

Behind the Glitter

Fabricated History and Problems of Stardom in Taylor Jenkins Reid's

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo

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Pro Gradu Thesis

English Language and Culture

University of Eastern Finland

School of Humanities

June 2024

Itä-Suomen yliopisto, Filosofinen tiedekunta**Humanistiset alat****Englannin kielen koulutusohjelma**

Metsälä, Lotta V.: Behind the Glitter - Fabricated History and Problems of Stardom in Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*

Pro Gradu -tutkielma, 58 sivua

Kesäkuu 2024

Asiasanat: Taylor Jenkins Reid, *Evelyn Hugon seitsemän aviomiestä*, postmodernismi, postmoderni kirjallisuus, fiktionaalinen omaelämäkerta, tähteys- ja julkkistutkimus, idolisointi

Tiivistelmä

Taylor Jenkins Reidin romaani *Evelyn Hugon seitsemän aviomiestä* (2017) on etenkin sosiaalisen median kirjallisuusaloilla suosioon noussut postmoderni teos. Kirja on kirjoitettu omaelämäkerta muistuttavalla tavalla, sekoittaen todellisia historiallisia tapahtumia ja kuviteltua fiktiota. Tämän tutkielman tavoite on analysoida tämän tyyppisille fiktionaalisille omaelämäkertoille tyypillisiä piirteitä ja niiden tapaa ilmentää ongelmallista median ja elokuvateollisuuden luomaa kuvaa todellisuudesta Reidin romaanin kautta. Näin ollen tämä tutkielma pyrkii osoittamaan tähtien ja julkisuuden henkilöiden idolisoinnin varjopuolia ja miten median luoma ongelmallinen esikuva tulisi purkaa ja rakentaa uudelleen. Tutkielman teoriaosuus käsittelee postmodernia yleisesti, kuten totuuden moninaisuutta tai narratiivin paradoksaalisuutta sekä määrittelee omaelämäkerta- ja julkkistutkimuksen keskeisiä piirteitä. Analyysiosuus on jaoteltu kolmeen osioon. Ensimmäiseksi analysoin teoksessa esiintyviä tarkoituksellisesti muokattuja ja hypertodellisia persoonia, toiseksi näiden virheellisten julkkisidentiteettien idolisoinnin ongelmallisuutta ja lopuksi analysoin teoksen osoittaman tarpeen purkaa nämä virheelliset, rasistiset ja patriarkaaliset mediaimagot. Näin ollen osoitan, että *Evelyn Hugon*

seitsemän aviomiestä pyrkii kirjallisilla keinoillaan luomaan samaistuttavuutta sekä ajatuksia herättää kontekstia, jossa median rakentama kuva, sen idolisointi ja siten vaikutus yhteiskuntaan on mahdollista nähdä kriittisessä valossa. Täten kirja voidaan nähdä yhteiskuntaa kritisoivana välineenä, joka pyrkii kannustamaan lukijaansa purkamaan vanhat, pinttyneet käsitykset tähteydestä ja median luomasta ongelmallisesta kuvasta.

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Thesis, 58 pages

June 2024

Keywords: Taylor Jenkins Reid, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, postmodernism, postmodern literature, mock-autobiographies, celebrity studies, idolisation

Abstract

Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) has gained popularity especially amongst the literary side of social media. The novel uses the means of mock-autobiographies, fusing historically accurate facts with imaginary fiction. The aim of this thesis is to analyse the typical features of mock-autobiographies and the ways in which they are used to portrait the problematic version of reality shown in mass media and the film industry. Therefore, this thesis aims to show the disadvantage of idolising the fabricated personas provided by the media and how those images show be deconstructed and reconsidered differently. The theory section determines postmodernism in general, such as the plurality of truths and paradoxical narratives, as well as gives as defines mock-autobiographies and celebrity culture, as relevant for this thesis. The analysis is divided into three sections. Firstly, I aim to analyse the purposefully manipulated personas and hyperreality as it is presented in the novel, then the problematic aspects of idolizing those false images created by the media, and lastly, the need presented to deconstruct those fabricated as well as problematic, racial and patriarchal images of media. Hence, I prove how *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* aims to create relatable images and thought-provoking context in which the fabricated personas of media and idolization of celebritized

identity can be seen in a critical light. Thus, the novel can be seen as a medium of social criticism, that aims to provoke its reader to deconstruct their way of understanding and categorizing the society through the problematic images of media.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aims and Structure

The aim of this thesis is to examine how Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* uses the means of a mock-autobiography to critique the glamour and superficiality of contemporary celebrity culture. By looking into themes such as mock-autobiographical narrative, hyperreal identity, and fabricated history, as portrayed in the context of Hollywood's golden age, this study aims to analyse the complexities of celebrity culture as portrayed in the novel that ultimately challenges the media influenced societal norms and values of our contemporary society.

Firstly, the theoretical framework discusses some central terminology and methodology relevant for this thesis. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* is a postmodernist novel, so I will first explain some general terms and trends of postmodernity and postmodernism that are relevant for this thesis. Postmodern literature deals with the accumulated uncertainties, scepticisms and vagaries of our time. It is medium for further discussion that often invites the reader to question the prevailing norms and standards of our society. Postmodernity encouraged and provoked authors to reflect on our historical development and what needed to be changed. History, its subjectivity and representations are key aspects of postmodernism and central especially in this thesis.

One innovation of postmodernism is mock-autobiographies, a literary genre studied previously by for example critics such as Ina Schabert, Siobhan Lyons and Jim Lane. The

term itself, however, was first introduced by David Lodge (1970), an English novelist and literary scholar, who used the term to describe a creative writing style of fictionalized self-autobiographies, often containing a humorous or even satirical tone. The narrative choices and storytelling elements of mock-autobiographies, such as fictionalized narratives and purposefully manipulated personas, are used as a tool to analyse in more detail the text of Taylor Jenkins Reid in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. I found this topic and perspective interesting as well as relevant, since mock-autobiographies still remain, as worded by Lyons an “underexplored genre in literature and media” (Lyons 678).

