caractérisation d'O'Neill et soutient que, bien que fondée sur le fatalisme dystopique, la représentation des femmes par O'Neill va au-delà d'une simple tragédie dystopique pour modéliser des formes de résistance aux idéologies de beauté dominantes dans l'Irlande post-Tigre celtique. Tandis que le personnage d'isabel, à travers ses habitudes alimentaires et vestimentaires défiantes, démontre un rejet du consumérisme et de la conformité esthétique, l'éveil critique de freida offre un récit de confession qui incite les lecteurs à remettre en question les normes de beauté édictées par les médias populaires.

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Introduction

Theorists of post feminism say that the post-second wave feminist era is marked by the emergence of new forms of women's oppression which consists in exerting pressure on women to self-regulate in order to achieve unrealistic and unattainable ideals of womanhood (Parisoli 16; Wolf 14; McRobbie 58; Negra 117; Gill and Orgad 19). After the 1980s, emerges a neoliberal capitalist system that commodifies women's bodies and feminist values such as self-confidence, agency, and freedom of choice (Favaro 285; Banet-Weiser 6). Louise O'Neill is a writer who writes in this context of anti-feminist backlash. Born in Ireland on 12 November 1985, she is one of the influential figures of contemporary Irish women's fiction. A question that comes to mind about O'Neill's fiction is how her writing might be in dialogue with the evolving social constraints placed on the contemporary woman. In other words, how does O'Neill's narrative deconstruct the hegemonic perspective of body image created by the images of women in contemporary popular media?

Undoubtedly, O'Neill's other works such as *Asking for It* (2015), *The Surface Breaks* (2018), and *After the Silence* (2020) are increasingly becoming the object of critical studies with critics exploring O'Neill's critique of domestic violence (Clark 80), rape culture in contemporary technology-driven society (O'Brien, "That's Because of the Trauma" 109; Hickey 132; Barr 197), as well as the hegemonic perspective on femininity and gender roles (O'Brien, "Mirror, Mirror on the Wall" 51; Hoey 24). However, the novel that has, so far, drawn more critical attention, especially with regard to its intertextuality with contemporary beauty ideology, is *Only Ever Yours* (2014).

Told by the first-person narrative voice of sixteen-year-old freida[7], the story relates a dystopian future, where women known as "eves" are artificially created and raised in a school designed to train them for one of three roles: a companion (a wife), a concubine (sex object), and a chastity (a teacher for the school). The role of companion is idealised as the best social role a woman can ever achieve, while the categories of concubine and chastity are regarded as failures, roles assigned to eves by default when they fail become companions.

[7] To emphasise the rigidity of women's oppression in the Euro-Zone, O'Neill spells females' names with lower case letters.

The novel's popularity has continued until recently with recent critical analyses opening new directions within the scholarly discussions on O'Neill's works by noting elements of posthuman gothic (Mitchell 117) and modernist fiction (Reynolds 3). However, the studies that focused on this debut's engagement with contemporary aesthetic pressures on women are those carried out by Ekaterina Muraveva in 2918 and Jean-François Lebel in 2019. From a discourse analysis perspective, Muraveva parallels the daily discourse of O'Neill's fictional universe with issues of beauty magazines and concludes that O'Neill deconstructs "the mythical and utopian world of the beauty industry discourse and presents its dystopian side" (Muraveva 134). As she explains, O'Neill achieves this through a pessimistic (or dystopian) twist in her representation of beauty magazines' manipulative contents. Instead of the "ecstatic atmosphere inspired by the sermon of an ultimate promise of a better life and glorification" that characterises the beauty magazines, the beauty discourse of O'Neill's fictional world "is conceived with no promise, apart from that of an inevitable nightmare" (134). This dystopian projection of the beauty magazines enables O'Neill to expose the consequences of internalising the deceptive messages of the advertising discourses of the fashion and beauty industry.

