The Breaking of the Hymen: Opposing Realities in Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Sharon Olds' "Odes to the Hymen"

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Index

Abstract

As part of female sexuality, the vaginal membrane continues to be taken as physical proof of female virginity by many cultures, societies or religions. This M.A. Thesis explores the hymen, the meanings attached to it, the consequences of its breaking and, most importantly, the effects all of these have on women's emotions and bodies. For the literary analysis, Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and Sharon Olds' poems "Ode to the Hymen" and "Second Ode to the Hymen" have been selected to be examined and compared. In order to explore the characters' and the speakers' experiences on an emotional level, Sarah Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* is primarily used as a theoretical basis. A feminist reading is further included to help understand the female body's workings, reactions, and (re)shaping when analysing the emerging pleasant and unpleasant emotions and their immediate and long-lasting consequences and effects. In this way, this study sheds light on the different – and sometimes opposing – realities that coexist nowadays since women's personal experiences are affected by intersectional dynamics.

1. Introduction

Women from all over the world still face constraints and oppression regarding their sexuality, amongst other things, in various degrees. Some are fortunate enough to make conscious and willing choices concerning their sex life; others may struggle with patriarchal and sexist notions embedded in their psyches; and others simply have no power of decision. For my M.A. Thesis, I narrowed the scope of female sexuality and chose the hymen as the central focus. Various reasons motivated my choice, the first one being the fact that the hymen may serve as a starting point in the study of women's sexual oppression *and* liberation. The vaginal membrane is the element through which the vigilance, pain and fear may start, and its breaking does not signify their end, for negative and positive emotions and attachments shape our bodies and their effects and consequences evolve and live on. My second reason to explore the vaginal membrane comes from a previous shorter essay I wrote, titled "Sharon Old's 'Ode to the Hymen': An Analysis on the Importance and Necessity of Praising the Hymen." I chose that specific poem for its feminist claim and reappropriation of the hymen. Even though in the above-mentioned essay I did not analyse the poem from an entirely feminist perspective nor did I touch on affect or emotions, in that study I became aware of the fruitful possibilities it contained for a more in-depth analysis and research. Accordingly, I will be adding unto this paper some of my previous analysis and ideas, although the focus will be different and I will be including more texts for my literary analysis.

This study will tackle the hymen and its portrayal in certain literary works, examining it from affect theory and a feminist approach. As part of my theoretical framework, I will apply concepts from affect theory, mainly using Sarah Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* as a basis. The analysis will be centred on emotions and the way they shape bodies, especially the female one. Moreover, I will include a feminist reading since the focus is on

the hymen, and thus the female body and women themselves. I will be applying ideas and concepts from different gender theorists, such as Judith Butler's and her "gendering," Susan Bordo's thoughts on femininity, or Susie Orbach's concerns in relation our bodies. Lastly, I will offer a brief historical context of the "hymen" to explain and understand its current relevance as well as my decision when choosing this particular element as central to my research. Regarding the literary analysis, I have chosen three texts to examine: two poems by Sharon Olds – "Ode to the Hymen" and "Second Ode to the Hymen" – and Edwidge Danticat's novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. I chose the poems because I believe they share an interesting dialogue and modern reflection on the hymen. Olds' poems serve as a praising of the hymen, but she does more than that; she brings awareness to the fact that not every woman is able to make her own choices regarding her sex life and her body. She makes clear, however, that the membrane is not the one to blame for the atrocities, horror and pain women had, and have, to suffer. Still, since the hymen's presence in the female body can become a physical constraint when used against the woman by intrusive others, animosity towards it may develop. For this reason, I had to choose a text that showed an opposing reality. Danticat's novel contains illustrative examples to prove my point, containing crude scenes of "hymen testing" – a testing that will cause a series of negative effects and consequences on the protagonist's body and her relation to it, as well as sex and her personal relationships.

I will argue that many of the emotions that are displayed in my chosen texts are a direct consequence and an answer to the patriarchal ideology and power to which these women are subjected. On the one hand, Sharon Olds' odes are charged with a feminist criticism and message. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, in turn, offers a depiction of women that are constricted by social impositions because of their gender. Therefore, in my literary analysis I will explore two of the different realities a woman might endure nowadays in regards to her hymens: the more positive and loving experiences in contrast to the unpleasant and painful

ones. By taking affect theory as a theoretical basis, along with feminist criticism, I will prove that women's relationship with their hymens as well as their sexuality directly affects them on an emotional level, shaping their very bodies.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Affect Theory: Emotions and Their Impact on the Body

In this section, I will briefly introduce affect theory whilst exploring the concepts and ideas I will apply to my literary, main analysis. Patrick Colm Hogan, in his essay "Affect Studies and Literary Criticism," makes a distinction between affective science and affect theory, albeit mentioning that notions from both orientations are sometimes combined (5). An example of this are Antonio Damasio's studies, which draw from neuroscience. In his book *Looking for Spinoza* (2003), Damasio differentiates between feelings and emotions, explaining how emotions historically and neurobiologically come before feelings – "feelings [...] are mostly shadows of the external manner of emotions" (29). As he states, "emotions are built from simple reactions that easily promote the survival of an organism and thus could easily prevail in evolution" (30). Damasio further distinguishes them by saying that feelings are private and emotions are made public (27), since "emotions play out in the theater of the body" and "feelings play out in the theater of the mind" (28).

The notion of emotions being "played out in the theatre of the body" is crucial in the understanding of emotions and the effect they have on our bodies. Scholar Sara Ahmed states how emotion "is the feeling of bodily change," giving the example of why when we feel fear is because "our heart is racing, our skin is sweating" (*The Cultural Politics* 3). For Ahmed, "emotions are not 'in' either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and

boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they were objects" (10). Affect is closely connected with emotions, for "affect dispositions – sometimes called 'trait affectivity' or 'trait emotionality' – are enduring personality characteristics (or traits) that dispose one toward a particular sort of emotion" (Hogan 8). That is not to say though that affect theory just focuses on emotions, for "affect's theorization" can have different angles dependant on its concern – philosophy, neuroscience or politics are some examples (Seigworth and Melinda Gregg 6-7). Affect theory is typically concerned with politics as it "has developed out of or at least in dialogue with cultural studies" (Hogan 5). For my theoretical framework, I have chosen to narrow the scope and only centre on emotions and the political and social issues that arise when touching upon women's sexuality and bodies.

Sara Ahmed in her essay "Happy Objects" describes affect as "sticky" – "affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects" (29). It is also linked to intentionality, for "we judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us pleasure or pain" (31). Examining the ways in which we are affected emotionally wise is part of the aim of this thesis, which is why I will be using Ahmed's more extensive study *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) as my principal theoretical basis. As the scholar indicates in the introduction, in the book she "explore(s) how emotions work to shape the 'surfaces' of individual and collective bodies," for "bodies take the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others" (1). Although it is not only about the movement of emotions between bodies and how they "stick" (2), but about the "attachments or about what connects us to this or that" (11). Since my work will centre on the hymen and, to a certain extent, female sexuality, I will examine how female bodies are affected and in which ways emotions shape them. I have chosen for my discussion and analysis four of the emotions Ahmed covers in her study – pain, fear, shame, and love – in

addition to her chapter on "feminist attachments," which I will accordingly link to a feminist approach, and therefore the subsequent section of this study. I shall start with pain.

In its most basic and physical sense, the breaking of the hymen *may* hurt. The stretching of this tissue, however, and as I will explore in the examining of the literary texts, will proof to be *not* the most painful and scarring element – "pain is not simply the feeling that corresponds to bodily damage" (23). So, even though we have the physical pain that may occur when the hymen stretches open, we also have the pain that comes from the persecution the woman has been subjected to, the abusive testing, and the obsession with this membrane that *supposedly* signifies and denotes a woman's chastity. In Ahmed's chapter on pain, she explains how experiencing pain "involves the attribution of meaning through experience, as well as associations between different kinds of negative or aversive feelings" (23). Thus, a woman who has been tested, like the women in Danticat's novel, will associate sex to the testing and thereby the pain; and not just physical pain, but the emotional one. Memory in this has a crucial role – "the sensation of pain is deeply affected by memories: one can feel pain when reminded of past trauma by an encounter with another" (25). As a way to avert pain, there is a subsequent "reconstitution of bodily space" and a "reorientation of the bodily relation to that which gets attributed as the cause of the pain" (24). In other words, if something (or someone) is hurting us, we move away from the source that causes it as "it feels like I am moving away from the pain" (24). Bodies are rearranged "into different shapes" (28) due to the pain, huddling or shuddering. Similarly, our bodies will recoil in fear by anticipating the pain, which leads me to the next emotion: fear.

Fear can also come into play in different ways in regards to our subject matter. Firstly, there is women's fear of the testing itself, the consequent pain and, more specifically, the consequences if they fail to pass the test. To not bleed, regardless of having had sex

before or not, would translate into the woman's punishment and/or rejection and repudiation from any future husband and her own family. Fear will also explain, in turn, the testing itself since "fear is understood as a safer instrument of power than love" (71), which is why the patrolling of a woman's sexuality is seemingly more effective when using verbal threats rather than when being "understanding" or "educational." When deemed as necessary, direct and physical methods are also employed, such as the testing. Ironically, women are often the ones testing other women; namely, mothers testing their daughters. These women act in such way due to an imprinted fear; that is, a fear that is "concerned with the preservation not simply of 'me', but also 'us', or 'what is', or 'life as we know it', or even 'life itself '" (64), which therefore hampers change and transformation.

Since fear "involves an anticipation of hurt or injury" there is a futural sense attached to this emotion: "the object that we fear is not simply before us, or in front of us, but impresses upon us in the present, as an anticipated pain in the future" (65). We fear what the future may hold, but physical signs or symptoms materialize in our present: sweaty palms, heart racing, etc. In regards to women, there is a long history and list of "objects" of fear. Some that will be particularly significant for this study are the fear of having sex for the first time, the fear of someone or something penetrating our private space, and the fear of going out and being *seen* (Evans 33). The idea that a woman shall remain home to be "safe" persists, and when she does go out, she should not move "through that space alone" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 70). However, home not always equals safety: members of her household can be abusive. What is more, the female body does not offer comfort, as it can become a source of exposure to unwanted attention and unsafety. These facts make women vulnerable and acutely aware of their bodies' limitations and delimitations, which is why "such feelings of vulnerability and fear […] shape women's bodies as well as how those bodies inhabit space" (70).