The last section of my theoretical background deals with the issues of celebrity culture and the power of media in general. Many researchers, such as Sam Riley and Su Holmes, have previously studied postmodern media culture and media studies and their work is used to demonstrate the prevailing issues in that field. The concepts of “being famous” and “stardom” are in the focus owing to the topic of this thesis, as well as the celebratized identity and the influence of social media in today's world.

The analysis of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* focuses thus on locating and discussing the literary styles and narrative decisions used typically in postmodern, mock-autobiographical texts, their use in the aforementioned novel, and analysing them in the context of celebrity culture and its prevailing issues in the modern world. The analysis in Chapter 3 is structured in three sections as follows: purposefully manipulated personas and hyperreality, idolizing the celebratized identity and false image, and deconstructing the mediated persona. Hence, by analysing the complexities of idolized celebrity culture as portrayed with the innovative postmodern narrative styles of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, this thesis aims to show how this novel ultimately aims to challenge the societal norms and values of our contemporary society.

1.2 Materials

Taylor Jenkins Reid is an American contemporary author. She has published multiple bestselling novels and is most known for her mock-autobiographical texts *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* and *Daisy Jones and the Six*. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* was published in 2017 and quickly gained popularity on social media's book platforms. In the recent years, it has become a so-called online hit.

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo is the fourth novel written by the *New York Times* bestselling author Taylor Jenkins Reid. It was published in 2017 right after the turbulent political elections held in the U.S. the previous year. It quickly gained popularity and became viral a few years afterwards, in 2021 in several book related online communities in social media. The novel now has been translated into over 20 languages and is one of the author's most known works still ranking high on New York Times best sellers list. The American streaming service Netflix has announced in 2022 that an adaptation of the novel will come to the big screen in the future.

The plot of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* follows the life of the legendary Hollywood actress Evelyn Hugo who starts to reveal the secrets of her glamorous and scandalous past to a reporter, Monique Grant. Through a series of interviews, Evelyn reveals her rise to fame, the twists and turns of her often turbulent love life, her multiple strategic marriages, as well as her secretive ever-lasting love for fellow actress Celia St. James. The narrative of the novel alternates between Evelyn's retrospective commentary and Monique's present-day life, whilst aiming to maintain the image of a historically accurate autobiography.

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, Taylor Jenkins Reid critiques contemporary society through her portrayal of celebrity culture. Through the main character of Evelyn Hugo and her turbulent journey through Hollywood's golden age, Reid satirically exposes the glamour and superficiality of celebrity culture, while simultaneously shedding light on the darker realities beneath the surface. By juxtaposing the glitz and glamor with the struggles and sacrifices of those within the industry, Reid critiques society's obsession with fame and fortune, inviting readers to question the true cost of celebrity in today's world.

Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* has gained significant media attention since its publication. While more and more articles and research papers are being published, the novel still remains relatively little studied. However, there are some more academic publications on the topic, such as Alfina Putri Damayanti's "Women Oppression's Portrayal in Taylor Jenkin Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*" and Syifa Kartika Aristawidya's "Woman Domination: A Study of Taylor Jenkins Reid's *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*", both conducted within the context of feminist literary criticism and the female narrative. In my study, I will focus more on the postmodernist innovations and narrative styles chosen to present the idolization of stardom in a problematic light. This novel from that specific point of view, at least to my knowledge, has not been studied much before.

2. Theory

The theoretical background of this thesis presented in this chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section discusses postmodernity, the changes and developments of the period and postmodernism, the ideology and ways of thinking, to gain wider understanding of the phenomenon and postmodern texts in general. This section will lay the base for the analysis to be carried out in this thesis where I will first address the features typical of the mock-autobiographies in *Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* that have been used to criticize celebrity culture. The second section will focus more on the ways postmodernism is seen in culture; the innovations central to this thesis, mock-autobiographies and celebrity culture in literature.

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2.1 Postmodernity and Postmodernism

[P]ostmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political. (Hutcheon 4)

Postmodernism is a diverse and complex phenomenon as indicated in the quotation from Hutcheon above. Therefore, in order to theorize the exact meaning of the term, we need to acquire a further understanding of the previous movements leading to the birth of postmodernism, as well as the key components that are strongly associated with postmodernism. The term *postmodernism* implies that there is a shift in our culture from modernism to a new phase (Berger 26). Therefore, to truly understand what

postmodernism is, it is important to draw a distinction between postmodernism and modernism.

Modernism is a period in literary and art history that can be best described as self-conscious, reflective and aesthetic (Featherstone, qtd. in Berger 27). As the term itself indicates, breaking old artistic manners and structures to create something new, modern, is central in modernism, whereas in postmodernism the emphasis is more on the assumption that nothing is truly new, and art can only be repetitious (Berger 27). Also, postmodernism conjoins different genres, styles and attitudes self-consciously. According to Berger, juxtaposing, for example, forms (fictional-nonfictional), cultural levels (high-low), and stances (straight-ironic), and doing so with a self-aware tone, is typical for postmodern style (Berger 28).

Instead of trying to find the more theoretic definition for the somewhat vague term of postmodernism, some critics locate it best with time related or economic signposting (Hutcheon 3). Temporally, postmodernism could be interpreted as a result of the 1960's, the explosive decade with multiple contradictory trends (Hoffmann 13). However, it is not the sum of it. The 1960s can be seen as a rebellious decade towards the dominant values of the 1950s, such as materialism, domesticity and individualism. Thus, according to Hoffmann, the prevailing mood in the 1960s was the spirit of deconstruction, complemented by the spirit of reconstructions, the liberating acts to break through the restraints of the Fifties (Hoffmann 13).