Lebel, in his study of female competition in *Only Ever Yours*, comes to a similar conclusion, yet goes even further, claiming that in her attempt to apply the dystopian framework to her critique of gender inequality, O'Neill violates the traditional codes of young adult dystopia:

> Avoiding to maintain the *status quo* like the majority of other dystopian titles for adolescents, the studied novel stands out for its radicality. The cynicism and the dark and pessimistic extrapolation of *Only Ever Yours* exacerbate gender inequalities and the social division of sexes to make them visible. (Lebel 6–7)[8]

For Lebel, unlike most dystopias written for young adults, which are usually optimistic in their treatment of characters' fates, *Only Ever Yours* maintains the pessimistic tone of conventional dystopia, using it to render more visible and shocking the description of women's oppression that it endeavours to

[8] « Évitant de maintenir le statu quo comme la majorité des autres titres dystopiques pour adolescent·e·s, le roman étudié se distingue par sa radicalité. Le cynisme et l'extrapolation sombre et pessimiste *d'Only Ever Yours* exacerbent les inégalités hommes-femmes et la division sociale des sexes pour les rendre visibles »

represent. Considering the coercive conditions that the eves are subjected to and the tragic fate that isabel and freida end up with—whether it is suicide as is the case for isabel or execution as is the case for freida—one cannot but agree with Muraveva and Lebel that the novel presents an unflinching portrayal of systemic violence against women, intensified through its dystopian framing.

The question that remains, however, is that of whether the politics of O'Neill's narrative is limited to this dystopian approach of dramatising to warn. In other words, do O'Neill's female characters remain mere martyrs of the system, or do they emerge as agents of dissent who embody resistance and serve as models for the reader to follow? This is the focus of the present study. Indeed, as opposed to critics like Jennifer Mooney, Lebel is more optimistic, noting a dynamic of resistance in the eves' navigation of their dystopian world of the Euro-Zone. Mooney reproaches *Only Ever Yours* for over-emphasising women's oppression through popular media contents, claiming that "it undermines girls' power as active girls and critical readers of such messages and is in danger of presenting women as perpetual victims rather than in more empowering terms" (84). In contrast to this pessimistic reading, Lebel acknowledges that the eves are "great figures of dissidence" endowed "with great lucidity about the trap in which they are caught" (Lebel 103). But again, one is tempted to ask how this "great lucidity" enables the eves, and by extension the readers, to confront the oppressive beauty ideology prevailing in their society? Lebel does not sufficiently tell us how this resistance of the eves within this dystopian world participates in the deconstruction of the beauty ideology prevailing in contemporary media culture, in particular, the transcendence of the assumptions that make the beauty myth a physically and economically oppressive tool.

Drawing on Naomi Wolf's theory of the deconstruction of the beauty myth, the present study addresses this issue. Wolf uses the concept of "the beauty myth" to refer to the ways in which the fashion and beauty industry, through its recourse to technology-assisted images of women and subtle co-option of feminist discourses of empowerment and agency, becomes a new source of oppression for women. Those unrealistic images of women are oppressive because they succeed in passing themselves off as the creators of the beautiful woman "in the mode" that the now economically empowered woman, who has full control of her life, can proudly emulate for her own

pleasure. She is also lucky, the advertising discourses of the beauty industry imply, to live in a world where biotechnology is developed enough to put at her disposal the necessary cosmetic products and services to accompany her in the pursuit of this ideal beauty. According to Wolf, women's liberation from that new oppression must begin with a woman-oriented redefinition of what it means to look beautiful:

> as long as the definition of beauty comes from outside women, we will continue to be manipulated by it … while we cannot directly affect the images, we can drain them of their power. We can turn away from them, look directly at one another, and find alternative images of beauty in a female subculture; seek out the plays, music, and films that illuminate women in three dimensions. (Wolf 90–91)

Wolf is conscious that a structural intervention in the media's representations of women to include the diversity of the female body is doomed to failure. Myriads of companies in the beauty and fashion industry that owe their economic prosperity to these unrealistic images would find alternative ways to survive such a revolutionary enterprise. However, the promotion of a women's subculture centred on self-esteem and self-worth can effectively render women impermeable to the manipulative influence of media portrayals and help them embrace a more authentic and inclusive vision of the female body.

