conflicting mental states as she cannot adopt the position of madness or sanity. Rhys ultimately leaves Antoinette’s fate undecided in a reflection of her own apparent inability to provide a solution for the abject individual. The ending, however, alludes to Bertha’s death in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, in which Bertha commits suicide. This aligns with the argument of Jennifer Bann who notes that “In the supernatural fiction of the later nineteenth century, death began to bring freedom: shackles, silence, and regret were cast aside” (Bann 664). Antoinette is not able adopt or escape the limitations of colonial society and so she chose death as the only escape possible. Rhys’ text thus makes the argument that the only solution for the abject individual to gain any form of autonomy is to gain freedom through death itself. This raises many ethical questions of the foundations of colonial societies and how their forced subjection isolates individuals to the extent of suicide. Thus, by examining Antoinette as a symbol of the ultimate abject and how her existence threatens both internal and external sense of self, it becomes clear that the abject body cannot exist in a colonial society. In a world structured on distinct binaries, the abject body causes boundary uncertainty and monstrous perverseness in the recognition of the self within the other. Rhys may not have provided a clear solution for the incorporation of the abject within society, but her book alludes to suicide as the only true choice one can make. As Charles Sarvan notes, the text ultimately outlines a “journey out of entrapment into the peace of death” (Sarvan 443).

**Works Cited**


**Appearance and Alterity: the Coding of Homoeroticism in Vernon Lee’s “The Doll”**

Sarah Jones

Addressing representation, Galia Ofek writes that “self-identity is constructed and determined, to a great extent, at a visual level,” a two-sided interaction which occurs between “one's projected body image and the socio-cultural codes which interpret it.”¹ This theme of appearance and its analysis is central to Vernon Lee’s short story “The Doll,” wherein the narrator, who has arrived in Italy to collect trinkets and furniture, accidentally comes across a life-sized recreation of a Countess made by her husband, the Count, upon her death. The incorporation and deconstruction of elements of standard female beauty and behaviour is largely accomplished through the interactions between the figure of the Doll and the narrator, a tie that becomes complex and at times problematic. The narrator never meets the Count personally, and instead recreates his and the Countess’s relationship through her mental communication with the Doll, as well as from the stories told to her by Orestes, the curiosity collector, and the maid working in the late Count’s home. Yet this potential bias on the narrator’s part is nevertheless informative, as it serves as a conscious attempt to create distance from the heteronormative patriarchy in which both characters (as married women) participate. An examination of the Doll’s figure also allows for a space in which alternatives to the dominant discourses of both the Doll’s and the narrator’s societies can be practiced safely, albeit in a secret and coded fashion. The continued references to faggots, for example, gestures towards

¹ Appearance and Alterity: the Coding of Homoeroticism in Vernon Lee’s “The Doll”
this theme of alterity and emancipation, as during the 16th century the word “came to be used as an abusive term for a woman” (Cresswell). In the opening to the story the narrator remarks that at Foligno “they roll faggots down into the torrent beds” (Lee 193); she later asks Orestes for some of his “beautiful faggots of myrtle and bay” (199) which, when burned, “crumbled” (200). These continued references to faggots as well as their final, fiery use in “The Doll” suggest an eradication or cleansing of the way in which they might represent women as burdensome objects, and might also function to comment upon the later homophobic implications of the word, which date from “the early years of the twentieth century” (Ayto). It is also interesting to note the use of this term in relation to the author’s identification as a lesbian, as well as the ways in which alterity is encoded throughout the story and portrayed as a source of power.

Although both the Count and the narrator are drawn to the Doll, their actions towards her differ. The Count marries his wife “straight out of the convent” and subsequently secludes “her from the world” (Lee 196), while the narrator, who also comes to possess the Doll (albeit through a monetary transaction) ultimately removes her from her isolated boudoir and puts “an end to her sorrows” (201) which, when burned, “crumbled” (200). The potentially Sapphic nature of the relationship between the two principal characters begins with the narrator’s gaze being trained upon the Doll, to whom we are first introduced by way of physical description: the narrator describes her “Canova classic face” and fixed stare, then her clothing and “merely painted” hair in “flat bands” (Lee 195). The references to hair invite further scrutiny, as the reader is later made aware of the “dusty unempt wig” made of “the poor lady’s real hair” that the narrator observes the next day (Lee 196). Interestingly, there is no mention of the Doll’s hair colour, despite the fact that the narrator mentions her twice and takes great pains to describe the colours of the Doll’s articles of clothing, especially the specific way in which each has faded or become blackened.