Economically, postmodernism can be classified as a cultural style of late capitalism as suggested by Fredric Jameson. Contextualizing postmodernism in this way, it can either be interpreted as providing moral judgements (positive or negative) or more likely as a dialectical attempt to understand and think our present time in the context of history

(Jameson 85-86). Pollheide sees that the two major catastrophes that shook the world in the 20th century, namely the Second World War and the murder of minorities in the concentration camps, are closely related to postmodernity (Pollheide 8). According to Lyotard, a French literary theorist and philosopher, the unquestionable and prevalent belief in morality, humanism and development, that were the source for humane rationality, were fundamentally shattered by these two catastrophes (Pollheide 8). This has also urged a need to reflect on our historical development and what needed to be changed, as indicated in the following quotation:

Perhaps it is another inheritance from the 1960s to believe that challenging and questioning are positive values (even if solutions to problems are not offered), for the knowledge derived from such inquiry may be the only possible condition of change. (Hutcheon 8)

Furthermore, according to Hutcheon, the representations of the past in present day texts are complex (Hutcheon 109). It is unclear whether the text's status is fictional or a truthful description of the past. However, Hutcheon implies that fiction should not be discussed with the terms of truth and falsity (Hutcheon 109-110). According to Hutcheon (109-110), many postmodern novels assert that there is not one truth but truths in the plural. Hence, that indicates that in postmodern fiction the term "falsity" is incorrect, and instead there are just other truths to be reflected.

The question with history that remains is whether the past is re-lived or re-written. Sometimes the interpretation of certain historical events as told by the author or metanarrative alters substantially from the "official" versions or time periods of set historical events (Ahmad 5). Hence, in some ways history-based metafiction proposes the continuing need for the opposition between fiction and fact (Hutcheon 113). However, as

mentioned before, this does not mean that there is a need to falsify the divergent interpretations of history, for they can be seen as different truths that are relevant for the understanding of the metafictional text.

As to the features of the writing style of postmodernism that are essential for the analysis to be carried out in this thesis, postmodern literature can be seen as a serious and almost desperate attempt to address today's uncertainties, scepticisms and vagaries.

It does this by creating a montaged confusion of discourses and reals, of presence and absence, by producing a field of intersections where expiring and evolving ideas and strategies meet, and by seeking in the remaking of the world and the fusion of design and debris the liberating source of the imaginary. (Hoffmann 15-16)

Hence, as presented in the quotation above, the remaking and reconstruction of the world is the source of the imaginary in postmodern fiction (Hoffmann 16). Hoffmann continues to mark that the inspiration for this comes from prevailing cultural and social context (Hoffmann 16). Furthermore, instead of the epistemological questions of knowledge or truth, that were common themes among the modern writers, postmodern literature focuses more on ontological questions of being and the existence of worlds reflecting a fictional truth (Hoffmann 18). Postmodern fiction aims to offer a dialectical presentation of literature, forcing the reader to scrutinize and reflect on their own beliefs and values in the surrounding contemporary world (Hutcheon 44).

When it comes to the characters of postmodern literature, they are said to have paradoxical combinations of features that would normally be mutually exclusive (Hoffmann

21-22). According to Hoffmann, they can be seen as empty canvases, as a person with no substance or permanence, while simultaneously being personal and possessing various characteristics that distinguish them from others (Hoffmann 22). Consequently, the characters are made of fragments, they are transformable and prone to change. They can be analysed as subjects of thought and experience, or as intersections of actions and qualities, or as mere linguistic centres of the text (Hoffmann 22). The characters do not focus solely on the self, like in most modern texts, but are the primary substance in the story that attach other elements (Hoffmann 23.)

Postmodernism is especially interested in the political dimensions of such deconstructions, since traditionally, the subject was characterised as white, male, and bourgeois. On the level of narrative technique, various attempts shatter (if not abolish) this construct, and possible strategies are the mixing and suspending of traditional points of view (such as omniscient vs. first-person narrator), intrusion of the author in a text told, written by somebody else, and general attempts to qualify the coherence of narrative modes. Two important techniques to achieve this are parody and pastiche. (Pollheide 19-20)

Pollheide explains that in postmodernism there is a strong interest in deconstructing the importance of adopting a one specific, single subject, especially when it comes to political dimensions. Traditionally, the subject is bourgeois, white and a male (Pollheide 19) referring thus to a culturally and ethnically narrow-minded, if not even racist, point of view. To shatter this traditional construction, postmodern fiction aims to blend and discontinue those traditional points of view. This is done, according to Pollheide, by using means of parody and pastiche (Pollheide 20), to comment on or even mock the subject.

When it comes to narrative styles and techniques, intertextuality and metafiction are some of the key elements of postmodern literature. Also, the mixing of formerly distinct genres of texts, like fiction and facts or the conventions of the novel and the autobiography is common (Pollheide 19). Intertextuality means literally the interconnections or interrelations of individual literary texts. It can also mean, as Hoffmann has put it, the relation between cultural conditions and the text or between the literary tradition and the text (Hoffmann 72). Intertextuality is pluralism in many ways. According to Hoffmann, it is “the pluralism of codes and discourses within the text”, it is “the pluralism of influences”, and, also, the pluralism of the dialectic relationship or interrelation between the reader and the text (Hoffmann 72). In other words, intertextuality pluralizes the reader by its knowledge of other texts and literary conventions, alongside by the intentions of the author. Also, an intertextual text becomes more than just the words in itself. The text is pluralized when it is read. “The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it” (Barthes 10).

However, intertextuality is not something that is exclusively associated with postmodern literature. Novels have always used intertextuality which was seen as a very conscious interaction of both author and reader (Pollheide 20). Yet in postmodern literature it is almost an impossibility for a text not to be influenced by intertexts. The difference is, according to Pollheide, that the intertextuality in typical postmodern literature is not necessarily conscious to the reader nor the author (Pollheide 20). Also, it is left to the reader to decide which intertext to consider. Another aspect of intertextuality, as it is used in postmodern literature, is the nature of the text and whether it is a unified whole, for intertextuality compartmentalizes the text into fragments that are left to be joined together later on (Pollheide 20).

Alongside with intertextuality, metafiction is often seen in the postmodern literature. In fiction, metafiction is a style that systematically and self-consciously draws attention to the connection between fiction and reality in the text (Waugh 2). Waugh states that by questioning the text's own construction and the methods used to structure "narrative fiction", they investigate simultaneously "the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text" (Waugh 2). Also, metafictional texts are highly conscious of the basic dilemma of representation and observing. It is not possible to describe the world in an objective manner, because the observer will always alter the observed (Waugh 3-4). Therefore, metafictional texts such as Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, acknowledge the fact that nothing can be represented as such. Instead of representing the world itself, literary fiction represents the discourses of that world (Waugh 3-4).