Focusing on the characters of isabel and freida, both martyrs of the dystopian regime of the Euro-Zone, this article investigates how O'Neill, in *Only Ever Yours,* echoes this call for women's redefinition of beauty in a contemporary context where myriads of artificial images of women in the advertising discourses of the fashion and beauty industry engage women to pursue unattainable standards of beauty. It is my contention that, beyond their tragic fate, isabel and freida exemplify a maturity journey out of the beauty ideology, rejecting not only the assumption that beauty must hurt but also challenging the consumerist mentality that makes the beauty ideology a modern tool of women's economic oppression.

1. Questioning the Myth of Beauty as a Quality that Hurts

As Naomi Wolf points out, the beauty myth, in its ideological conquest of women, conditions women to believe that "suffering is beauty and beauty is love," thus making it impossible for those women to "envisage a female body

free of pain and still desirable" (219). The woman who is worth it, the myth says, is the one who successfully regulates her body shape through various pain-inducing, and often life-threatening, practices such as extreme dieting, cosmetic surgery, and excessive exercise (Wolf 53-4). Like their peers in the Euro-Zone, isabel and freida have internalised and are unlearning this oppressive vision of womanhood, serving as models of resistance for readers to follow. For freida, this awakening takes the form of a confession in which her mistakes and regrets serve as a warning for the reader.

1.1. freida's Confessional Resistance

Like her peers, freida is aware that she needs to regulate her food intake to increase her chances of improving her appearance and becoming a companion. She refuses to attend the Nutrition Centre for several days, and when chastity-ruth tries to understand the reason for this dangerous attitude, her answer is "I'm fine. I'm just not hungry." Even isabel, who is reputed in the school for her disobedience, refuses to go for food, even on chastity-ruth's invitation: "isabel, dear. It's time for you to leave too." "I'm not hungry," isabel says. "I'll get something to eat later" (O'Neill 97).

After several years of this self-starvation, however, freida begins to identify paradoxes in the discourse of the society and begins to question the veracity of this assumption that achieving beauty means enduring suffering:

> There are only ten days left until the rest of my life begins. They have told us that in order to succeed we need to be good girls, we need to follow the rules, we need to look pretty and speak nicely and be pleasant. I've tried. I've waxed every last hair on my body. I have taken my pills. I have gone to bed hungry every night since I was four years old. I've done everything they have told me to do and here I am, ten days left. (217)

In this self-criticism that freida makes towards the end of the school year, it is clear how she is disappointed about the school's norms and is regretful of her innocent devotion to respecting them. The eves' training in the school takes sixteen years, and as freida states, the school year is ending in ten days. Yet, she has not yet achieved the beauty which, according to the beauty discourse of the school, the numerous years of starvation that she has unfailingly endured were expected to provide. With this criticism of herself, freida not only reveals her growing awakening but also directly warns the reader against

falling into the same traps that her innocence took her into.

freida's status as a first-person narrator is important in this didactic function of her character in the story. As critics have demonstrated, first-person narrator has a didactic dimension comparable to the protagonist of the Bildungsroman (Varghaiyan 134; Foniokova 387). According to Varghaiyan, for instance, the first-person narrator is a "confessional" narrator because his or her storytelling activities "unveil their own different selves, or mobile identities, in different time periods, and where possible, to achieve some sort of reconciliation among their conflicting selves. Their narratives are thus their own Bildungsroman since, despite their many ups and downs, they experience cognitive as well as emotional development at the end" (Varghaiyan 134). The use of the "I" narrator is an effective device to imply that the narrative is a regretful account of the protagonist's past flaws, which suggests that by the time they are telling the story, they are reborn and beyond those flaws. Through her regretful introspection, freida exemplifies this confessional narrator whose regretful narration of her innocent, unfruitful, yet painful reliance on the beauty discourses of her society invites the reader to be more critical about the beauty ideals of her own world, which are conveyed by the mass media, the advertising, and the beauty magazines.