Shame is the third emotion I chose to expand on and use for my analysis. First, we have the shame that results from acknowledging we were at fault for something – "the 'we' is shamed by its recognition that it has committed 'acts and omissions', which have caused pain, hurt and loss" (101). As a result, shame comes with an intense feeling of negation that "is taken on by the subject as a sign of its own failure" and that "is usually experienced before another" (103). This leads to an attempt to hide: the body turns away from the other towards itself (103). Still, not everyone or everything can cause one to feel shame: this emotion "– as an exposure before another – is only felt given that the subject is interested in the other; that is, that a prior love or desire for the other exists" (105). Nevertheless, we find that people can be influenced in a subconscious way by society and its moral "rules," particularly those that concern "sexual conduct" (106). Women (and men too) continue to suffer from body and sexual shaming, and not only by others, but also by themselves. They judge their own bodies just as harshly as others would, which ultimately leads them to being ashamed of their bodies, sexuality, and desires, as they fail to match up with what society expects from them. Thus, "shame becomes both a domesticating feeling and a feeling of domestication" (107). Bodies are domesticated, both consciously and unconsciously, to close down and turn away from shameful behaviour and acts. To combat this shame, as well as other unpleasant emotions, we would need to embrace and welcome positive emotions, like love.

The fourth emotion I want to include is love, as I intend to conclude my literary and overall analysis on a positive, hopeful note. Nevertheless, love, similar to the other emotions, can be a double-edged sword depending on its usage and focus. In the name of love one can carry out hurtful actions; actions that could be regarded as hateful. Therefore, "hate is renamed as love" (123). Instead of acknowledging hatred as the source of one's actions, one can justify their behaviour by stating they have acted "out of love." With this statement I am

not suggesting that every hurtful action comes from hate concealed as love for another. I merely wish to stress the fact that causing damage is often linked to the notion of protection: "it is out of love that the group seeks to defend the nation against others, whose presence then becomes defined as the origin of hate" (122-123). Love is taken as a political tool, most notably in discussions on migration: migrants shall take "'the nation' as their object of love" (134); love is the requisite to keep the nation together (135). Nonetheless, my take on love will mostly draw from Ahmed's remarks on how "our relation to particular others" is what "gives life meaning and direction, and can give us the feeling of there being somebody and something to live for" (139). In my literary analysis I will concentrate on why "how one loves matters," as "it has effects on the texture of everyday life and on the intimate 'withness' of social relations" (140). Love will also shape the female body and it will be an essential emotion when opening it up, especially if it has been previously damaged.

Lastly, I want to go through Sara Ahmed's "Feminist Attachments," which correlates with the feminist perspective I will be applying. She mostly dedicates the chapter to how "feminism involves an emotional response to 'the world,' where the form of that response involves a reorientation of one's bodily relation to social norms" (170-171). She presents us the different emotions she has as a woman and a feminist:

> The *anger*, the anger that I felt about how being a girl seemed to be about what you shouldn't do; the *pain*, the pain that I felt as an effect of forms of violence; the *love*, the love for my mother and for all the women whose capacity for giving has given me life; the *wonder*, the wonder I felt at the way in which the world came to be organised the way that it is, a wonder that feels the ordinary as surprising; the *joy*, the joy I felt as I began to make different kinds of connections with others and realise that the world was alive and could take new shapes and forms; and the *hope*, the hope that guides every moment of refusal and that structures the desire for change with the trembling that comes from an opening up of the future, as an opening up of what is possible. (171, emphasis mine)

I selected this particular quote since it highlights a myriad of emotions to which most women can relate. Anger, wonder, joy and hope are crucial emotions in feminist criticism, which is why I will be expanding on them throughout my study. As displayed in the quote above, Ahmed discusses the oscillating emotions a woman may have as a feminist: those catalogued as "against" something, like anger, and those that show a "'for-ness'" (178), such as wonder or hope. Even if some emotions, like anger or wonder, might seem contrary at first, in the feminist discourse the aim is essentially the same. Negative and positive emotions usually arise in arguments concerned with both past and present gender hierarchies (and hence the inequalities that stem from them), and as a result feminist attachments are formed.

We fight in the struggle "against 'what is'" and we strive "for" what should be, and this "involves the coming together of different bodies in this present time"; "it is here that the feminist 'we' becomes affective" (188). The questions and concerns that emerge will necessarily apply to the future, but as Ahmed points out, since the future is unknown, there is a desire "that the future should not simply repeat the past, given that feminism comes into being as a critique of, and resistance to, the ways in which the world has already taken shape" (183). Because of this, we shall always take into account and "attend to the legacies of feminist pasts," that is, how the feminist thinking, and the world itself, has evolved, begging the question of "what it would mean to have a world where feminism, as a politics of transformation, is no longer necessary" (183). Thus, the past, present, and future are essential elements when constructing a feminist discourse and analysis. With this, we shall move on to the next section to further expand on feminism and the female body.

2.2 Feminist Lens on the Emotional Shaping of Bodies

I believe the application of a feminist approach was imperative when studying and analysing hymen-centred texts. Thereby, in this subchapter, I will present the feminist and gender

arguments and concepts I will draw unto my literary study. As the focus is on the hymen, during my research I selected feminist theorists and critics whose works examine, in some way or another, the female body, sexuality and emotions. I will begin my discussion exploring the construction of sex and gender, which leads to gender dualities. We can only understand a woman's position and her relationship with her sexuality (and her hymen) if we first look into gender/sex and their norms, and how dualities inevitably arise and relegate women to an inferior position. This affects the relation and perception of our bodies and, by the same token, our sexuality. For this reason, amongst feminism's aims – and specifically in regards to women's sexuality – we find a social and cultural transformation. I shall begin with Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1993), taking some of her ideas on gendering, and sex and gender. Her work is exhaustive, so for the sake of brevity I will only be examining the arguments that can be connected to my subject matter.

Judith Butler dedicates a large part of her discussion to the construction of sex and gender. When talking about sex, she states that the "construction not only takes place *in* time, but is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration" (Butler 10). In this reiteration of norms through time, "gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm" (10). This can be applied to the hymen and virginity: what was believed or done centuries ago has changed (to a greater or lesser extent) over time. The fact that our vision and social norms alter through time is crucial to the future of feminism. Changes take place because someone questions such norms, offering evidence on how they were something not entirely defined or established. Therefore, they can be *transformed*.

Gender is constructed, too. In Butler's words, gender is "an assignment," as can be virginity. Like Hanne Blank claims, virginity is "female" and "exclusively heterosexual" (10) in that patriarchal societies only care about the virginity of women. Then again, gender – as virginity – "is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation" for its "addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate" (Butler 231). The same happens with the notion of "femininity," which is "not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment" (232). Susan Bordo comments on femininity in her work *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1995), arguing that we learn about femininity and its rules "through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements, and behavior are required" (170). Sandra Lee Bartky also calls attention to this specific point and adds to it, asserting how "the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (142). Everyone, and at the same time no one, can fit in the role of "judge" when the "failure" that comes from not fulfilling any given expectation is presented.

The stereotypical set of norms that concern the biological sex and the gender identity and the expectations that come from these two are still deeply ingrained in every society, culture, and mindset. Males are expected to be masculine, and females, feminine. This translates into a demonization of those who do not "adjust" to these norms. That is why different phenomena like homophobia arise, as there is "a terror over losing proper gender ('no longer being a real or proper man' or 'no longer being a real and proper woman')" (Orbach 238). We can further encounter instances such as "the revulsion felt by many at the sight of female body builder"; in short, "neither the homosexual nor the muscular woman can be assimilated easily to the categories that structure everyday life" (Bartky 146). The battling

against body shaming a woman has to endure is intersectional, as the shaming can also concern her race, wealth, sexual life or orientation, body size, etc. The norms and expectations are such that every woman who tries to undergo bodily transformations "is destined in some degree to fail" (139). Consequently, the shame felt "is added to a woman's sense that the body she inhabits is deficient" (139).

This is not to say that only women are subjected to these social expectations: men suffer from gendering too. Their bodies are also exploited and shamed, although in different ways because they "historically occupied positions of dominance over women" (Bordo 29). In a system structured by dualities "gender and race […] make a difference," for "the 'generic' core is usually in reality a white or male body passing as the norm for all" (34). Even if gendering is "resisted" or "unintended," "in our present culture our activities are coded as male or female and will function as such under the prevailing system of gender-power relations" (242). What is more, as Bartky argues, there is no "formal institutional structure" that forcefully inscribes femininity (and masculinity) – at least in certain Western countries –, which "creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural" (143). It is important to stress that the notion of a "disciplinary modern power" that does not "rely upon violent or public sanctions and nor does it seek to restrain the freedom of the female body to move from place to place" (148) cannot be applied to every society or culture. As I will be exemplifying with Mona Eltahawy's recount in my next subchapter, some countries legally use violence to enforce and secure the compliance with heterosexual and sexist norms.

Moreover, we must look into the consequences of gendering, which vary depending on one's origin. Amongst those that affect women, we find the long history of "rules" concerning female behavior that prevail in present time. The focus is on the female body,

more specifically, on "its sexuality" and "its presumed heterosexuality and […] appearance" (Bartky 149). Women also continue to fight the expected, and at times imposed, chastity in certain parts of the world. To avoid temptation, their bodies are hidden, as "the female body has been considered to be so sexually powerful that it can overwhelm" (Orbach 115); only if they are not *seen* they will remain chaste and pure. Women cannot be seen, and neither can they be seen *seeing*: "the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer" (Bartky 135). Susie Orbach further reflects on women's position in her book *Bodies* (2009), a position that is one of vulnerability on account of their gender and the expectations that come with it. Women are subjected to appalling and outrageous "forms of violence, such as rape as a weapon of war, sexual violence and the theft of women's sexual and reproductive rights through FGM and so on" (Orbach xi). All of this makes them "vulnerable in what ought to be the most taken for granted place of safety, their bodies" (xi), which proves that women's bodies are not theirs: they belong to others.

Pain and fear inevitably arise and become tools to be used against women in order to control them and their sexual desires. Women are shamed and punished if they show sexual impulses or a different sexual identity, as most of them belong to patriarchal societies in which there is an "ambivalent relationship to women's sexuality" (Orbach 129). In these societies women have been and still are "vested with regulating their own and their daughter's sexuality," and those "who openly enjoyed their own sexuality for themselves [are] ostracised as bad, immoral or fallen" (129). If they dare to speak out, they will face further punishment. As Hélene Cixous analyses in her essay "Castration or Decapitation?," those women will be "decapitated" in the end, "and in any case the moral is that if they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them*—lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons" (42,43).