The construction of metafiction alters from a traditional narrative fiction. Metafictional texts create a fiction and at the same time comment on the creation of that fiction. This reflects the dissatisfaction of traditional values (Waugh 6). Contemporary metafiction is also a response to the idea that history and reality are provisional. Waugh continues to state that they are no longer eternal verities but a series of impermanent structures, artifices and constructions (Waugh 7). Hence, many writers, especially postmodern ones, have questioned and even rejected the traditional norms of fictional writing, including for instance the chronological sequence, the rationality between characters' actions and nature, an omniscient narrator and so forth (Waugh 7). In metafiction, the resistance of set literary or social norms is, according to Waugh, "within the form of the novel itself" (Waugh 7). In other words, metafiction is self-referential, meaning for example that the author is referring to himself (Hoffmann 188).

What is essential with this thesis in mind, is that metafiction does not only question the formerly distinct genres and narrative methods used in fictional literature, but that it also

questions the realism it provokes (Pollheide 17). This problematization of realism and history, and questioning the fictional and descriptive element of texts, is seen in many postmodern innovations, such as mock-autobiography that is a relatively new way of writing. In determining postmodernity and postmodernism, as relevant to this thesis, we can hence see the spirit of deconstruction, the attempt to understand and viewing the present in the context of history is central, as well as the concept of the plurality of truths. When it comes to postmodern narrative styles, the paradoxical characters, intertextuality and metafiction are essential to understand with the aims of this thesis in mind.

2.2 Postmodernism in Culture

Celebrity culture and the autobiography are suitably linked in regards to their performative strategies. (Lyons 680)

Postmodernism has created many new and even experimental ways of writing, but the innovation important for this thesis is mock-autobiographies. That innovation also goes by names such as biographical fiction or pseudoautobiographies, referring all to a way of writing that blends typical reality based autobiographical writing styles with fiction. Mock-autobiographies often contain features such as blurring fact and fiction, creating unreliable characters, exaggeration and metafiction, often aiming to provide social commentary. Another branch presented is celebrity culture and the power of media as a part of postmodernism culture. In 2.2 I will first determine what are the key features of mock-autobiographies and follow with establishing how the celebrity culture and power of media are relevant to this thesis.

2.2.1 Mock-autobiographies

Whether metafictional or realist interpretations of real lives, it seems biographical fiction is one important literary expression of the postmodern zeitgeist, (Caulfield 2)

Mock-autobiography or biographical fiction as referred to by Caulfield in the quotation above, is an important literary expression in the postmodern timeline. David Lodge was one of the first scholars to start using the term mock-autobiography when referring to a postmodern literary style of blending fiction with reality in the form of fictional biographies. These fictionalized biographies, biographical novels or mock-autobiographies are, according to Perkin “an example of a new, but increasingly common type of literary work” (Perkin 151). He continues to note that this new way of writing requires a new way of studying it as well (Perkin 151). The writing style of mock-autobiographies is hard to classify. They cannot be seen purely as realistic novels nor as classic historical novels, but the genre is more a hybrid form of writing, creating a fusion with two very different literary styles.

Adams mentions several authors who have used this hybrid form of autobiography in their writings, such as Gertrude Stein, Frank Conroy, Norman Mailer, and Mary McCarty (Adams 417). Adams continues to state that mock-autobiography is a sub-genre, that exists somewhere between non-fiction and fiction (Adams 417). He also comments on the historical aspect of mock-autobiographies. The basic element of mock-autobiographies is fiction, for it is inventive and claims veracity as well as simultaneously is a form of fiction, it is descriptive, that just like history, it is subject to verification. (Adams 417). What is characteristic of mock-autobiographies is that

[Biographical fiction] takes a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration, using the novel's techniques for representing subjectivity rather than the objective, evidence-based discourse of biography. (Lodge qtd in Perkins 151)

Perkins continues to explain that mock-autobiographies are not hiding this fusion of genres and hybrid nature of factual fiction. Cora Kaplan has also pointed this out by stating that there is a profound difference between pure fiction and historical biographies (Perkins 151). Therefore, the fusion of these two genres is always visible to the reader. Mixing documented facts and imagined speculations creates a hybrid form of writing that is hard to place in the canon of literary fiction. As Janice Caulfield has pointed out in her study about biographical fiction, mock-autobiographies, such as Bret Easton Ellis's *Lunar Park* or James Ellroy's *The Hilliker Curse*, take a real life story, or a part of it, from the past and model it out as a main character of a fictional novel, which makes it "a hybrid and a crossover genre" (Caulfield 2).

Perkins states that biographical novels or mock-autobiographies often have a famous person, such as a political figure or a writer as their main protagonist (Perkins 152), or, as in the case of Taylor Jenkins Reid's *Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, an actress. He continues to argue that mock-autobiographies "tend to draw heavily on the archival record, while inventing the consciousness of the figure" (Perkins 152). In order to accomplish this "difficulty of knowing the past" (Perkins 152), the author often relies on metafictional means aiming to draw the attention to the general narration or ways of commenting on the text. As Lyons writes,

The pseudo-autobiography operates differently to fictional autobiographies; it is not merely a fabricated memoir, but features certain truthful events and

people in a highly fictionalized manner. It is not simply an autobiography of a fictional character, but the purposefully manipulated life story of a real person. (Lyons 679)

Both Perkins and Lyons highlight that a typical narrative choice of a mock-autobiography is a fabricated version of a famous person, or persons fused purposefully together. Perkins mentions the archival record, and Lyons refers to real life stories, meaning true events often act as inspiration for the author's work or at the centre of the story's plot. However, these stories are fictionalized or manipulated to adapt to the writer's agenda which, as discussed above, will always be visible and evident in some way to the reader. When it comes to remodelling, as according to Di Summa Knoop, it:

[...] can be a form of protection; we tend, for instance, to remove or mitigate painful memories from the past to the point to which we might even deny having lived through them. Other times, the alteration of memories is dictated by the need of "making sense" of what happened; we need, in other words, to connect our memories into a whole, to spell out their connections, whether etiological or of other nature, and to establish a narrative that abets our perception. (Di Summa-Knoop 3)

By remodeling true events or adding imagined traits or tendencies to real people, the writer tries to achieve her own reality or bring out her own points of view. The aim is not to tell lies or even categorize things based on truth or reality but manage to create as reader-friendly and multidimensional understanding of what happened as possible (Di Summa-Knoop 3). Also, as it was mentioned earlier by Hutcheon, postmodernism states that there is not a one truth but truths in the plural. Hence, there is no need for viewing the "falsity" just different reflections of truth. Caulfield continues to argue that truthfulness is not

necessarily the most central definition for a postmodern text, when the actual important message comes before historical accuracy (Caulfield 4). However, this creates a sense of unreliability to the reader when facts are fused with fictional versions of events.