In her work investigating the myriad meanings, implications and embodiments inherent in the tresses of different time periods, Galia Ofek writes that “hair became increasingly important to the formation of self-image since the early growth of the European city and the ascendance of the bourgeoisie in the early stages of mercantile capitalism” (2). The Doll, dressed as she is in “1820 costume” (Lee 195) would therefore have been a part of the cultural trend spanning throughout the nineteenth century, where, as Quentin Bell states, hairstyles were “deliberately kept so complex and ornate that only the wealthy with much time on their hands could afford to display them” (qtd. in Ofek 2). Hair was also, for the middle and upper classes, “the only female body part – excepting the face – on constant display” (qtd. in Ofek 2). Considering the importance of these various social norms and meaning related to hair, the absence of detailed description seems odd. Ofek writes that “[p]atriarchal societies which try to restrict women’s power are likely to impose on them some kind of hair behaviour”; as such the Doll’s existence acts as proof of the objectifying male gaze and fetishization that the Count actively participates in after (and even before) his wife’s death, as is the existence of the wig fashioned from her real hair (3). The lack of elaborate description surrounding the Doll’s hair and its appearance could then be considered a subversion of these patriarchal norms. By abstaining from participation in a dissecting blazon, the narrator consciously remains vague.

Despite being a gap in the text, hair continues to facilitate the homoerotic undertones of Lee’s story. That the Doll’s hair is observed by the narrator as “unkempt” is significant and implicates her in a type of social transgression (Lee 196). Ofek writes that married women were expected to pin their hair up “in a roll on top of [the] head,” while freely floating hair “took place only in intimate personal circumstances” (3). The Doll’s dishevelled wig might then imply both a freedom from patriarchal norms and an intimacy with the narrator, who sees her in this private fashion in the inner depths of the house, yet the Doll’s loosened hairstyle also recalls that of young girls who would not be “seen as a threat to the symbolic social order, since she was not sexually mature” (Ofek 7). This thread is compelling, as the Doll, while living, had an “inconceivable incapacity for expressing her feelings” and also died in childbirth: two factors which perhaps indicate that the Countess never physically or mentally reached adulthood despite her status as a married woman (Lee 197).