The portrayal of freida as a teenager is equally important. It establishes her as a narrative device for O'Neill to facilitate young readers' involvement in this didactic narrative. As Daniel Delbrassine explains, one of the ways the character-reader communication is established by writers of young adult literature is by creating characters in the image of the reader (Delbrassine 197) in such a way that narration and reading become "a confidential chat" that "simulates a peer-to-peer relationship with the young reader ... who thus sees someone his own age addressing him directly" (Delbrassine 250, my translation)[9]. As a teenager navigating a rigid beauty culture like that of the Euro-Zone—which, as Muraveva notes, closely mirrors the discursive patterns of contemporary beauty magazines like *Cosmopolitan* (127-8)—freida is designed to be pertinently relatable to contemporary young women. These contemporary young women, who are daily bombarded by "the media images of perfect female beauty," leaving "no doubt in the minds of most [of them]

[9] le bavardage confidentiel permet de simuler une relation entre pairs avec le jeune lecteur … qui voit ainsi quelqu'un de son âge s'adresser directement à lui.

that they fail to measure up" (Bartky 33), will find in freida a peer who is disillusioned with the false promises of perfection promoted by the advertisements of cosmetic products and services.

freida's confessional narrative, thus, becomes a space for the confidential character-reader conversation that Delbrassine talks about. She engages in an intimate conversation with the young reader through which the latter learns from her lived experience of the manipulative influence of the beauty advertisements in the media. Her internal conflict—characterised by her growing awareness of the contradictions in the beauty regime, her regret, and anger—mirrors the experiences of real-life readers who are similarly subjected to unrealistic ideals and pressures from social media, advertising, and peer environments. Her disillusionment also functions to reassure readers that their doubts and frustrations are valid. By witnessing freida's awakening, those readers are encouraged to reflect on their internalised beliefs about beauty, particularly the assumption that beauty must hurt. While freida's resistance is limited to a passive feeling of disappointment and regret, the narrative shifts with the character of isabel, who is more enterprising in the process of self-decolonisation from the beauty myth.

1.2. isabel's Embodied Resistance

isabel is perhaps the most inspirational rebellious martyr of the dystopian world of the Euro-Zone, in *Only Ever Yours*. Unlike freida, isabel's rejection of the beauty myth's equation of beauty with pain and self-sacrifice is more confrontational and inspiring, as illustrated in the following passage:

> "Isn't that isabel at the Fatgirl buffet?" And it is. Dressed in a loose black tank over gray leggings, she is the only one there, steam from the hot bar curling around her face, obscuring her features. Seemingly oblivious to the girls in the BeBetter line openly pointing at her, she loads her plate with fried chick-chick and noodles, white bread rolls, soup, and pasta. She dispenses a hot chocco from the silver beverage tap and covers it with mounds of whipped kream, sprinkling chocco flakes generously over the top until she's buckling under the weight of her laden tray. I turn away, knowing that she will return to chastity-anne's desk to pick up a portion of ipecac syrup, and I don't want to see it. I sit down at once, banging my tray on the mirrored desktop. "I can't believe she's eating Fatgirl food again. (O'Neill 22)

This passage is about freida remarking and commenting on isabel's sudden change of eating patterns. The Girls' School has a Nutrition Centre which has two buffets. The BeBetter Buffet and the Fatgirl Buffet. Each buffet has multiple sections dispensing a rich variety of food for the eves. The Fatgirl Buffet dispenses fatty and sugar-rich foods while the BeBetter Buffet offers veggies and eggs. Though there is no official recommendation by the school about which food the eves must and must not eat, the names that are chosen for the buffets clearly state from which buffet the eves are expected to eat. Each buffet is named after the metamorphosis it has in store for the bodies of its clients. The BeBetter Buffet is for the eves who wish to improve their bodies, while the Fatgirl Buffet is for those who wish to be or do not care if they turn fat. Because all the eves are trained to be in such an eternal quest for an improved body, no eve dares eat from the Fatgirl Buffet despite the irresistibly attractive foods which, as freida admits, "make my mouth water" (20).