“How should a person be?” a question that, to no surprise, has no answer. There is not much more to life than a series of vignettes, of unaccomplished, unending scenarios—they are real, or at least they feel real, but what in the end is real is their being experiments: amusing experiments at being a person. (Di Summa-Koop 7)

Di Summa-Koop considers the narrator and the protagonist's reality in her research. She mentions that the realness of the characters is not relevant for their ultimate aim is to be luring to the audience (Di Summa-Koop 6). She claims that “finding the narrative that underlines our lives is then equivalent, in these memoirs, to finding moral closure; it is what we need to ascertain who we have become” (Di Summa-Koop 6). As stated earlier, it is typical of postmodern texts such as mock-autobiographies to ultimately criticize the norms of society or bring out phenomena from the past in a critical light. Thus, relatable or at least thought-provoking protagonists are more successful in appealing to the reader.

The narrator or the main character of mock-autobiographies are often exaggerated versions of the self and seem hyperreal, which in the view of Lyons is a phenomenon in which a person or a place imitates reality in a way which makes the fake seem real (Lyons 682). These hyperreal personas are, according to Lyons similar to their historically accurate role models, “the only difference here being that they themselves [the author] have created this persona, not the media” (Lyons 682). This playfulness of the fictionalized yet hyperreal narrative creates a link between the author and the reader. Lyons continues to point out that these “larger-than-life imitations” of real personas can often be misinterpreted by the

reader and thus create a postmodern dilemma. However, since mock-autobiography is often purposefully playful with its writing style, breaking the boundaries of traditional writing styles can be and often is, as explained earlier by Perkins (152), a deliberate way to influence the reader.

The term hyperreality, that Lyons (682) keeps referring to is a concept of postmodernity that, according to Wolny, claims that “in contemporary consumer culture: the picture of a product – also a [...] film celebrity – is more important than the original since the context – the environment – adds to the value of the “original product” (Wolny 77). Therefore, the simulated version of reality, hyperreality, becomes more valid than the image once known as reality (Wolny 78). That, however, does not mean that the world becomes unreal, but that the reality as we know it dies out and new versions of reality emerge. Hyperreality, like postmodernism in general, refuses the “real” culture known in modernism and, on the contrary, accepts the comical and imaginary version of reality (Wolny 80).

Hence, the key elements of mock-autobiographies as relevant to this study are the deliberate fusion of truth and fiction, deliberate manipulation of the narrative, metafiction and hyperreality as often portrayed in a famous or well-known persona’s point of view. Since *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* relies strongly on celebrity narrative, it is important to try and define celebrity culture and look shortly into the power of media for the sake of the analysis.

2.2.2 Celebrity Culture and the Power of Media

In this section I will aim to determine the key aspects of celebrity culture, providing a short explanation of the terminology, and looking into the ways celebrity culture and media are seen in postmodern culture. They create a facade for the public to further idolize or even model, creating thus questionable version of reality. A celebrity can be categorized as follows:

A celebrity is a famous person who receives heavy media attention, who is popular due to personal qualities that go beyond actual accomplishments, and whose identity is suitable for some degree of merchandising. In today's America, most, although not all, celebrities come from some part of the vast entertainment industry. (Riley 14)

Being a celebrity in the modern world, as Riley states in the quotation above, does not necessarily mean acquiring any set skills. One can simply be "famous for being famous" (Boorstin as qtd in Riley, 14). Often this means being suitable for marketing and having a persona that sells, whether it is in the film industry or any other equivalent, talent is not the only aspect. However, often, as Riley pointed out, to be famous or a celebrity, you must be part of an industry and acquire something unique to become part of it. Stardom also fascinates people. Just to be titled as a star can intrigue people and raise the public's curiosity. "When people hear someone famous is in their vicinity, they will want to see the celebrity, even if they have no idea why or how that person gained such celebrity" (Riley 14).

The expansion of film stardom can be seen to have started with the Classical Hollywood period of cinema also known as the Golden Age. This is the period that started with the introduction of sound cinema in the late 1920s and lasted until the end of 1960s. In that

period, the famous people were singular “super-stars”, and the vastitude of stars was smaller than in contemporary celebrity culture. There was a set hierarchy within stars:

In drawing attention to new ways of conceptualizing and researching a star ‘image’ (the most famous example here being Marilyn Monroe) (Dyer 1986), Dyer later proffered seminal methodological tools for the analysis of stardom – a model for mining the cultural significance of a star by examining the network of ideological discourses from which they emerged. (Holmes 8)

The emphasis of stars, according to Holmes, as qtd by Dyer, an English Cinema Studies specialist, is on the Classical Hollywood period of cinema. However, Holmes brings out the question of the development of stardom in film industry and “the contemporary state of ‘being famous’ in which ‘meaningful’ distinctions and hierarchies have diminished” (Holmes 8). Talking of stars and stardom, it is hence meant to refer to cinematic stardom, mostly to the 20th century Golden Age cinema (Holmes 9). The term “celebrity” can be seen used more broadly nowadays to refer to the multidimensional scope of public figures.

In star studies, the term ‘stardom’ was conferred to denote a dialectic between on/off-screen presence. In comparison, the term ‘celebrity’ has had an ambiguous popular and academic circulation – one that has long since been structured by discourses of cultural value. (Ellis 1982 and Marshall 1997, as qtd by Holmes 9)

Holmes continues to explain that however these guidelines of terminology are not necessarily respected when talking about contemporary celebrity culture and therefore the terminology in this thesis is also a fusion of those two terms. There are multiple modern-day celebrities that are referred to in the media as “stars”. This shows evidence of a culture that declines meaningful distinctions of fame (Holmes 10). Holmes states that “in studying the phenomenon of celebrity and fame at any one moment, we are essentially studying traces of how it is written about”. These writings to be studied can be of any form, what is important is to detect the way stardom of fame or celebrity is addressed (Holmes 10).