On account of the exposed issues, we can confirm that effects of gendering are particularly acute in women – they are the ones that are more commonly ostracised and repressed. Sexism, racism and many other repressive and hurtful attitudes are present in women's lives (albeit not exclusive to just them), which is why there is an aim "to recorporealise our bodies so that they become a place we live from rather than an aspirational ways needing to be achieved" (Orbach 145). Feminism strives and hopes for a future where we are "able to experience our diverse bodies, in the varied ways we decorate and move them, as a source of taken-for-granted pleasure and celebration" (145). What this means for women and their sexuality is the acquisition of the right and power to decide and choose what they want, when, where and with whom. Sex should be a "powerful meeting of bodies," an act "where people can be sufficiently vulnerable and open and find the confirmation that they and their body are all right, acceptable, beautiful and alive" (133). To achieve this, I believe one must dispose of annulling emotions and take in the powerful emotions of love, wonder, and hope. The success of these notions is yet to be seen and will be further discussed in the literary analysis.

2.3 The Hymen and its Historical Context

A brief review of the hymen through history is imperative in order to understand the violence and ideas attached to the membrane. Of course, the attachments and meanings a society and women may give to the membrane will change depending on the cultural background and personal experiences. In this subchapter, I will demonstrate how past notions and misconceptions still carry weight nowadays: the hymen continues to be associated with a woman's virginity and taken as evidence and as a means to patrol women's sexuality. I will start by examining the hymen's definitions before I delve into a historical recount.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the hymen as "a thin piece of skin that partly covers the opening to a girl's or woman's vagina and breaks when she has sex for the first time" ("Hymen," *Cambridge Dictionary*). When one encounters such a definition in a dictionary, it is unsurprising why the hymen is commonly associated with a woman's virginity. Even if it can indeed be "stretched open the first time [a woman has] vaginal sex, which might cause some pain or bleeding," there are plenty other reasons and ways in which the hymen might break, such as when "riding a bike, doing sports, or putting something in [the] vagina (like a tampon, finger, or sex toy)" ("Virginity"). Nevertheless, we still think about sexual penetration as the principal cause of its breaking, hence the ongoing belief of women as virgins with hymens to break (or preserve). What is more, as Hanne Blank points out in her book *Virgin: The Untouched History* (2007), we commonly assume that the hymen and its association with virginity would have been the same for our ancestors, yet its existence "wasn't even confirmed […] until the sixteenth century" (6).

Hanne Blank's work has served me as a historical basis as she offers interesting facts about virginity and, by association, about the hymen. She tracks down the history of this thin tissue, starting with the writings from the ancient world in which, even though there are several mentions of virgins and virginity, there are no references to the hymen – for them, "the hymen did not exist" (42). One of the reasons was that "at that time it was strongly taboo for male doctors to examine women's bodies directly" (43), and even if it had not been taboo, "the word 'hymen' meant something altogether different than it does today" (43). To people such as "Aristotle and the rest of the Greek world of his time, the hymen was nothing more or less than a membrane […] any membrane" (44). Therefore, this chronology, and contrary to popular belief, "leaves no evidence to support the idea that there is a direct connection between Hymenaeus, the Greek god of marriage, and the name we've ended up using for the small bit of genital tissue that bears the name 'hymen'" (45). Nevertheless, etymologically

they share the same root ("***syu-** 'to bind, sew'") and in folk etymology they are "supposed to be related" ("Hymen," *Online Etymology Dictionary*); there is a clear connection between marriage and the wedding night, and a woman's hymen and loss of her virginity. Physicians of the time were not oblivious to the fact that "women often bled when their vaginas were sexually penetrated for the first time," but "they saw no reason that such bleeding necessarily had to be associated with any specific bit of the genital anatomy" (45). What mattered was that the bleeding signalled their virginal state.

During the Middle Ages there was a growing concern with female virginity and chastity for several reasons:

> [...] partly because of increased devotion to Mary and the rise of women in monasticism; partly because virginity was a precious object to be guarded by the senses and the feminine was synonymous with the sensual; partly for economic reasons: within medieval systems of inheritance and land tenure, the woman's body is male property and the virgin wife guarantees the purity of the family line. (Evans 22-23).

Consequently, the virgin tradition suffered a transformation, going "from the virgin as a virago – a woman acting like a man (ninth to eleventh centuries), to the feminized virgin (twelfth to fourteenth centuries): a romance heroine married to Christ" (Evans 24). The latter had to match the impossible imposed role model of Virgin Mary – Mary who was both a virgin and a mother. The notion of "*wilful* virgin" originated as a result. Margery Kempe was a strong advocate of the so-called "*wilful* virgins," understanding them and the desired virginity "not as a return to a state of bodily intactness [these women could have had sexual intercourse] but as the recuperation of a spiritual state that stands outside the temporality of virginity as we normally understand it" (Evans 26-27). Meanwhile, as the interest in virginity grew, so did the interest in the female genitalia. Accordingly, like Hanne Blank argues, "we became aware of hymens because we are aware of something we call virginity" and "we

found the hymen because we found reasons to search women's bodies for some bit of flesh that embodied this quality we call 'virginity,' some physical proof it existed" (24).

The fifteenth century marked the first usage of the vaginal hymen by Michael Savonarola in his *Practica maior* (45). Later on, it first appeared in *The Dictionary of syr Thomas Eliot knight* by Thomas Eliot, produced in 1538, in which it is defined as "a skynne in the secrete place of a mayden, whiche whanne she is defloured, is broken" (Eliot). As suggested by the definition's wording, at that time the hymen's exact location remained unknown. Studies from doctors and surgeons, both advocates and opponents of the existence of such membrane, flourished during the sixteenth century. The French Ambroise Paré "was medicine's most vocal opponent of the hymen" (Blank 53), whilst the Flemish Andreas Vesalius and the French Séverin Pineau closely studied this membrane. Vesalius dissected two women whom he believed were virgins, shedding light on what the hymen looked like (51). Pineau, on the other hand, wrote *De virginitatis et corruptionis virginum notis* (*On Virginity and the Signs of Corrupted Virginity*) (1597), which was considered "a discussion of virginity from the medical perspective" and "a self-proclaimed 'true history' of the hymen" (53).

In the seventeenth century, Paré eventually "lost his crusade and the essentially Vesalian vision of the hymen promoted by Pineau won out" (55). This translated into the hymen becoming "proof of virginity" for the "canon and secular law" (55). That conception gained strength over time and, "by the nineteenth century, the hymen was more firmly entrenched than ever as material proof of a sexual status that was, more and more frequently, being cast as a matter of inherent virtue" (55-56). Even up to this day, virginity and hymens are of utmost importance to certain cultures and religions. The attention on the hymen and its "intactness" increased after its "discovery." The membrane was to be periodically checked

and safeguarded; and so, virginity testing ensued. The World Health Organization (WHO) has an article that explains how "traditionally, the virginity examination [was] performed on unmarried women and girls, often under force, threat or coercion, to assess their virtue, honour or social value" (García-Moreno 9). This testing was used to confirm the woman's premarital chastity. On the wedding night, the bleeding would serve as the ultimate proof of her purity. Bed sheets were further inspected the morning after in search for bloodstains. Some of these practices, namely virginity testing, are not obsolete. Certain countries and ethnic groups, such as Egypt or the *Gitanos* in Spain, continue to subject women to painful, traumatic and humiliating examinations.

Mona Eltahawy in her *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* (2015) criticizes the misogyny that exists in the Arab World specifically, and gives no shortage of horrifying and crude examples that depict women's abuses and general ill-treatment. Eltahawy bluntly states that "[their] hymens are not [theirs]; they belong to [their] families" (109), insomuch that "in the name of 'honor,' some families murder their daughters to keep the god of virginity appeased" (115). Women are harassed and abused on the streets, and *they* are the ones to blame when they are sexually assaulted. They are the ones that have their sexuality "controlled," sometimes by extreme means such as female genital mutilation (FGM) in order to "reduce [their] sex drive, thereby helping to maintain [their] virginity and, later, [their] marital fidelity" (115). Men are not the only ones who patrol women; women too have internalized "misogyny and subjugation, so much so that mothers will deny daughters the same pleasure and desire they were denied" (114). We find an example of this in my chosen novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory*: matriarchs relied on the testing as a means to ensure their daughters' chastity. Due to the persisting brutality and persecution, Eltahawy urges both women and men from every country to speak up. She advocates for a change of mindset as "the battles over women's bodies can be won only by a revolution of

the mind" (31). Sharon Olds will similarly advocate for a female sexual revolution in her "Second Ode to the Hymen." Both are aware that most societies are predominantly heteronormative, and women are affected in various "degrees" by this preconception. With this paper, I hope I will shed light on the current repercussion and significance the hymen has – principally emotionally wise – and how it *should* evolve.

3. Literary Analysis

During my research, I struggled to find literary texts that thoroughly tackled the issue of the hymen. Whilst there were plenty of works concerning the losing of virginity and virginity itself, mentions of the hymen were scarce and not relevant to what I was trying to prove for my thesis. Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and the poems Sharon Olds dedicates to the hymen were the most compelling and applicable for an affect and feminist focused analysis. Nevertheless, I did come across some interesting texts that I want to mention and briefly comment on, as they are important in the corpus of works that talk about this membrane. The poem "Revolt from Hymen," by Angela Manalang-Gloria, and Karen Blixen's short story "The Blank Page" will serve me as a literary introduction to the meanings attached to the hymen, by both women and society. The membrane as a physical constraint and the idea that its presence endorses and equals the validity of female virginity extracted from those texts will provide me a bridge to the examination of Danticat's and Olds' work in which those notions appear and are explored more exhaustively.

3.1 Imperative Bloodstains: "Revolt from the Hymen" and "The Blank Page"

The Filipina poet Angela Manalang-Gloria (1907-1995) wrote the poem "Revolt from Hymen," which she submitted along her other poetry for the Commonwealth Literary Awards

in 1940. The judges deemed its theme and language as “morally inappropriate” (Amorao 37). The poem is read as a critique of Filipina’s imposed roles for women: in this case, the one of dutiful wife to a non-caring husband. The speaker would rather be a child, as children are freer and safer: marriage appears to signify being enslaved and unsafe. The speaker talks about kisses “festering on [the breast] like sores,” which can be read as sexual abuse: she had injuries (“sores”) and the kisses, instead of soothing, further infected them (“festering”). Amanda Salomon Amorao reads the last verses as the speaker seeing “her duty to her husband as akin to prostitution,” desiring “to be alone” (37).

The poem, when analysed by focusing on the hymen, as indicated in the title, the scope widens. The hymen does not only stand for itself, the “seal” that supposedly closes the vagina; it stands for the sexual oppression, abuses, and shame against women. The speaker hence “revolts from (the) hymen”: she refuses to be controlled and ruled by patriarchal norms. The protagonist in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* similarly rejects the membrane, breaking it to free herself from her mother’s testing. These women regard the membrane essentially as a guarding tool and a telltale element “that marks the flesh no better than a whore’s,” for they would be deemed whores if they had it torn apart before being wed. Nonetheless, the hymen is a questionable and unreliable feature in the construction of virginity, and the short story “The Blank Page” is proof of that.