However, after isabel notices that she has gained more weight despite her efforts to endure hunger, as prescribed by the school, she engages in a daring revolt and breaks the myth around the Fatgirl Buffet. She refuses to impose this restriction on food on herself. Not only does she allow herself to eat the fatty and sugar-rich foods such as chocolates, fried chicken and noodles, and soup, but she also does not hesitate to generously fill up her plate.

Indeed, eating from the Fatgirl Buffet can expose isabel to risks of health problems. However, in this context of the Euro-Zone, where eating is regulated and framed as an act of shame, the act of eating, for isabel, is a significant act of resistance. Besides, both isabel and freida end tragically—by suicide for isabel and execution for freida—as is tradition in the dystopian novel. For isabel, the regime ultimately got "her stomach shrunk" through a surgical procedure after which she has been successfully brought back to order to such an extent that everyone is surprised about "how disciplined she is … how she's managing to lose the weight so quickly," a tragic end that echoes Winston Smith in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1954), who ended stripped of all resistance and reconverted to love Big Brother (Orwell 235-36). Moreover, she is later pushed to commit suicide, like John the Savage in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1977), who, unable to reconcile his desire for authenticity with the oppressive conformity of the One State, ends by taking his own life (Huxley

205-6).

Despite this conventional tragic fate of the dystopian rebel, however, isabel succeeds in carving out a model of embodied resistance. Her refusal to conform, even temporarily, to the oppressive food and beauty norms of the society plants the seeds of doubt and defiance in both her peers and the reader. I share Muraveva's point that by eating from the Fatgirl Buffet, isabel uses her body as "a symbol of resistance," as "she attempts to reclaim it [the body] by eating more and letting herself put on weight" (130). When isabel eats from the Fatgirl Buffet, she reclaims not only her body but also the freedom to eat, to respect one's desires, to be true to oneself in a rigid beauty culture that fosters conformity. More importantly, that subversive attitude resonates beyond isabel's fictional universe to serve as a powerful message to the contemporary woman who is under the manipulative influence of the normative beauty discourses. The beauty advertisements in the media, as Maria Michela Marzano Parisoli observes, implicitly warn women that "if a woman is fat, it is her fault" because "she is what she eats" (27). isabel's eating exposes the contemporary young woman to this logic of repression and regulation that underpins the beauty advertisements. By witnessing her peer engage in such a subversive act, the reader—who may feel trapped by the guilt and shame of eating or having a larger body size under the manipulative influence of the beauty advertisement—finally finds encouragement and a renewed sense of legitimacy.

isabel's revolt is not only against the restrictions on food but also against the unfair limitations placed on eves' dressing. Indeed, there are no clearly stated rules defining the kind of clothes that the eves must wear, but because all the eves are taught to seek an attractive physical appearance, every eve knows that clothes must be chosen carefully. We see a good example of this attachment to clothing on the first day of the eves' third school year. freida dresses so smartly that she catches the attention of the entire school, receiving compliments from her peers: "freida, you look great." daria has floated over to join us, her eyes skimming over my body. "Totally," freja says, far more convincing now that she has had time to prepare. 'I love that skirt'" (O'Neill 13). We are not giving any details about isabel's dressing in those early school years, but we have a confirmation from freja that "she has such good taste" in clothing that she must have assisted freida in choosing her skirt. The eves also learn that when a girl loses control of her body and grows fat, she must,

out of shame, be careful about the clothes she wears. This is the case with christy when the eves are playing in the yard of the school: "christy attempts a weak smile as she tugs her kimono down, pretending she can't see freja staring at her soft thighs with open disgust" (58). With these details on the eves' dressing, it is clear how the school and, by extension, the Euro-Zone controls its girls' choices about dressing and how those girls comply with those dressing norms.