In recent decades, the number of celebrities writing, or, more appropriately, ghost-writing autobiographies, has risen dramatically. This is indicative of the growing interest in the 'celebrity exclusive' or the revelation of the 'real life' of a celebrity. (Lyons 680)

Fame intrigues people. Moreover, people are getting more and more interested in the "behind the scenes" life of celebrities. We can also see this in the rise of reality shows and the wide variety of those shows. However, as Lyons put the word in quotation marks, the "real life" of a celebrity or their "realness" can be interpreted as an ironic comment hinting that the "real life" of celebrities is still a fabricated reality or rather a simulation (Lyons 689). It is production that sells. As Riley has also pointed out, what counts as a celebrity nowadays is having a life or a persona that sells (Riley 14).

With the evolution of stardom in the 1950s to modern day celebrity culture, the major difference is the way the audience sees and understands stardom. Today, image, looks and age matter above all (Riley 15). For example, in the movie world, a large number of moviegoers are young, and in order to be admired by the target audience, a public figure must be young, muscular and good-looking (Riley 15). Appearance and age are the focus, and the so-called ordinary, everyday faces.

Coupled with looks in today's celebrity culture is the matter of youth. One would be hard-pressed to believe that in today's Hollywood, an actor such as Humphrey Bogart could become a major star. He was simply not pretty enough, and when he began acting, he was too old to appeal to the kind of

people who today buy most of the movie theater tickets. The youthful present-day theatergoer would much prefer a leading man no older than twenty-five or thirty at the outside, who had lifted his share of weights. (Riley 15)

This admiration of youth and even the pursuit of over-perfection when it comes to appearance undeniably creates pressure for those working in the field. Riley continues to explain that “diet and exercise can help only so much, but Botox and cosmetic surgery have come to the rescue, not just for celebrities, but for ordinary Americans, who want to look young, too” (Riley 15). When public figures are role models for ordinary citizens, these pressures are indirectly transferred to the shoulders of the people of society, especially the youth.

Among the young, the desire to look as much as possible like their favored celebrities is a powerful force. Among boys, the temptation to “buff up” or to excel at sports with the help of anabolic steroids is considerable anorexia and bulimia among young girls constitute a serious health problem despite the massive, if ironic, media attention these disorders have received. (Riley 15)

As the media industry nurtures these beauty ideals, hiring again and again young, fit, thin and "ideal" actors and actresses for films and series, the problem persists despite the attention directed at it. As Riley mentions, today's youth are especially the target audience for this negative pressure to be a certain way and look a certain way (Riley 15). The cinema keeps circulating these images of the ideal man or woman thus influencing the ways in

which we as the audience think and identify ourselves and others (McDonald 176). This pressure leads to, for example, eating disorders and/or self-esteem issues that can have fatal and lifelong consequences.

Raviv et al., in their study of adolescent idolization, state that the phenomenon of idolization is strongest among the young and can be seen in forms of worshipping and modeling (Raviv et al. 631). This idolization is strongest in girls and can thus be seen as a link with the growing social pressure, emotional difficulties and body image issues reported by BBC amongst the young teenager girls (Jeffreys n.p.). BBC has also reported links to mass media and the image or role model provided through it. Raviv et al. support this connection stating that “we also know that children from a very early age are exposed to these media and events, and are able not only to relate to them, but also cognize and enjoy them” (Raviv et al. 632).

What is even more problematic, the beauty standards are very limited culturally and ethnically. Lyons says that “the phenomenon of celebrity culture, after all, is built on Western notions of the self,” meaning that the beauty standards stem from Western culture (Lyons 689). This means in contemporary western beauty standards having pale skin, slender body, large eyes and a small nose (Primbet n.p.). This narrow-minded perspective on beauty poses an ever-increasing problem, being nearly impossible to achieve for a large portion of the world's population.

The power of the media is therefore enormous for it creates a facade, a culture of images to be consumed. Media provides a fabricated image of stars and celebrities that, when consumed by the public, especially the young, creates a false presentation that must be

considered. Idolizing stars and especially doing so by ways of modelling or mimicking leads to problems with body image, social pressure and emotional pressure to be something that ultimately is only a fabrication of the media.

3. Analysis

In this section I will analyse the postmodernist features, especially those typical of mock-autobiographies, and how celebrity culture is portrayed in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* in order to show how this novel aims to criticise the norms of our contemporary society, especially the idealization of celebrities. I will begin by analysing the purposefully manipulated personas and hyperreality as depicted in the novel. Then, I will continue to analyse how the novel presents and problematizes idolizing celebritized identity and false image, and lastly, focus on the deconstruction of the mediated persona.

3.1 Purposefully Manipulated Personas and Hyperreality

Purposefully manipulated personas and hyperreality, the ultimate fusion of fiction and reality, are both strongly present in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. It can be seen with the connection between the main characters of the novel and their real-life representations, such as Evelyn Hugo and Elizabeth Taylor, as well as in controversial topics and behaviour as presented in the novel, and with paradoxical features of the narrator. In postmodernism, as with *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, it is unclear whether the text is purely fictional or a truthful description, for the past, as Pollheide puts it, is always a subjective representation of the narrator (Pollheide 18). However, Evelyn Hugo as a character, remains a fictional character with evident similarities to the nonfictional events and lives of those living in the turmoil of Hollywood cinema in the late 20th century. Even then, the line between fiction and truth is vague. This fusion can be seen as the novel's way to create purposeful confusion in the reader, aiming thus to question the "reality" we see and consume through media.

Evelyn Hugo is portrayed as a sex symbol of her time, as well as the image of beauty and very successful in her career. There are clear connections with Evelyn and some real historical actresses of the same Golden Age of Hollywood. For example, Ava Gardner was known for her sensual roles and can be considered a sex symbol of her time. Elizabeth Taylor, also praised for her beauty was one of the most successful female actresses of the 1960s (Kelley 117). Evelyn can be seen as a fusion of several real personas, such as Gardner and Taylor, as the following quote presents.