The way in which the Doll’s dishevelled hair functions as both an indicator of intimacy and of innocence aligns her with the narrator in a type of female solidarity and reclamation of self. In her work on the various meanings of women’s hair in an English literary context, Elisabeth G. Gitter writes that “neatly combed heads” imply virtue and industriousness while “disorderly hair” implies that its wearer is “sexually and emotionally volatile” (941). With both her painted lines and her wig, the Doll embodies order and disorder, chastity and sensuousness, and as such, seems to have an identity or selfhood that was not possible while the Countess lived, and was fastidiously kept
and groomed by her husband in doll form. Her hair, being left alone, becomes almost "vital, independent, [and] energetic," and in being separated from the Count becomes, as Gitter states, "an obscure text, dangerous to read" (943). No longer under the Count's direct and castrating influence, the Doll's hair is rarely touched by human hands. Thus the dishevelled nature of her hair enacts "masculine fears of loss of control and virility," while also perhaps functioning as an indicator of unbridled sexuality (Ofek 7). Mary Douglas writes that hair, by solely "issuing forth" and traversing "the boundary of the body" functions "as a structural anomaly"; this is much the case for the Doll, whose hair is no longer attached to her long-dead form, and as such, is subject to less limitation (Ofek 7). Hair and hair practices are also deeply tied to fetishism, a concept that has its roots in anthropological thought and was first theorized in British and European "imperialist ethnography," gaining popularity in the nineteenth century (Ofek 18). Employed in both a religious and evolutionary context, Ofek notes that the term 'fetish' was often used to denote aspects of primitive thought or behaviour, although many were also of the opinion that "vestiges of fetishistic habits" could be found in contemporary Western (and thus 'civilized') society (19). Concerning nineteenth century sexuality, Ofek names hair as "the flagship fetish" (20), while Victorian sexologist Havelock Ellis writes that the way in which hair is "at once an animal and a human product" and "may be separated from the body" renders its associated fetish "a sexual perversion of specially great medicolegal interest" (qtd. in Ofek 20). Yet when considering "The Doll," fetishes of a sexual nature are as relevant as (and blurred with) those associated with capitalism. Marx's concept of commodity fetishism sees items that depend on their position within a "symbolic network," a process that Ofek describes as requiring "the projection of consciousness or power into the object, and then a forgetting of the act of projection" (22). This 'forgetting' leads to an alignment of the idealized with the intrinsic, and the fetishized object becomes "magical" (Ofek 21). Thus hair functions as a "site where different definitions of fetish worship intersected" (Ofek 21). Ofek writes that the way in which the sexual and commercial merged with the social "transformed hair from its natural, living form" into "an important object in its various economies," thus illustrating the complexity of the Doll's status as both idea and object, as well as the various embodiments and meanings evoked by her presence and appearance (Ofek 22). Both the Countess and the Doll are inextricably tied to these fetishistic currents of sexual, commercial and social value for the Count, and are described as little more than objects to be seen and touched by him. In her marriage, the Countess is unable to "find a word to express" her emotions, while her husband, in his "overflowing, garrulous, demonstrative affection… could not be silent," caring not for "the feelings of others" (Lee 197). The ways in which the Count treats the Countess and Doll are eerily alike, aligned with notions of patriarchal control and his place in the outward, public realm. Apart from being a sentient woman, the Countess is not dramatically different from the Doll; she is almost entirely silent during her marriage, she and the Doll are contained in the same spheres, and they share the same face, hair and clothing. Thus the Count's fetishization of the Countess began even before her death, starting by centering on the various social currencies that she embodied, and ultimately becoming realized through his one-sided obsession with her. Ofek writes that "mementoes which commemorated the dead…suspended the separation between the holder of the hair and its dead owner" (26), a connection which is synonymous with the Count spending "hours every day weeping and moaning before" the Doll after the Countess's death (Lee 197). The way in which the Count remembers his wife is thus inextricably tied to notions of patriarchal management of female sexuality, as he participates in fetishizing the Countess's hair and form after her death, treating them as a substitute for her living presence. As Patricia Pulham writes in her work on object relations theory, the transitional object "must never change, unless changed by the infant" (77). In this case the role of the infant is synonymous with the Count, as he is unable to relinquish either the memory or the image of his late wife. The way in which the narrator focuses on the Doll's individual attributes differs from the Count's fetishistic frenzy. She does not describe her in tiresome detail, but instead draws attention to the way in which her form and clothing appear dirty and aged. In her study of the supernatural in Vernon Lee's works, Pulham examines the "pristine, asexual beauty of Greek sculpture," aligning it with the "corpse-like" (75) figure of the doll, in which "the danger of female sexuality and power is lost" (71). Yet the absence of a threatening