The Danish author Karen Blixen (1885-1962) wrote “The Blank Page,” included in *Last Tales* and published in 1957 under the pen name Isak Dinesen. With a story within a story frame, we have the tale of a convent in Portugal where nuns had been manufacturing what was considered the best linen in the country. Due to its popularity, royal members ordered the nun’s linen for their wedding night. Those sheets would be displayed in the balcony, proclaiming the purity of the bride. The tangible evidence of her virginity was none

other than the red tinted bed sheet. I find it necessary to highlight the action of hanging out the sheets, as if showing off a prize, which it was: the prize was the *virgin* bride. Intimacy and privacy are lost in this act. The story does not end there, though. Those bed sheets would never be used again and so, in order to honour the nuns, they were given the privilege "of receiving back that central piece of the snow-white sheet which bore witness to the honour of a royal bride."[1] The returned linen was hung up in a gallery in the convent and, amongst the canvases, there was one that stood out:

> But in the midst of the long row there hangs a canvas which differs from the others. The frame of it is as fine and as heavy as any, and as proudly as any carries the golden plate with the royal crown. But on this one plate no name is inscribed, and the linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page.

A wholly white canvas, which raises questions that are left unanswered in the text: was the bride a virgin or not? Perhaps she was, but did not bleed. The response that would be given from a contemporary, privileged and feminist position is that there should be no question at all: no one should care nor question another's sexual life. This argument correlates with the feminist aim of sexual freedom that Sharon Olds advocates in her poems. However, as will be seen in Danticat's novel and highlighted in Olds' texts, a woman's sexuality, virginity, and hymens still matter, hence the questioning and inspection. In my following analysis of the three texts, I will explore the realities of the characters and the speaker in the poems, focusing on the emotions that emerge and the impact these have on their bodies as well as their lives and those surrounding them.

[1] There is no page number; the link to the webpage can be found in the "Works Cited" section.

3.2 *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat: The Hymen as an Emotional and Bodily Scarring Element

Breath, Eyes, Memory was written by the Haitian-American Edwidge Danticat, born in 1969, and published in 1994. It has Sophie Caco as its protagonist who, as a young girl, is sent from Haiti to New York to reunite with her mother Martine. The book focuses on the female characters – Sophie, her aunt Tante Atie, Grandmè Ifé and Martine – and their history of violence and oppression, especially in regards to their sexuality. The hymen, its "testing" and other forms of abuse such as rape are central issues in the story as well as the effects those have on their emotions and bodies.

To begin with, we find that the political context of Haiti accounts for the brutal and repressive conditions with which women had to live. From 1957 to 1986, Haiti was under the Duvalier dictatorship, covering the rule of both father (François Duvalier) and son (Jean-Claude Duvalier). Before their regime, women had been regarded as "political innocents"; "under the Duvalierist state, however, systematic repressive policies undermined the prevailing conception of women as passive political actors, devoted mothers, and political innocents" (Charles 139). The use of violence against women was institutional and reinforced the already strong ideology of "women's weakness": "women began to be detained, tortured, exiled, raped, and executed" (140). In addition to this, "the dominant sexual discourse [classified] sexual and conjugal relations in polarized terms – with marriage at one extreme and prostitution and adultery at the other" (142). With Haiti's political context in mind, we can better understand the reasoning and actions of the characters and the events that take place in the narrative.

The testing is one of the central themes in the novel. Firstly, it is an ingrained custom for the women of the Caco family; as Martine tells Sophie when confronted, she had tested

her “because [her] mother had done it to [her]” (170). The testing was not exclusive to the Cacos though, as there are mentions of other secondary female characters being tested, like Ti Alice. Readers may question said action, wondering why mothers would subject their own daughters to such a degrading procedure they had previously endured. The Duvalier regime and its sexist ideology towards women had a significant impact on the actions of the Haitian population and serves as an explanation for their reasoning. Since a woman would be deemed “loose” if she had premarital sexual encounters, family matriarchs took on themselves the guarding duty of their daughters’ virginity:

> “The testing? Why do mothers do that?” I asked my grandmother.
>
> “If a child dies, you do not die. But if your child is disgraced, you are disgraced. And people, they think daughters will be raised trash with no man in the house.” (156)

As can be inferred from the quote above, the family’s “honour” is above a girl’s integrity and privacy; the idea of chastity and the subsequent familial disgrace if the woman is “ruined” prevails. To be a good girl, she must not have “been touched,” nor have “held hands, or kissed a boy” (60). Girls were under constant vigilance by their families and they were made very much aware of this fact, as Tante Atie exposes:

> “They poke at your panties in the middle of the night, to see if you are still whole. They listen when you pee, to find out if you’re peeing too loud. If you pee too loud, it means you’ve got big spaces between your legs. They make you burn your fingers learning to cook. Then still you have nothing.” (136-7)

Naturally, young girls would be scared of straying from the rules and what was expected from a “good girl,” even if the requirements and ideas were as outrageous as having “big spaces between your legs” if you peed “too loud.” Fear here comes into play and proves to be an efficient means to discourage women from engaging in any sexual act, for “fear is understood as a safer instrument of power than love given its link to punishment” (Ahmed,

The Cultural Politics of Emotion 71). Sophie in the novel is "punished" by her mother after she is suspected of having a close relationship with their neighbour Joseph. To ensure she remained chaste, Martine began to test her daily: she saw a "crisis in security" (*The Cultural Politics* 76) – Sophie could potentially have a sexual awakening – and thus "border policing and surveillance become justified" (76) – that is, virginity testing became justified.

As I have argued previously, even nowadays women have to face all kinds of invasion of privacy, violence and torture when found "unchaste" or "disgraced," which may be similar to those depicted in the novel or even worse. Arguments like Sandra Lee Bartky's when stating that "a properly embodied femininity is dispersed and anonymous" as "there are no individuals formally empowered to wield it" (148) will inevitably fall short and lack adequacy when examining most non-Western instances. The Duvalierist Haiti or certain Arabic societies, such as Egypt, had (and still have) institutionalized gender regulations that place women in a vulnerable position. Perhaps the most heart-breaking part is that mothers are commonly the ones in charge to carry out hymen testing in the best cases, female genital mutilation at its worst. Mona Eltahawy poses a question in her *Hymen and Headscarves* that becomes central to the women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and to us readers: "how does a girl survive this barbarism with her trust of other people intact, especially after her own mother was there and failed to protect her?" (119). Quite painfully, one may argue, and painfully in many senses too. The most immediate effect of the testing is the physical pain, but the emotional pain quickly follows:

> She pulled a sheet up over my body and walked out of the room with her face buried in her hands. I closed my legs and tried to see Tante Atie's face. I could understand why she had screamed while her mother had tested her. There are secrets you cannot keep. (85)

The painful betrayal of her mother is clear ("*there are secrets you cannot keep*"). The testing provoked a feeling of estrangement between mother and daughter, whose relationship had not

been close to begin with since they had lived separated for several years. Afterwards, Sophie felt “alone and lost, like there was no longer any reason for [her] to live” (87). Concerning Martine, she is described as leaving the room “with her face buried in her hands,” probably hiding away her tears. In this manner, and because she had been inspected in that way as a teenager, she is transforming her daughter’s “pain into [her] sadness” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 31). Nevertheless, she carried on the legacy of the testing and its *pain*:

> "[…] I realize standing here that the two greatest pains of my life are very much related. The one good thing about my being raped was that it made the testing stop. The testing and the rape. I live both every day." (170)

As the quote mentions, Martine was raped when she was young and had Sophie as a result. Her confession when she says “that the one good thing of being raped” was that the testing stopped is quite horrifying and worrying. It also establishes a parallelism between the rape and the testing: they are both abuses. Even if the rape had a much more painful and traumatic effect on Martine, the unwanted daily intrusions and all they entailed carried weight and had an impact on her emotions and body too, for “everything in our early experience shapes our bodies” (Orbach 58). Such traumatic experiences are bound to have long lasting consequences, especially since “traumatic suffering is structured by the persistence and dominion of a past within the present, turning it into an endless present” (Beardsworth 53). Memory plays a strong part in the persistence of the past “within the present,” even if it at times these are not conscious recalls. Likewise, memory is intricately linked with emotions and, as Ahmed states in *The Cultural Politics*, it has a crucial role in arising emotions such as pain, for “one can feel pain when reminded of past trauma by an encounter with another” (25). Having sex serves as a major trigger for Martine and Sophie, as it is a physical reminder of the testing and the rape. Amongst other direct consequences of the characters’ trauma, we find instances of bodily and mental distress that present themselves in various forms:

dissociative *doubling*, bulimia, suicide attempts or nightmares. I will be discussing each of them throughout the analysis, starting with the last one.

Both Sophie and Martine were affected by nightmares, although the latter's ones were worse and continual. At first, fear was the emotion that rearranged her body:

> For months she was afraid that he would creep out of the night and kill her in her sleep. She was terrified that he would come and tear out the child growing inside her. At night, she tore her sheets and bit off pieces of her own flesh when she had nightmares. (139)

Her body recoiled in fear in anticipation of additional injury (the rapist creeping out of the night and killing her). What is more, the pregnancy was a constant bodily reminder of the abuse and pain, which accentuated her aversion to her own body. Martine resorted to all sorts of poisonous herbs to miscarriage, and she even "tried beating [her] stomach with wooden spoons" (190). Despite her efforts, she ended up having Sophie. The nightmares did not disappear though, and at one point, when Sophie was a baby, Martine "tried to kill herself several times" (139). Pain took over her subconscious at night and the nightmares never stopped – "it's like getting raped every night" (190). The fact that her daughter resembled her father did not help: "when I look at your face I think it is true what they say […]; a child out of wedlock always looks like its father" (61). Becoming pregnant again, even if many years had gone by, was the last straw for her. The feeling that her body was somehow "contaminated" by her rapist persisted – "what if there is something left in me and when the child comes out it has the other face?" (217) –, and all her fears, shame, and pain (which had always been there, even if at times subdued) became too much for Martine to handle. The unwanted pregnancy, added to her already emotional instability due to the trauma, ultimately lead her to commit suicide, stabbing her stomach "seventeen times" (224).