Evelyn Hugo is maybe the most beautiful woman of all time. [...] She started making millions by being a badass business bitch back in the '60s. And she would never have had the clout to do that without her talent and beauty.
(Reid 11-12)

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo contains several similarities to real events that took place in the same era the plot of this mock-autobiography is set, as well as real celebrities living in the mid and late 20th century. Most importantly, the similarities between the life of Evelyn Hugo and the one of Elizabeth Taylor, former Hollywood actress, cannot be overlooked. Like Evelyn Hugo, Taylor was as well married seven times and was one of the silver screen's most admired stars. They both were praised not only by their looks and acting skills, but with their scandalous lives, which involved multiple marriages starting from a young age (Hugo was first married aged 15, Taylor aged 17), having Hollywood's greatest love scandals, and shocking losses, as seen in the quotation below. It is typical for a mock-autobiography to rely on historical achieves and use real historical figures as the source of the story, as worded by Perkins in chapter 2.2.1.

Hugo has long been an icon of glamour and elegance. She is known for a personal style both sensual and restrained and [...] has weathered her share of Hollywood scandals, not least of which being her seven marriages, including her decades-long relationship with film producer Harry Cameron. (Reid 1)

The fusion of multiple real-life stories is very present in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. Another central character in Evelyn Hugo's life is her co-worker, friend, father of her daughter, and one of the husbands, Harry Cameron. He bears many similarities with the late Hollywood actor Montgomery Clift, who in reality was also a close friend of Elizabeth Taylor. The unspoken truth, with both Clift (Petersen n.p.) and Harry Cameron, is that they are gay. They both have tragic car accidents, problems with drug abuse, and die middle-aged, never truly retiring. These hyperreal personas are aimed to be, according to Lyons, a valid resemblance of their historically accurate role models (Lyons 682).

Also, the close and speculated friendship between Clift and Taylor bears many similarities with the one of Evelyn Hugo and Harry Cameron. Petersen, the author of *Scandals of Classic Hollywood: Sex, Deviance, and Drama from the Golden Age of American Cinema*, writes about Clift and Taylor that "it's impossible for us to know what happened—or if the two even had a relationship that went beyond the platonic" (Petersen 301). Here we can clearly see the fusion of fiction into reality with *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* where the storyline between Evelyn and Harry was fabricated in Evelyn's memoirs. The quotation that follows, shows both the sexual orientation of Harry (like Clift) and the close relationship between Harry and Evelyn (fictionalised version of Clift and Taylor).

[Harry] looked thoughtful. "It's a long and complicated story. But suffice to say, you've just never been my type."

The way he said it, I knew he was trying to tell me something. Harry wasn't interested in girls like me. Harry wasn't interested in girls at all.

"You're my best friend in the world, Harry," I said. "Do you know that?"

He smiled. I got the impression he did so because he was charmed and because he was relieved. He'd revealed himself, however vaguely. And I was meeting him with acceptance, however indirectly.

"Am I really?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Well, then, you'll be mine." (Reid 72-73)

Hence, in the novel the storyline of Evelyn and Harry is very similar to the public as that of Clift and Taylor's. It would have been impossible to know what truly happened behind the scenes without the metafictional commentary of the main protagonist. This creates an illusion of a possibility, where the hyperreality of the storyline suggest that this could have happened and would have made sense. As Di Summa-Koop states, reader often yearns for a sense of closure (Di Summa-Koop 3), which the fabricated personas of mock-autobiographies thus aim to provide. However, Lyons also mentions that those "larger-than-life imitations" of real personas that can be misinterpreted by the reader. However, as explained by Perkins, this confusion can be a deliberate way to influence the reader and their way of viewing the past.

Reid herself has stated that a series of autobiographies from various classic Hollywood celebrities has been the premise for writing *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. She has mentioned Ava Gardner's memoir, *Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations*, as one of the sources of her inspiration in an interview with the AIB (American Institute of Bisexuality) (Zane n.p.). Also, the stories found in *Scandals of Classic Hollywood: Sex, Deviance, and Drama from the Golden Age of American Cinema*, published in 2014, withholds many similarities with

the ones occurring in Evelyn Hugo's life, as stated above. Both Perkins and Lyons highlight that it is typical of mock-autobiographies to fuse the stories of many different famous people purposefully together. This creates the possibility to create a protagonist and other characters interesting and as Di Summa-Koop said "luring" to the reader. The humanity and relatable experiences of the characters can reinforce the experience of realness to the reader.

Controversial topics and behaviour are typical in postmodern literature according to Hoffmann (22). Often, especially with autobiographies, the protagonist wants to explain their life, if not in a positive way, then at least with an objective perspective. Here, Evelyn controversially wants to show the world that she is not the perfect, idolized icon the mass media and her admirers have set her out to be. She is not who she seems to be in public, hiding her true origins and having multiple staged marriages just to conceal her real sexual orientation and relationship with another woman. This almost satirical anti-traditional narrative (not being male, bourgeois, or white) shows the postmodernist interest in deconstructing the seemed norm of the subject (Pollheide 19). According to Pollheide, it is typical for postmodern fiction to purposefully blend and discontinue those traditional versions of narrative in an attempt to awaken society to question its own outdated points-of-view.

As a result, Evelyn Hugo, the protagonist, has paradoxical combinations of features. She is controversial by many means, being bisexual, an immigrant and a strong female influencer, and by being so, deconstructs the importance of a typical white, male and bourgeois narrator. However, she is none of this openly. Also, at some point she seems to be ashamed of her past, when sometimes takes huge pride in it, proving to be a typical transformable protagonist, as explained by Hoffmann are prone to change (Hoffmann 22). Evelyn is rational and strongly career-orientated while simultaneously being emotion

driven and stating that “[...] all I was ever looking for was family” (Reid 358). She also pushes the other main narrator of the novel, Monique, to write the true story of her life, showing her true self to the world, but controversially states that:

I’m not a good person, Monique. Make sure, in the book that that’s clear. That I’m not claiming to be good. That I did a lot of things that hurt a lot of people, and I would do them over again if I had to. (Reid 272)

However, the full story of Evelyn’s life proves different to her wording, highlighting even further the paradoxical features of this narrator. The metafictional commentary and two stories in different timelines, show a perplex reality to the reader. However, as Wolny stated about hyperreality, it is that new version of the truth (or multiple versions) that matter, thus the fabrication replaces the “original” reality (Wolny 78). Evelyn does not come across as a bad person, even if she does make some selfish and questionable decisions in her life. In the passage above she states that she would not change anything, hinting that she does not regret the decisions she has made. However, later on the novel she states quite the opposite by stating that “Tell everyone that I got it wrong. That I chose the wrong things most of the time” (Reid 358). As stated by Hoffmann above, the characters of postmodern novels rarely are consistent or simple natured. They are prone to change and un-logic thinking patterns.