Unlike her peers, however, isabel rejects these dressing codes in favour of her personal clothing taste. Considering her current condition as the fattest of the eves, one would believe that she would choose clothes which hide her "abnormal" body. Yet, instead of embarking on this self-effacing initiative, isabel dresses "in a loose black tank over gray leggings" (22). Both the type and the colour of each of these clothing items reveal recalcitrance. Tank is the short for "tank top." According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, tank is "a knitted piece of clothing (= made from wool or thick cotton) that covers the upper part of the body but not the arms and is usually worn over other clothing". Leggings is defined as "very tight trousers made from a material that stretches easily, sometimes worn under other clothes. This special attire demonstrates the maturity of isabel's awakening. By choosing a loose tank top with no additional clothing underneath, isabel clearly expresses her desire to prioritise the needs of her body over all external appreciations. It is mealtime and she is a "fat" girl in the Nutrition Centre to help herself. She knows that her new body needs a clothing item that is elastic enough to keep her at ease. It is the same self-love that informs her choice of the leggings and her option to wear them without any additional clothing item on top, as they are typically worn. The leggings easily stretch in accordance with the shape of her body and thus present no risk of causing discomfort.

Like the type of her clothes, isabel's choice of the colours of those clothes is selective and expressive of open rebellion. On advising women about how to dress attractively, fashion experts insist on the importance of clothing colour. According to Martin Graff, the red colour is the colour that men find attractive on women because of "its association with love and passion" (par. 3). isabel's choice of black, the opposite of red, shows that she does not care about whether she looks attractive or not. Even if this black colour along with others like grey are also recognised as capable of exposing the female body and are highly recommended by some stylists for women

who wish to look attractive, isabel's preference for a "loose" black (a black but loose) tank and grey "leggings" (grey but easily stretching) indicates that the purpose of her dressing is not to please her social environment but to guarantee her own comfort. Theorising the possibilities for women to get beyond the beauty myth, Wolf insists on the necessity of learning to prioritise their desires and a sense of agency over the perception and appreciation of the external world:

> Women will be able thoughtlessly to adorn ourselves with pretty objects when there is no question that we are not objects. Women will be free of the beauty myth when we can choose to use our faces and clothes and bodies as simply one form of self-expression out of a full range of others. We can dress up for our pleasure, but we must speak up for our rights. (Wolf 273–74)

With the manifest freedom that she shows about her clothing style, isabel becomes not only a perfect example of this self-centred vision of physical appearance that Wolf dreams of and recommends to women, but also some sort of a means for its expansion around her. By seeing isabel in such an active rebellion, neither with a sense of shame nor with a feeling of guilt or fear, the rest of the eves and, by extension, the reader are offered an opportunity to learn that there is room for difference in terms of clothing. They are given to understand that looking beautiful does not mean suffering but rather feeling comfortable in one's clothes. The beauty myth does not only engage women to internalise the assumption that beauty must hurt, but it also nurtures a consumer culture that drains women's economic power.

2. Transcending the Consumerist Mindset

As a tool in the service of a neoliberal economy that seeks to commercialise cosmetic products and services of beautification to maximise profit, the beauty ideology prevailing in contemporary Western cultures also endeavours to nurture in women consumerist attitudes. Mona Chollet, in her critique of the tyrannical grip of the beauty ideology on women, describes this situation as follows:

> They [women] dedicate their lives to aesthetic concerns, which constitute the second pole of this revitalised traditional femininity. They are overtaken by an obsessive perfectionism, accompanied by an ever-renewed desire for the products and techniques being marketed

at a frantic pace. (Chollet 23, my translation)[10]

Contemporary women are increasingly pressured to invest emotionally and financially in their appearance by continually seeking self-improvement through consumer choices. This consumerism is often disguised in what Wolf called the "dream language of meritocracy" of beauty magazines (Wolf 29), which deceptively equates empowerment and personal success with the ability to meet unrealistic beauty expectations. In doing so, the system individualises structural pressures, presenting beauty as a personal responsibility and achievement, rather than a socially constructed and economically motivated demand. The advertisers of the beauty industry, as Michelle M. Lazar observes, encourage this consumerism through a systematic co-option of the notion of choice:

> choice standing in as a shorthand for 'feminism' thus can be easily appropriated to fit into consumerist imperatives so that the implied message is that women may reach feminist goals through their consumer choices. In some ads, the assumption that the modern emancipated woman/consumer is used to having choices at her disposal is presumed as a 'given'. Such messages as 'what are your make up choices?' and 'giving women all the options they want' presuppose that women do have (make up) choices and that they want to be able to exercise options, respectively.