Taking Susie Orbach's words when examining a daughter-mother relationship, and applying them to Martine and Sophie, we find that the "body-to-body relationship that they had internalised had been one of shame, lamentation, anguish, fear and hesitation [and] it could only be passed on" (71). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Sophie mirrored, in a way, her mother's path and emotional roller coaster journey. Nonetheless, she diverges from her mother: whereas Martine accepted the testing, she decided to take matters into her own hands and found a (albeit violent) way to stop being tested. Sophie decided to break her own hymen with a pestle, inspired by a story of a woman that could not stop bleeding and turned to the Haitian goddess Erzulie for guidance. The only way to stop the bleeding was to "to give up her right to be a human being […]; she could choose what to be, a plant or an animal, but she could no longer be a "woman" (87). The woman accepted and was hereby transformed into a butterfly, as she wanted to be an animal that was free and not held captive, and she "never bled again" (87). The story itself is quite telling and establishes a (bloody) parallelism between her and Sophie. The incessant bleeding would be a metaphor for the testing, as both occurrences could happen to both women at any given time. In Sophie's case, bleeding – that is, the breaking of the hymen – would set her free from the testing. In turn, and just like the woman, the stopping of the testing/bleeding would signify their "banishment": they would no longer "be women." In Sophie's case, she would no longer be a woman for whom her mother would care. Sophie realised that her actions would come as a betrayal to her mother, along with a subsequent hostility and punishment:

> "Go," she said with tears running down her face. She seized my books and clothes and threw them at me. "You just go to him and see what he can do for you." (88)

The breaking of the hymen is a turning point in the story and in Sophie's life, too. The scene, which can make some readers flinch, is described in symbolic terms that make her act freeing rather than solely rebellious: "it was gone, the veil that always held my mother's

finger back every time she *tested* me" (88). The aftermath, as expected, was quite painful and Sophie was left "limping" since her "body ached from the wound the pestle had made" (89). In the end, what should have been an act to free herself, turned into further emotional and bodily entrapment, especially in regards to her sexual life. Her body, just as her mother's, would shut down when attempting sexual intercourse. Pain acted as both cause and effect: their bodies still remembered the pain of the very first time and the testing, so they huddled up, trying to protect themselves. Consequently, as their bodies did not let go and were not enjoying the act, penetration was painful. In medical terms, they may be suffering from vaginismus, a condition in which the vagina involuntarily tightens up when one tries to penetrate it. Although in the novel the term never appears, the signs of vaginismus are there, and even its treatment, for Sophie goes to psychosexual therapy. These women will only overcome the fear and pain once their bodies "can accept vulnerability," until then "the body" can only "touch and be touched, but it cannot be reached" (Orbach 133).

Gender "assignments" also play a role in their choices and sexuality, especially the one of the "dutiful wife" that should readily please the man. There is no mention of women's own pleasure, not that it should *be* there; "they don't really have a sexuality for themselves any more than they have bodies which feel stable," and so, by the same token, "they know sex is important but what it is, where it comes from and what it is for, elude them" (Orbach 114). The bodily aversion to sex from both Sophie and Martine, as I have suggested, comes partially from the previously experienced pain and fear, yet intermingled with these emotions we find shame. Sexuality and shame have been historically linked, as sex before marriage is considered something shameful and that could potentially bring shame to the family: "if I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me" (Danticat 156). Shame "is crucial to moral development," and moral development, in turn, is bound up "with norms of sexual conduct" (*The Cultural Politics*

106). The pressure is put on the woman, for men are not as heavily antagonized when they are the ones committing shameful acts; indeed, women are often held responsible "for the bodily responses of men, aggressive as well as sexual" (Bordo 6). Moreover, women are expected to measure up to impossible bodily standards, such as "feminine movement, gesture, and posture" that "must exhibit not only constriction, but grace as well, and a certain eroticism restrained by modesty: all three" (Bartky 135-6). As said standards certainly cannot be satisfied, women are left with the "sense that the body [they inhabit] is deficient" (Bartky 139), and so the guilt that comes with it "festers into unease with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self loathing" (Bordo 8). Sophie expresses said self-loathing in a conversation with her grandmother regarding the testing and its after-effects:

> "I call it humiliation," I said. "I hate my body. I am ashamed to show it to anybody, including my husband. Sometimes I feel like I should be off somewhere by myself. That is why I am here." (123)

The humiliation and revulsion that comes from shame, in addition to pain and fear, makes her body "huddle" and close up when touched in a sexual way. Her inward bodily resistance against sex, rather than being exclusively connected to the memory of the pain inflicted by the testing and the first time, also comes from her disconnection with her own body and the ingrained idea that sex is something sinful: "I feel like it is an evil thing to do" (123). It is not surprising then that she turns away from her husband's sexual advances, for one in shame "feels [oneself] to be bad, and hence to expel the badness, I have to expel myself from myself"; "the subject's movement back into itself is simultaneously a turning away from itself" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 104). Sophie and Martine actually manage to "expel" themselves from themselves whilst having sex (the most painful and shaming act): they *double*.

To *double* means to mentally escape from reality – “I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant things that I had known” (155). Sophie first learnt how to do it while she was being tested, and she later continued to *double* whenever she was *together* with her husband Joseph (155). Yet again, sex is portrayed as something greatly unpleasant, especially when a comparison is drawn between Sophie’s instinctive and self-protective reaction to both acts. After being tested for the first time, she comments how she understood Tante Atie’s screams whenever she was tested. Later on, when describing sex with her husband, she states that “it gives [her] such nightmares that [she has] to bite [her] tongue to do it again" (156). From the previous quote, we can infer that she bit her tongue in order not to cry out, as she also “kept [her] eyes closed so the tears wouldn’t slip out” (200) at another time. Martine also *doubled* and pretended she was enjoying herself when she was actually having nightmares instead; she went through all the pain because she “was tired of being alone” (191) and because satisfying a man was the believed requisite to keep him by her side.

These women had been brought up with the ideology that women must do “certain things […] to keep” (210) their husbands; namely, to please them sexually. As Mona Eltahawy points out, they have grown to be and “remain forever mental and emotional virgins,” because all their life they have been told that “sex is dirty, that sex is a sin” (120). One wonders then how these women, with the “physical and emotional trauma,” are supposed “suddenly to enjoy sex, let alone to express what [they] want” (Eltahawy 120). In most cases, they will most certainly neither enjoy it nor know what they want, as happens with Martine and Sophie. Sex becomes an act of bravery in their eyes; something that they have to go through and not shudder, cry or scream in the process:

> "Do you think you'll ever stop thinking of what you and Joseph do as being brave?"
>
> "I am his wife. There are certain things I need to do to keep him." (210)

The conversation begs the question of consent. Sophie sees sex as a duty, not as something she actually wants or would actively pursue because she has a desire to do so. As Catharine A. MacKinnon explains in her essay "Rape: On Coercion and Consent," "if sexuality is relational, specifically if it is a power relation of gender, consent is a communication under conditions of inequality" (52). We do have inequality, which is embedded in Sophie's psyche: sex is a marital duty. We find yet another allusion to this notion in the quote above when Sophie is discussing her problems with Grandmè Ifé:

> "You cannot perform?" she asked. "You have trouble with the night? There must be some fulfilment. You have the child."
>
> "It is very painful for me," I said. [...] "He is a very good man, but I have no desire. I feel like it is an evil thing to do." (123)

Here we see how sex is linked with reproduction and not pleasure; nevertheless, that she got pregnant does not mean it was pleasurable at all. In the early modern period, "medical and legal discourse held that female orgasm was necessary for pregnancy" (Thompson 1). This belief would rule out pregnancies that came out of rape: if a woman became pregnant after being raped, it meant that she must have enjoyed it, so it would *not* be deemed as an abuse. Over time, it was discovered that for reproduction purposes the woman's pleasure was inconsequential. These two facts and beliefs still have weight nowadays. For one, in some cases rape becomes justified if the woman was *looking* at the man or wearing certain clothes, or if she was out there *alone*. On the other hand, phallocentric notions took over, with the result of having female pleasure further relegated to a background position, if paid any attention at all. These facts pose a consent issue that, even though I cannot exhaustively delve into because I would stray from my focus, I want to address as it has come up in the book and is intrinsically linked with a woman's sexual freedom.

Was Sophie indeed raped by Joseph? He asked her "several times if [she] really wanted to go through with it" (130). Still, Sophie thought she owed it to him as he had married her and because she felt "it was [her] duty as wife" (130), and because to refuse would mean "to be seen as trouble, as causing discomfort" (Ahmed, "Happy Objects" 39). It consequently led her to consent even though it was "painful" (130) and she did not enjoy it. The same happened the other times she had sexual intercourse: she saw them as an "act of bravery" instead of a pleasurable act. We have already mentioned the ways in which pain, fear and shame rearrange her body and deny her to let go and fully give in and enjoy sex. On the whole, their sexual encounters fit what MacKinnon says when talking about sexuality and power-relations, for "it transpires somewhere between what the woman actually wanted, what she was able to express about what she wanted, and what the man comprehended she wanted" (52). Joseph, when Sophie told him they "weren't connecting physically," responded that she was "usually reluctant to start, but after a while [she gave] in" (196), implying that he thought she was enjoying it. He failed to comprehend what she actually wanted (which probably was to stop) and confused her *doubling* with her "giving in." Overall, consent would be a case of Hobson's choice for the Cacos: they either have sex with their husbands or they run the risk of losing them and the stability, comfort, and nurture otherwise provided.

Apart from the *doubling* as a coping mechanism, we find that there is an added bodily revolt: Sophie's bulimia. A telling and illustrative instance of this is when, after they had had sex followed by Joseph's praise – "'you were very good'" (200) –, Sophie went to the kitchen, ate the dinner leftovers and immediately thereafter "went to the bathroom […] and purged out all the food out of [her] body" (200). The out-of-control eating may be an "emotional and biological rebellion" (Orbach 99) against her mother and her testing. On the one hand, it may seem as a way to control her body and make it *real*. On the other hand, the immediate reflex to purge signifies that she was actually *not* in control, signifying that the

embedded idea that her body was deficient and faulty won over, which hence made her vomit what she had just consumed. The need to *double,* the vomiting, the tongue biting and the pain are all expressions of "a bodily distress in the body itself, engendered by social forces, family preoccupations and trans-generational body trauma" (Orbach 13). Her body is inwardly and somewhat subconsciously revolting against what feels like a punishment and abuse. Of course, this "rebellion" is in a constant fight against an ingrained ideology that regards female bodies as weak, imperfect, submissive and "bound to be wrong" (Orbach 111).