presence exists only so long as the doll retains this “seamless” sterility and continues to embody the idealized form of a flawless and perfect icon (Pulham 71). Walter Pater writes that the purity of Greek sculptures is associated with “white light,” wherein “the angry, bloodlike stains of action and passion” have disappeared; Eileen Gregory similarly states that this whiteness is “abstracted from finite bodily particulars, such as sexuality” (qtd. in Pulham 77). However this light which obscures “human frailties” is often “appropriated by the homoerotic gaze to express its desire,” compromising whiteness through either “a play of light,” or a “transient movement of shadow” (Pulham 72). It is here that the deterioration of the Doll’s clothing can be attributed to more than just age; her clothes are not simply faded, but have become darkened. The Doll’s “white satin frock” is turned “grey with engraved dirt,” and both her “white silk mittens and white silk stockings” become “almost black” (Lee 196). The way in which whiteness and blackness, “and describes the way in which “European racial cosmology” associated the colour black with “all that is base, bestial and sensual” (Deliovsky 26). Thus the way in which the Doll’s clothing has deteriorated and become discoloured unsettles notions of societal order and class convention, and simultaneously functions to threaten both a physical and psychological uncovering of the controlled female body, while also intimating the gaze of a potentially problematic ‘Other,’ in this case the narrator. The frock, mittens and stockings that the narrator describes are items used to cover and veil upper class women in conventional patriarchal society, while the risk of disintegration threatens the custom that sees women’s bodies as objects that must remain concealed in the public sphere. As with the ways in which the narrator observes the Doll’s hair as unbound and even sensuous, her clothing serves to further suggest an alterity from (or even dissatisfaction with) the hegemonic heteronormativity that the Countess participated in while living and also indicates, by the white kerchief turned red, the potential for a recently achieved sexual or emotional maturity that was not previously possible. The encoding of homoeroticism is also accomplished through the language surrounding the Doll, and functions in a similar way to her hair and clothing. The narrator experiences an “odd wish to see the Doll once more [emphasis added],” is “fascinated” by the Doll’s gaze, and is “irresistibly impelled to talk about her” (Lee 196); Pulham notes that “the Doll’s statements (when taken out of context of being spoken about her experience is also voiced as being out of the ordinary, in a way that is “painfully interesting” (Lee 196). The way in which language is used to suggest deeper meaning also gives voice to the Doll; by psychologically experiencing her story (whether imagined or not the narrator provides the Countess with an opportunity to speak and listens to her previously unheard and unspoken history. Instead of caring only to “welter and dissolve” in her own emotions like the Countess’s husband, the narrator engages in a subversive form of communication with the Doll, thus allowing for a non-threatening exchange to occur while also freeing her from being the object of a one-sided fetish (Lee 197). If both the language and form of communication used by the narrator urges a deeper reading, then the way in which the Doll articulates her relationship with her husband may also be imbued with homoerotic subtext. The narrator informs the reader that while living, the Countess suffered an “inconceivable incapacity for expressing her feelings,” despite the fact that she felt for her husband in a “deep, inarticulate way” (Lee 197). In the same way that colour, blackening of clothing and disheveled hair are potential indicators of subversion with homoerotic implications, the Doll’s statements (when taken out of the context of being spoken about her husband) imply that same sex love, in a patriarchal context, is considered unutterable. If so, the narrator also participates in this potential subtext.
When summoning the courage to ask for Orestes' help in procuring the Doll, she asks him "as if it were the most natural thing in the world" (Lee 198). The anxiety felt by the narrator while voicing her request, as well as her simultaneous attempt to disguise the way in which it might be considered inappropriate, is in alignment with the social context that sees female emancipation from male power as a transgressive act, especially when accomplished through alternative (or feminized) channels. The Doll's final scene is rich with symbolism and subtext concerning emancipation, specifically freedom from patriarchal authority as well as an adoration of femininity. Pulham notes that pinecones (used by the narrator to ignite the Doll's funeral pyre) are "sacred to Dionysus," and that the chrysanthemums, which are placed upon her lap, are "usually associated in Italy with death" (Pulham 107). She also writes that the scent of the bay and myrtle evoke an "ancient rite of purification," while also drawing attention to myrtle's association with Venus, the goddess who "can embody a fluid sexual identity" (Pulham 107). These ancient associations precede the Doll's nineteenth-century setting, and in being connected with release and freedom, offer an alternative to the patriarchal structure within which she lived and was socially contained. Pulham notes that at this moment, sitting outside in Orestes' garden, the Doll "momentarily comes alive" (107), her "black fixed eyes" staring "as in wonder" around her (Lee 199). What Pulham does not address, however, is the way in which the Doll's attire has changed. Outside, the Doll's once stained frock "seemed white once more, and sparkling" (Lee 199). In this ceremony, surrounded by emblems of femininity, power, and warmth, the symbolically charged stigma on the Doll's clothing have disappeared, and she appears to become sentient. In this way, the Doll has overcome her boundaries; instead of the need for veiling, secrecy and coded meaning, the way in which the Doll communicates is now visible, public, and even socially acceptable. In her work on nineteenth-century doll culture, Eugenia Gonzalez writes that although dolls were "made by adults to embody conservative patriarchal ideals of female domesticity," girls were not necessarily "passive consumers" (34). She writes that girls who "rejected doll play altogether" might even arrange "funerals for the perfect little bodies with which they were intended to have tea" (Gonzalez 34). In Lee's tale, the narrator is an almost exact embodiment of the girls that Gonzalez discusses; she is horribly disturbed by the way that the maid 'plays' with the Doll by bending her "articulated arms," and upon becoming the rightful owner of the Doll, destroys her (Lee 196). Yet in being destroyed, the Doll is also set free of the physical and mental ways in which she was confined by social structure, patriarchy, and gendered expectations, finally escaping the position of being a "trapped consciousness unable to react to the world" (Gonzalez 39). Thus the destruction of the Doll allows for her emancipation to occur, as she is both removed from the home and influence of the Count, and from the ideological structures and expectations placed upon her by the society in which she lived. Simultaneously, the narrator's role in facilitating the Doll's destruction combines notions of agency, femininity and alterity, which ultimately work to prevent further objectification of the Doll herself.

Works Cited