Thus, the normative beauty discourse of the fashion and beauty industry, as Chollet and Lazar make it clear, strategically aligns itself with feminist rhetoric by framing consumption as a form of liberation. This rhetoric disguises the underlying commercial agenda, allowing the industry to commodify empowerment itself.

O'Neill's eves navigate and attempt to transcend this consumer culture, exemplifying forms of resilience for readers to follow. The character of isabel, for instance, models an ideological rehabilitation from this consumerist mindset. As the secret favourite of the Original father, isabel has had the privilege of receiving gifts including snakeskin boots, shoes that are

[10] Elles dédient leur vie aux préoccupations esthétiques, qui constituent le second pôle de cette féminité traditionnelle revivifiée. Elles se laissent gagner par un perfectionnisme obsessionnel, qu'accompagne une convoitise sans cesse renouvelée pour les produits et les techniques mis sur le marché à un rythme effréné.

highly coveted by every eve in the Euro-Zone. However, she does not show any interest in these shoes. Instead of proudly wearing them and using them as a demarcation line between her and her peers, isabel receives and offers them to freida:

> *"They're incredible, isabel," I said, touching the boots reverently. "Where on earth did you get them?" "They're yours," she said. "I don't want them." "But . . ." I stuttered, confused. "They're real snakeskin. You must love them." "I hate them," she turned away from me. "I hate them."* (O'Neill 256, author's italics)

In the neoliberal context of the twenty-first century, where O'Neill writes, the snakeskin boots are significant, as they are part of the luxurious clothing items frequently referenced in the commercial discourse of online beauty magazines. In a recent post, *Instyle*—an online magazine that specialises in exposing celebrities' lifestyles to create new trends of consumption in the fashion and beauty industry—reads:

> Rihanna[11] is basically a walking mood board of never-ending fashion inspiration. So, on the rare occasion she's spotted re-wearing a statement piece, it's best to take notes. In just the last week, the mogul styled two early spring uniforms in New York City, grounded by sharp snakeskin boots; a luscious knit green midi dress, and a sophisticated ensemble including a pinstripe button-down and trousers. The week before, she teamed those *same* boots with a trendy Canadian tuxedo and a sleek leather trench coat. (Cigliano)

The purpose of this commercial ad is not only to orientate audiences' fashion choices towards Rihanna's choice of repetitive and fashionable use of the snakeskin boots but also and more broadly to spark consumer habits in those audiences. By insisting on Rihanna's style and its implied prestige and pride, the ad successfully constructs desire and fosters a compulsive need to purchase in order to emulate status and style.

The snakeskin boots in O'Neill's narrative epitomise this commodified ideal of beauty and style. The Father's offering of the snakeskin boots to isabel symbolises the pressure of the advertising discourse on women to possess these beauty items. In this angle of analysis, isabel's refusal of the boots functions as a subversive act which establishes her character as a literary

[11] Born Robyn Rihanna Fenty, Rihanna is one of the most influential figures in music, fashion, and business. With a career spanning over two decades, she has cemented herself as a Grammy-winning artist, entrepreneur, actress, and philanthropist.

device for O'Neill to raise consciousness about the transformation of women into faithful consumers by the beauty discourses in the contemporary West. Her act undermines the assumption that material consumption is the marker of empowerment, highlighting instead how consumerism can function as a form of ideological submission. By rejecting a commodity designed to signal privilege, as suggested through freida's astonishment at this rejection, isabel breaks the chain of desire that sustains the consumer economy of beauty. In this way, she models an alternative mode of being—one that values autonomy, critical awareness, and self-definition over compliance with capitalistic aesthetics. Through isabel's defiance, O'Neill critiques how neoliberalism commodifies the female body and polices desire through the seductive promises of beauty culture. isabel thus becomes not just a rebel within the narrative, but a beacon of resistance for readers, as she is the figure who dares to decline what every girl has been taught to desire and pursue.