The rebelling acts emerge partially due to the anger as well as the pain. This anger is mainly directed to her mother and the patriarchal system in which she grew up. Sophie is constantly questioning certain behaviours and acts. Anger is crucial in a feminist critique of the world, and is very much related with pain and women's "experiences of violence, injury and discrimination" in the sense that from their testimonies, feminist collectives mobilise "around the injustice of that violence and the political and ethical demand for reparation and redress" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 172). In the novel, Sophie's anger eventually subdued because she empathised with the women in her family, something she confessed to her therapist when she recounted a conversation with her grandmother concerning the testing:

> "Did you express your anger?"
>
> "I tried, but it was very hard to be angry at my grandmother. After all she was only doing something that made her feel like a good mother. My mother too." (208)

She could relate to the feeling and need of being a good mother, which does not mean she agreed with their behaviour. She understood that the matriarchs' actions came out of love and the need to protect their children, even if the results were damaging and traumatic. Apart from the private therapy sessions, Sophie was also part of a sexual phobia group, which included Buki, "an Ethiopian college student [who] had her clitoris cut and her labia sewn up

when she was a girl," and Davina, "a middle-aged Chicana [that] had been raped by her grandfather for ten years" (201). In one session, they were asked to write in a piece of paper the name of their abusers and burn it. She did not "feel guilty about burning [her] mother's name anymore" and came to an understanding that her mother's hurt and hers were "links in a long chain" (203). She also acknowledged that it was "up to [her] to avoid [her] turn in the fire" (203), which is related to the idea that even if anger is rooted in a relationship to a hurtful past, or even present, it serves "as opening up the future" (*The Cultural Politics* 175). The future holds the possibility of change; Sophie knows she is *against* what her female relatives did (like the testing), which means she is *for* the rupture of certain customs and ideology:

> It was up to me to make sure that my daughter never slept with ghosts, never lived with nightmares, and never had her name burnt in the flames. (203)

The will for transformation is energised not just by anger or pain, but by "wonder," for "wonder works to transform the ordinary, which is already recognised, into the extraordinary" (Ahmed *The Cultural Politics* 179). Love, particularly the love for her daughter, will also be a crucial element in her transformation. To achieve said transformation, compromise and hard work are necessary. We acknowledge Sophie's efforts when she goes to therapy and faces her fears, pain and anger, and how she slowly begins to let go of them. Indeed, the quotes above reassure the reader in the hope for a better future for Sophie and her daughter Brigitte. Despite having an open ending, for the story ends with Martine's burial, there are several hints that point to Sophie's deviation from her mother and grandmother's procedures in Brigitte's upbringing. Hope effectively materialises, as it "requires" present action "rather than simply wait for a future that is always before us" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 184). Sophie and Martine's emotional journeys in regards to their bodies and sexuality, which can be taken as a rite of passage, have different outcomes. Whereas Martine

unfortunately meets a tragic end, readers can envision a brighter future for Sophie, one in which she overcomes her fears and learns to love her body and herself. We expect her to stop the continuation of the familial history of hymen testing, which she will do out of love for her daughter.

3.3 The Praising of the Hymen in Sharon Olds' *Odes*

The American poet Sharon Olds, born in 1942, presents us a completely different take on the hymen in her "Ode to the Hymen" while being very much aware of other women's realities as she demonstrates in her "Second Ode to the Hymen". Both poems are part of her *Odes* collection, published in 2016. In this compilation of sixty-five odes, Olds explicitly explores both female and male bodies, finding poems such as "Ode to the Clitoris," "Ode to the Penis" or "Ode to the Vagina." I will only be analysing the hymen-centred odes, comparing them whilst dragging parallelisms with Edwidge Danticat's novel.

Unlike the Haitian woman in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, we soon find that the speaker in the poems speaks from a privileged position. Accordingly, the emotions that stem from the characters' and the speakers' experiences will be contrasting. First, a diverging tone and theme are marked by the very titles: they are an *ode*. An ode is, in Chris Baldick's words, "an elaborately formal lyric poem, often in the form of a lengthy ceremonious address to a person or abstract entity, always serious and elevated in tone" (Baldick 238). There are two classical models, Pindaric and Horatian odes, but we can also find an "irregular form of ode" that is "sometimes called the Cowleyan ode" (238). For the purposes of this essay, I will not centre my analysis on the categorisation of the odes based on the existing models. Nevertheless, I would argue that since neither odes have regular, defined stanzas (like Horatian odes do) and the tone, as well as the focalisation, shifts, we can divide the poems when the fluctuation takes place and hence classify them as somewhere in between the irregular and the Pindaric

odes. Like these last odes, which were usually "devoted to public praise of athletes" (238), we find a clear praise to the hymen in the poems' words and tone.

The speakers' identity is quite relevant too. First, because there are intersectional inequalities that need to be taken into account when examining and comparing experiences; and second, because the speakers use the "I" as well as a personal tone, sharing private and detailed experiences. The "I" that appears in poetry can have distinct purposes and meanings according to TS Eliot in his *The Three Voices of Poetry* (1957). First, we can have an "I" that "pretends to be another person, maybe a historical or made-up character" (Vega Trijueque 7) – this type fits Eliot's definition of the third voice of poetry. In the odes, notably in "Ode to the Hymen," the "I" "does not seem to be an imaginary character addressing another imaginary character" (Vega Trijueque 8). The poem is addressed to a "you" that is in fact the (speaker's) hymen; "but rather than speaking to the hymen, the 'I' is speaking to herself and about herself when addressing this 'you'" (Vega Trijueque 8). This fact "also rules out the idea of the 'I' as a communal 'I,' for this 'I' could only be applied to women," (Vega Trijueque 8) and certain women at that, as not every woman would relate to her experience and viewpoint, especially in "Ode to the Hymen." In "Second Ode to the Hymen," even if the focus is more general, she continues to give various personal details and, naturally, her perspective. This leaves us with the first and second voice that Eliot describes. The first voice is "the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody" (Eliot 4). In the poems "we have such a voice, because when the 'I' is addressing the 'you,' Olds would be talking to herself (and of herself): the hymen is (was) a part of her" (Vega Trijueque 8). We also find the second voice, which "is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small" (Eliot 4), as "Sharon Olds is addressing, apparently, the hymen" (Vega Trijueque 8). However, "there is an intended audience, albeit not the hymen or herself, but a specifically female audience whose emotions or own memories" (Vega Trijueque 8) are expected to be

evoked. She "gives just the right amount of personal details to make the poems universal and not wholly about herself" (Vega Trijueque 8).

"Ode to the Hymen" primarily focuses on her own experience, her feelings and on the very existence of the vaginal membrane. As such, we have access to the speaker's impressions on the hymen, which greatly differ from those of Sophie. For starters, there is admiration and awe in the tone throughout the whole poem. At the very beginning, the speaker is reminiscing a time she cannot actually remember, as she is thinking about how the hymen formed when she was safely inside her mother's womb. I want to highlight the verses when she mentions the clitoris and hymen's safety:

> I love to think of you then, so whole, so
> impervious, you and the clitoris as
> safe as the lives in which you were housed, they would have
> had to kill both my mother and me
> to get at either of you. (5-9)

The sense of safety can translate into a lack of fear of being harmed, for "fear involves an anticipation of hurt or injury" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* 65). This fearlessness may account to the fact that the speaker clearly comes from a privileged social context – she does not feel as threatened as other women. Furthermore, she is thinking about the time when she was a baby, so a motherly protection would have seemed eternal and invincible. The use of "housed" (7) or "fortress" (10) additionally seem to imply that the hymen is something that ought to be protected. Nevertheless, this self-guarding does not appear to involve harsh, violent methods and does not convey the ideas of women as sex-driven and unchaste. She is simply protecting a valuable possession from the privileged position of not having to worry about any external or internal threats. Accordingly, we identify wonder and tenderness when the speaker is thinking of this "you." Wonder, as

Ahmed explains it, is "about seeing the world that one faces and is faced with 'as if' for the first time" (*The Cultural Politics* 179). It is in that way the speaker faces and takes the hymen, revering it and its very existence, which appears to be wondrous.

Her reverence is perceptive, even if filled with popular misconceptions. The succession of metaphors included in the poem – "wall," "gate," "stile," "Dutch door" or "piñata" (14-17) – in reference to the hymen can be taken as quirky and witty, but they have attached stereotypical ideas concerning this membrane. Sharon Olds is undoubtedly aware of that, and she is therefore highlighting the ridiculousness of the names the hymen has taken throughout history and its attributed conceptions. In regards to the nature of these references, I believe that the "Dear wall" is probably an echo of Shakespeare's scene in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Bottom and Flute are respectively playing Pyramus and Thisbe in the play-within-the-play. Olds reference "could be playing with Shakespeare's 'Wall and hole,' and we could take it as the 'Wall' being the hymen, which would stretch open and leave a hole so that the vagina can be penetrated" (Vega Trijueque 6). The metaphors with "gate," "stile" and "Dutch door" make the hymen be regarded as a sort of door; however, the hymen would not be like a "cat-flap" or "a swinging door." Cat-flaps and swinging doors "easily open, but they also easily close once the individual goes through them" – they do not remain "open unless something or someone is blocking them" (Vega Trijueque 7).

Consequently, according to the speaker's wording and argument, one could not go through the hymen, break it, enter the vagina and have the hymen return to its original state once the penetration is over (Vega Trijueque 7). Research proves though that, whilst it is true that most hymens disappear once they are stretched open, others may not present "complete transactions" when penetrated: it depends on the "thickness, thinness, and relative fragility" of the membrane (Blank 39). In a complete disregard of these facts, like popular belief, we

have the speaker's choice of the most accurate comparison: "a one-time piñata" (17). In order to "open a piñata and release the sweets it contains you have to break it," usually using a stick (Vega Trijueque 7). The piñata will be cracked open with no possible way of repairing or reusing it (Vega Trijueque 7). The exact same thing supposedly happens with a woman's hymen: once the hymen (piñata) is stretched open with the penetration of the penis/fingers (stick), the membrane will not regenerate (Vega Trijueque 7). That is why "the speaker wonders next about 'how many places in the / body were made to be destroyed / once?' (17-19): once it breaks, it is gone" (Vega Trijueque 7). This belief continues up to this day and, despite being true for many women and for the speaker in the poem, a woman whose body and hymen does not meet such expectations may be punished. Furthermore, she will be left with the feeling that she has "failed to create the body as it should be or how [she wants] it to be" (Orbach 111).

These descriptions of the hymen are tied closely to its historic origin and development, and the speaker quite insightfully wonders about its origin; about "who" (12) invented that which keeps "a girl's inwards clean and well-cupboarded" (13-14). Indeed, the hymen is inside every woman's vagina, but it came to our knowledge because "we found reasons to search women's bodies for some bit of flesh that embodied this quality we call "virginity," some physical proof it existed" (Blank 24). Even if the membrane is real, the "significance attached to" it – that is, a physical evidence of a woman's virginity – is a human construction (Blank 34). In this light, I believe the use of "who invented you" here is quite proper for its underlying implicatures. Incidentally, the speaker employs the words "clean" and "well-cupboarded" which, inadvertently or not, may communicate the notion that a "woman's insides" (her sexuality) should be locked away until the time comes (marriage) for someone to "open" it (husband): only then she would be "clean" (chaste). Unlike some women like the Cacos, the speaker does not seem to be obliged to meet such expectations,

though, and she does not necessarily agree nor comply with them given her personal experience.

In "Second Ode to the Hymen" Sharon Olds further develops this sexist ideology and puts it into context:

> why not address, directly, the human
> maidenhead, the Platonic form
> of her, putting off intercourse until
> the girl will not be torn apart by full-term birth,
> why not lament the hymen being hunted
> and plundered, impaled on a pike in a public
> square like a tiny severed head. (7-13)

In these lines, she is calling to our attention the violent history surrounding the hymen. As such, she uses the word "maidenhead," an old term that still has a literary use when referring to a woman's virginity ("Maidenhead"). With "the Platonic form of her," she is again referring to the hymen, the "proof of virginity," although as happens with Plato's theory of Forms, no element (hymen) is a perfect representation of the idea it represents (virginity). Yet, since this membrane and its bleeding are indeed taken as proof, the hymen ends up being the element that puts off "intercourse until the girl will not be torn apart by full-term birth" (9-10). Once again, like in Danticat's novel, sexual intercourse is linked with its reproductive function. The connection between a sexual awakening and reproduction is further drawn a few lines later: "[…] the small / death which marks the beginning of an inner / life, and the species continuing" (15-17). One of the stereotypical duties of a wife would be that of bearing children and, biologically speaking, being a mother is a role she is expected to fulfill. Biology, nevertheless, is not as determining as are historical and cultural forces, for "we are creatures swaddled in culture from the moment we are designated one sex or the other, one

race or another" (Bordo 36). This takes us back to Butler's gendering and the assignments a woman is expected to accomplish. With this in mind, and going back to the hymen whilst following the speaker's reasoning, the breaking of the hymen would open "the door" for the woman's sexual life and the *possibility* of becoming pregnant. Due to this, the hymen is taken as a sort of barrier, although the membrane is not the real boundary, so to speak, that prevents girls from engaging in sexual activities; the issue's roots are cultural, religious, and even political. We find an illustrative example of this in *Breath, Eyes, Memory,* for the sexist ideology in which the Caco women were brought up made them guard their daughter's hymens, as in its integrity relied the girl's own honour and her family's.

As the speaker points out in this second ode, the hymens are not only being "hunted" but also "plundered, impaled on a pike in a public / square like a tiny severed head" (11-13). They are "hunted" by their families, and they are "plundered" because the hymens are stolen from them, and not only their hymens, but their power to choose and their sexuality as well. The hymens are taken since the blood shed with their "death" is considered a sign of a bride's purity. In male-centred cultures or religions, women *embody* their gender assignments and so, before becoming wives or mothers, they are *virgins*, for their "female premarital virginity ensures that a woman's first child is of guaranteed paternity" (Blank 26). For this reason, physical proof and demonstration of their chastity were (and are) required, as exposed in "The Blank Page" short story and as Olds highlights in the previously mentioned lines. A similar example also appears in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in the form of a tale in which a woman, in her wedding night, did not bleed. The husband, who had "his honor and reputation to defend" (Danticat 155), made everything he could think of to make her bleed to the point of cutting between her legs with a knife, which led the bride to her death. During "the funeral procession, her blood-soaked sheets were paraded by her husband to show that she had been a virgin on her wedding night" (155) because, in the end, *his* honour was above his wife's life.

The bloody residues were paraded as "impaled on a pike in public": a woman's sexuality, which should be private and personal in principle, is turned into a public spectacle for her family and her husband's pride and reputation. The speaker "laments" all the violence, pain, fear and shame women have to face, like the ones illustrated in the mentioned texts, and that is why she turns their pain into her sadness, for "the pain of others becomes 'ours'" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 21). This specific ode gives voice and visibility to the pain of fellow women; she is giving their pain "a life outside the fragile borders of [their] vulnerable and much loved," and sometimes hated, bodies (30).

In "Ode to the Hymen," pain appears in a physical way when the speaker recounts the first time she had sex. She tells us how "sturdy" (19) the membrane was, in the sense that it was hard to stretch open (Vega Trijueque 7). We can find pride and admiration in the tone: she is impressed by how "seriously" the hymen took its job (20) and she later overtly expresses the pride she felt when it turned "to a cupful of the bright arterial / ingredient" (23-24). She is naturally referring to the bleeding that can occur when the tissue is torn apart. The speaker is almost like "a proud mother witnessing her child becoming independent" (Vega Trijueque 7), which is definitely a contrast to Sophie's history with her own hymen. Whilst Sophie was scared (of her mother's reaction) although somewhat relieved (the testing would stop) when she broke it, the speaker in the poem cherishes the moment and, more importantly, the hymen itself. Her own body and the workings of anatomy amaze her, despite never having felt "such pain" (20-21). The speaker does not seem to suffer further bodily or emotional pain, unlike Sophie, who carried it with her even when the testing stopped. The contrasting responses come from the fact that people react differently to pain, as "the mind affects the body and the body affects the mind in a complex loop" and it is very much influenced by one's "personal circumstances" (Orbach 107). Even if the speaker suffered from the physical pain of the hymen stretching open, she does not share a previous traumatic

experience of testing or violent sexual shaming as other women do, and she is very much aware of this:

> [...] And how lucky we were,
>
> you and I, that we got to choose
>
> when, and with whom, and where, and why – […] (24-26)

She knows they were "lucky" to choose, as even in the present-day time not every woman has the power to make that decision (Vega Trijueque 8); she recognises that "nothing in the world can be taken for granted, which includes the very political movements to which we are attached" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 182), as can be feminism. This fact is what makes her regard the first time she had sex (and sex in general) in a completely different light, both physically and emotionally, for they are intrinsically connected. The sensorial wonder makes the body open as "the world opens up before it; the body unfolds into the unfolding of a world that becomes approached as another body" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 180). She seemed to cherish her first sexual encounter, regardless of the mundane and rather unromantic location – "it happened on the rug / of a borrowed living room" (28-29) –, as she contrasts it with the mythic imagery of her feeling as if they "were in Diana's woods" (30). If the location was not enough evidence for the reader to know that the first time was neither planned nor was a newlywed bride duty, the speaker states that it happened "years before / [she] married" (37-38). Yet again, it contrasts with Sophie's first time after she had married Joseph, which she viewed as something she owed him for marrying her. Sophie scarcely experiences Olds' wonder, especially regarding sex, and when she does open up, it comes with the risk of being "closed down if what [she approaches] is unwelcome" (*The Cultural Politics* 180).

For Olds, love and joy most probably overpowered the feeling of pain the first time she had sex. In her words, it was as if they "were the magma from the core of the / earth burst up through the floor of the sea" (32-33). Contrasting with Sophie and Martine's first sexual experiences, which were either a disappointing and painful duty or a downright assault, the speaker's first time was an "expression of intimacy" (Orbach 117). The visual of the magma bursting up from the core of the earth serves as a grand visual and metaphor of their climax. Pleasure can be just as powerful and as intense as pain, which also brings "attention to surfaces" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 164), principally those concerning our bodies. Instead of recoiling in fear and closing down, like the Caco women, the speaker's body reacted in a very different way due to the pleasure she felt – "the enjoyment of the other's touch [opened her] body up, [opened her] up" (164). In this light, we can safely assume that the speaker loved the man and the joy of being with him affected the environment and overall mood, that is why she felt as if they "were in Dianna's woods" (30). Like Ahmed suggests in "Happy Objects," "the moods we arrive with do affect what happens", even if these can change (30). In this sense, since she was happy and relaxed, sex turned to be an intimate "powerful meeting of bodies" (Orbach 118). Sophie, however, felt afraid and anxious before intercourse, and thus the outcome was naturally catastrophic, leaving her almost in tears and in pain.

Emotions usually have immediate effects on our bodies, our actions, and on those who surround us, although the consequences can be long lasting too. Memories of pleasant and unpleasant past events have an impact on our bodies and on our behaviour; they are "sticky." The first sexual encounter and the events that led up to it, including elements like the hymen, can certainly become "sticky," for the better and for the worse. As I have exposed, the speaker in "Ode to the Hymen" has "a loving orientation toward" the hymen (Ahmed, "Happy Objects" 32), as she considers it as something intrinsically "good" (35) and

inherently part of her. In “Second Ode to the Hymen,” on the other hand, she acknowledges the fact that some women (like the Cacos) have negative attachments to the hymen due to the violence and pain attributed to the membrane. Consequently, its very existence can be the cause of “unhappiness” (Ahmed, “Happy Objects” 35). Sex can inevitably be affected by the remembered embodied emotions, which for Olds’ could be love, joy and pleasure whilst for Sophie or Martine could be pain, fear and shame.

Shame is an important emotion when dealing with sex, the hymen, and the female body. The speaker in the first ode continues to be a departure from Sophie and Martine nonetheless, for she shows no shame; on the contrary, self-confidence emanates from the way she speaks to and of the membrane and, in turn, of herself. As opposed to the Caco duo, she appears to have full control of her body and is therefore able to behold the hymen, sex, and her own body in a positive and loving light. Her feminist take on the membrane and a woman’s first time relies, rather than on negative feelings like pain or anger (which she explores in the second ode), on responding “to the world with joy and care, as well as with an attention to details that are surprising” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 179). Perhaps for this reason she associates her “relationship” with her hymen with a biological cycle, which reinforces the fact that the hymen *truly* belongs to her. “Ode to the Hymen” starts with the membrane’s creation, its life, its death, and finally, in the last thirteen lines, the poem comes full circle: the hymen is “reborn” after its “death” (Vega Trijueque 8). With the hymen’s “farewell” she became a woman who could bear daughters with “little baby hymens.” The speaker thanks the hymen “for [its] life and death” (34): “its life had been linked to her girlhood and its death meant the start of her womanhood” (Vega Trijueque 8-9).