This portrayal of isabel is even more important in O'Neill's context of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. As Sylvie Mikowski explains, in her study of the transformations of the Irish society as a result of the rapid economic changes of the Celtic Tiger era, the Irish citizen has undergone a significant ideological transformation. From this era of economic reconfiguration, the Irish society becomes one of the globalised economies in the West and engages in more dynamic cultural dialogue with the rest of the World, a dynamic through which citizens not only embrace neoliberal values such as individualism, freedom, and choice but also grow new needs:

> In this new, ultra-liberal Ireland, the individual was no longer 'the citizen', the stereotype of which was immortalized by Joyce's famous episode in *Ulysses* or by O'Casey in his play *The Plough and the Stars,* nor one of the flock who could be upbraided by the parish priest, but a potential consumer convinced that he/she can buy their way to happiness. By encouraging the rise of new needs, capitalism raises individual expectations, exacerbates the sense of a unique, separate self, and creates the illusion of unlimited freedom of access to all forms of pleasures. (Mikowsky 90)

The character of isabel embodies O'Neill's critique of the consumerist ideology that has become profoundly embedded in Irish society since the Celtic Tiger years. In a globalised culture where identity is increasingly shaped by consumption and where neoliberal values equate personal freedom with

the capacity to choose from an expanding marketplace of lifestyles and commodities, isabel's rejection of a coveted luxury like the snakeskin boots becomes a radical refusal to equate self-worth with material acquisition. She disrupts the illusion that empowerment and fulfilment are attainable through products and aesthetic conformity. isabel, therefore, positions herself as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of neoliberal Ireland, one that prioritises critical thought, emotional authenticity, and resistance over performative femininity and commodified empowerment. The rejection of the boots is, therefore, not simply an act of rebellion, but a symbolic refusal of an entire system that commodifies female bodies, desires, and agency in service of capitalist goals.

Conclusion

Only Ever Yours transcends to dystopian tragedy to serve as a powerful site of resistance against the beauty myth and the consumerist ideologies that sustain it. Through the characters of isabel and freida, O'Neill exposes the psychological violence inflicted by a society that commodifies female bodies and disguises empowerment. The novel paints a bleak picture of systemic control so that characters appear not only as navigating eternal oppression but also channelled into the conventional tragic ending of classical dystopia, a dystopian approach which establishes it as an effective cautionary tale about contemporary normative beauty discourse. However, alongside this dystopian atmosphere, the characters of Isabel and freida function as models of critical reflection and resistance for readers. From her rejection of consumer goods to her indifference to social validation and bold challenge to beauty norms, Isabel demonstrates the possibilities of reclaiming agency in a world where a woman's worth is defined in terms of her physical appearance. freida's narrative voice is equally important in this perspective. Evolving from unquestioning conformity to self-aware disillusionment, it creates a confessional space through which O'Neill addresses readers directly. Through this narrative intimacy or "confidence chat," as Daniel Delbrassine calls it, freida's narrative urges readers to question the beauty ideology that shapes their desires and behaviours. Situated in the context of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, a society undergoing rapid neoliberal transformation, *Only Ever Yours* critiques how capitalist logic manipulates feminist ideals like freedom, agency, and choice, reducing them to commercial strategies. However, by

foregrounding acts of rebellion against these structures, *Only Ever Yours* refuses to confine its politics to the classical dystopia's tradition of dramatising to warn. Beyond the dystopian tragedy, characterised by Isabel's suicide and freida's execution at the end of the story, the novel constructs a vision of feminist resistance rooted in emotional honesty, critical awareness, and the reclamation of embodied selfhood. Through this narrative dualism, O'Neill not only denounces the oppressive system that polices female identity but also provides readers with the imaginative tools to envision and enact beyond the beauty myth.

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