Moreover, “the speaker establishes a parallelism between the hymen’s death and the moment a bride walks down the aisle” (Vega Trijueque 9). Traditionally, at a wedding, “the

flower girl walks the bride down the aisle, leading her unto a new life" (Vega Trijueque 9). The hymen would serve a similar purpose, for in its "flower girl walk" it threw down its "scarlet petals" (blood drops), which led the speaker "into the animal life / of a woman" (42-43) (Vega Trijueque 9). What the "animal life" can signify, amongst other things, is sex and motherhood (Vega Trijueque 9). Her mourning and farewell to the hymen further proofs how in touch she is with her own body and the loving relationship she has with it. The reaction is quite telling, as is her love, for "love has an intimate relation to grief not only through how the subject responds to the lost object, but also by what losses get admitted as losses in the first place" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 130). Incidentally, it is difficult to imagine Sophie or Martine mourning the loss of their hymens; as a matter of fact, they were relieved and pleased to have them gone because the testing and humiliation stopped.

On the other hand, "Second Ode to the Hymen" does allude to shame, in a way. The poem starts with how the speaker's husband says that what she writes "about women is self-involved" (2), possibly implying that her writings only concern her own interests, namely "the first time [she] got laid" (4). The tone can be taken as somewhat condescending and, to a certain extent, shameful of the topic. His demeaning of something that is clearly important for her makes visible the gendering and the struggle when understanding the opposite sex. Experiences are inevitably gendered in many cases, even if its "consequences may be unintended" or "may even be fiercely resisted" (Bordo 242), and the first time one has sex is no exception. Both men and women have to measure to different standards for what seems to be a determinant act in their lives. There is no denying that women have far more pressure and are more "restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their lived spatiality" (Bartky 134), meaning that their very bodies, like the hymen's existence, betray and confine them. Again, the matter is not so much of a biological constraint rather than a cultural and social one. The speaker refuses to be shamed and feel badly about herself. Furthermore, as

she counter argues, her poetry is not just about her hymen (5); the vaginal membrane symbolises and comprises part of a structural, sexist issue concerning women's (sexual) oppression. Rather than being ashamed of her desires and her body, she puts to shame the persisting constrictions women have to face in regards to their sexuality. It is those who oppress women who should "acknowledge wrongdoing," which would mean "to enter into shame," that is, to recognize committing "'acts and omissions' [that] have caused pain, hurt and loss for […] others" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 101).

The passionate tone in its outrage and overt criticism comes from the anger that compels many feminists to "call for action"; it is the acknowledgement that the pain suffered "is wrong, that it is an outrage, and that something must be done about it" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 174). The discourse goes against the "sticky" history that makes us "continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, of insufficiency, of never being good enough" (Bordo 91). The lack of power of decision over our own bodies, especially in regards to anything sex-related, is something that the speaker wishes to change:

> I'm calling up a hymn for your honoring,
> looking toward the day, as if it could come,
> when your disposition will be left to the great
> city of the girl which stands all around you. (21-24)

She is well aware that it will take time until every woman has the right (as it *is* their right) and ability to decide over their bodies, their hymens. She is not sure that day will come – "as if it could come" (22) –, but she certainly *hopes* it will. With the same praising and familial, almost maternal, tone from "Ode to the Hymen,' she guides us through a stance in which a woman is able to cherish her hymen, *love* it, stripping from all the prejudices and trauma attached to it and its history. In that first ode, she even goes as far as calling it a "blood mother":

[…] You were a sort of blood

mother to me: first you held me

close, for eighteen years, and then

you let me go. (43-46)

These last lines highlight the close, physical bond she has with the vaginal membrane. The hymen "held her close," which can be taken in a literal sense, and then it "let her go" when it broke. The wording is touching, and the reader can almost visualize a maternal embrace between the two. Throughout the whole poem, it seems that the speaker is both holding and being held by the hymen – the connection is such that it seems as if they are one, which, of course, they *are*. Her openness to the hymen allows her to feel desire or joy, expanding "the contours of [her body]" and allowing her to be at home with herself (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 185). Unpleasant emotions like fear read the openness of the body "as the possibility of danger or pain," consequently making the body shrink "in anticipation of injury" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 185), which is what happens to Sophie: she has to *double* in order to endure sex and she suffers from bulimia. Olds is aware of this reality, which is why she combines a fierce opposition of the violence against women with a loving defence of the hymen, both acknowledging the persistence of a painful past and present but hoping for a future that has not yet "been realised in the present" for every woman (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 187). In the "Second Ode," we find Olds' final stand and hopeful prospect of the hymen being declared "sovereign" over itself, stripping from every constraint and assignment:

Many things have been called sacred

to the many religions founded on earth –

oh if we could declare you sovereign

over yourself, night blood sister,

picnic basket of pain and free will,

bright civil right! (25-30)

As part of gendering, the hymen has the assignment of being the physical evidence of female virginity. As such, it would be considered "sacred," something that should be preserved and only taken when the time is right (that is, after the woman marries). The implications behind the words, particularly when using "many things have been called sacred" (25), seem to be that the importance given to certain features, objects or ideas are, or should be, inconsequential nowadays. Consequently, we have again the speaker's ultimate hope in regards to women and their hymens: to achieve sovereignty over themselves.

In order to achieve such sovereignty, a cultural and social revolution needs to take place: "the battles over women's bodies can be won only by a revolution of the mind" (Eltahawy 31). Regarding the hymen, virginity, and a woman's sexual life, we would ideally need a world "in which virginity or lack thereof [does] not represent a burden of proof for women at all" (Blank 73). Personal and emotional work by women themselves also needs to take place, especially by those whose realities are similar, or maybe worse, than those of the Haitian women in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. An inner transformation and fight has to take place against the "internalized patriarchal standards of bodily acceptability," which are "incorporated into the structure of the self," that is, the "modes of perception and of self-perception that allow a self to distinguish itself both from other selves and from things which are not selves" (Bartky 145). Present and individual actions can shape the future; a future that feminism is concerned about, for there is a shared "desire that the future should not simply repeat the past, given that feminism comes into being as a critique of, and resistance to, the ways in which the world has already taken shape" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 183). For

this reason, the praising of the hymen has never been more necessary and relevant. Olds claims that the hymen, just as the virginity and the ability to decide, belong to the woman and the woman alone: not to other women, their sexual partners, or their family. The speakers in Sharon Olds' poems fight for and try to win back the sexual agency and virginity that has been, and still is, taken away from girls.

4. Conclusion

My research on the hymen proved to be a challenge at first, as it is rarely a central theme in literary texts. However, whilst its relevance may appear to be minor in comparison to female sexuality in general, its existence and the importance that has been attached to it over the centuries make it worth to be studied. Since the vaginal membrane continues to be considered proof of virginity by many cultures and societies, its presence (or absence) has a crucial role in many women's lives. Women are terrorized, tortured and seized from their virginities and their right to choose, although not every woman has to face such harsh, violent, and oppressive realities. Fortunately, there are women that can enjoy constraint-free sexual lives, even if persisting sexist notions might influence – mostly in a subconscious way – their choices and actions. Given these points, I chose to present and explore the opposing female realities and experiences that coexist nowadays using Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* and the "Odes to the Hymen" by Sharon Olds. Whilst applying affect theory and a feminist reading, I have analysed the emotions behind women's personal experiences with their hymens and the effects they may have on their bodies.

My analysis of each emotion led me to various conclusions. First, I discovered that unpleasant emotions like pain or fear predictably arise when a woman has a violent and abusive personal history. Since in the novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* we have such histories, I

found in it more examples and evidence of these emotions' workings. Pain and fear acted as cause and effect in the character's lives: they were inflicted in order to restrain young girls from having sex and, consequently, the girls ended up being scared and hurt. Consequently, that fear and pain lingered in their psyches and bodies even if the sources (the Caco matriarchs or the rapist) were no longer being threatening or causing them further injury. As trauma victims, they remembered painful past events and, when the memories or sensations were triggered, their bodies responded. I further concluded that shame plays an equally important part in how our bodies "turn away" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 103) when feeling exposed and vulnerable, particularly in a sexual context. The Haitian women in Danticat's novel were brought up with the idea that sex is sinful, which affected and impeded the opening up of their bodies when touched by another. The feeling that sexual intercourse was something wrong and immoral added to the fear and anticipation of pain, eventually leading to discomfort, unpleasantness, and even agony. These women were unable to enjoy sex and their own bodies, and with this came the feeling of "failure," for they failed to match the ideals and "requisites" of what a woman and the female body "should" be. In short, the Cacos were essentially traumatized by the taught sexist ideology and, crucially, by the abuses (testing and rape). This trauma prompted a bodily distress and revolt: the Caco women had nightmares; they potentially developed vaginismus; they *doubled* when having sex to dissociate and lower the pain, fear, and shame; Sophie suffered from bulimia; and Martine went as far as committing suicide.

A (feminist) response to these unpleasant emotions, beliefs and actions is generally anger. In the book, Sophie questions her family and the reasons that motivated the testing and the pain, even if ultimately she showed empathy and forgiveness. Sharon Olds' "Second Ode to the Hymen" gives us a more passionate protest against the violence to which women and their hymens are subjected; Olds is giving voice to those who cannot speak up. The message

she appears to convey is the channelling of this anger in order to strive *for* a transformation. The aim is the same one as the hope that appears in the novel and the poems: shape a better future. In this way, through anger Sophie and the speaker in the poems acknowledge what they are *against*, whereas hope allows them to open up to the necessary changes in order to avoid repeating and to correct past mistakes. Without hope, we would be accepting "that a desired future is not possible" (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 185) and past would repeat itself. Sharon Olds' poems give us hope for a reappropriation of our hymens; she shows us that the hymen is just another part of our anatomy that should be cherished instead of blamed for its associated meanings and the atrocities committed against it (and therefore women). Lastly, I examined wonder, joy and love, which are essential in the feminist fight and the (re)construction and (re)shaping of our bodies. "Ode to the Hymen" specifically captures how these emotions make our bodies open up to other bodies; we reach other bodies and we allow them to reach us back. Even if unpleasant emotions can sometimes overpower positive ones, without joy, wonder, love or hope we would never be able to move on, change and improve.

To reach these conclusions the feminist perspective helped and supported my arguments. Throughout my research and analysis it was made clear to me that the hymen's inclusion to the female sexuality discussion along with its praising and "honouring" is vital, for its existence and the connotations attached to it continue to have an impact on women's bodies, emotions, and lives. The cult of virginity prevails, and with it violent and abusive practices along with sexist misconceptions that are ingrained in our psyches. For these reasons, an intersectional protest that includes both the praising and the depiction of the crude and harrowing realities women still face is necessary: "if injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not end there" (Ahmed, "Happy Objects" 50). In order to welcome a better future, we first need to address painful stories; "to move on, [we] must make this return" (Ahmed, "Happy Objects" 50). Personal, social, and cultural work needs to be

accomplished so that hopefully women's opposing realities can unite and become one; one in which women, and their hymens, achieve body sovereignty.

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