Also, ontological questions of being and reality are also very quintessential in mock-autobiography (Hoffmann 18). Thus, the reader is often left to wonder what makes a person good and, also, what is morally acceptable in life. People are never purely good or purely bad, and even set stereotypes can be easily broken. Metafictional texts enable the characters of the novel to join the readers in this conversation with self-reflecting their behaviour, for they are partially aware that they are only part of a story. With *The Seven*

Husbands of Evelyn Hugo, one of the central conversations between the characters (and the reader) is various moral questions, for example, are these so called “bad deeds” in life or “hurting others”, as Evelyn Hugo stated (Reid 272), acceptable when the happiness or safety of your own family or loved ones is at risk.

By using this literary form (mock-autobiography) the novel creates a medium to observe society and its development with a critical eye. Especially, when historical events are observed with the knowledge of today, society and its many stages play a strong part. In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, there are multiple different social issues that the main protagonist, Evelyn Hugo, encounters throughout her personal life, such as growing up poor and being abused both physically and sexually by men due to her sex and looks. This is seen for example in Evelyn’s memories of her youth.

I know what it feels like to not want your father to look at you too closely, lest he decides he hates you and hits you or decides he loves you a little too much. And I know what it feels like to see your future ahead of you – the husbands who’s really just a new version of your father, surrendering to him in bed when it’s the last thing you want to do, making only biscuits and canned corn for dinner because you don’t have money for meat. (Reid 52-53)

Her narrative, alongside some of the side characters in the novel, are purposefully manipulated versions of real people and can be seen as hyperreal. It is almost stretched to the point of being unconvincing to have one person to experience all the major social inequalities and problems presented in the story. The main themes regarding social issues in the novel are attitudes towards sexuality and patriarchy, domestic abuse, LGBT rights or forbidden love, as well as problems with ethnicity, social image and prejudice in the film industry. The aim of these hyperreal characters and the fusion between fiction and facts is

to awaken the reader to consider these problematic topics and the way they are presented (or the lack of it) in the mass media.

3.2 Idolizing the Celebratized Identity and False Image

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, the celebratized identity and the praise of the false reality are very central for they dictate the course of the plot. For the purpose of this thesis, they are to be studied applying the framework of postmodernism in culture, especially celebrity culture and the power of mass media, as presented in section 2.2 in the theory section. In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, the idolization of celebrities or more specifically of Hollywood stars is present throughout the whole novel.

Evelyn Hugo's decisions are most often based on the act of maintaining her social status. As Riley mentions, to be famous one needs a persona that sells (Riley 14). Evelyn undergoes extensive changes, with both her physical appearance and her personality, changing her name and whole life story, just so she could fit the social standards of a typical white, bourgeois and therefore, relatable female characters. Some physical changes the protagonist undergoes in the novel's length are stated in the quotation below.

Gwen bleached my [Evelyn's] hair and cut it into a shoulder-length bob. She shaped my eyebrows. She plucked my widow's peak. I met with a nutritionist, who made me lose six pounds exactly, mostly by taking up smoking and replacing some meals with cabbage soup. I met with an elocutionist, who got rid of the New York in my English, who banished Spanish entirely. (Reid 50)

As we can see from the quotation above, the physical appearance of Evelyn is ultimately fake, a fabrication that allows her to match the societal norms. The picture sold to the public, however, is the source of idolization, the image to look up to. As people are increasingly more and more interested in celebrities, and idolization, as reported by the BBC and the study by Raviv et al., is strongest amongst the young, the need to deconstruct this false image is strong. In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, the novel creates a medium to reflect by showing the different versions of reality. The truth lived and celebrated by the audience (public) and the truth of the celebrity, the source of idolization. In postmodernism, as Hutcheon (109-110) stated, there is no longer a single truth, but a plurality of truths. An individual's story has many versions, or many truths. However, the media is fixated to the idea of a singular truth, as can be seen in the quotation below:

Even long past my prime, people were still easily distracted from seeing how I felt about Celia St. James. But this time was different. Because I wasn't hiding anything.

The truth had been there for them to grab if they'd paid attention. I had been my truest self, searching for the help of my best friend to ease the pain of the loss of my lover.

But of course, they got it wrong. They never did care about getting it right.

The media are going to tell whatever story they want to tell.

They always have.

They always will. (Reid 354)

Here, Evelyn refers to "not hiding anything" as in not hiding her true loving feelings towards Celia. She had a long sexual relationship with Celia, and towards the end of their relationship, was more and more open about it. However, even at Celia's death the media

turns the focus elsewhere. "They (as in the media) never did care about getting it right" (Reid 354) is a strong statement confirming the reluctance seen in media to portray these "truths", as Hutcheon (109-110) stated and, on the contrary, stay dependable on their singular version of the truth.

As mentioned in the framework of celebrity culture, racial issues come to the picture with the limited grasp of beauty standards (Lyons 689). Evelyn Hugo has Cuban origins, but since she was to become a star of Hollywood, she had to fit those standards. In other words, she had to appear white. What she is on paper, is what matters, for people believe it to be the truth. This is still strongly the case. Our society is very appearance orientated and is becoming more so with the vast spreading of social media and its influencers. The idolization of celebrities leads to rising social pressure on ordinary people which then leads to various other problems including mental health issues, like anxiety or even depression. Therefore, media representation matters, since it affects the way, we see and understand our society. With narrow ethnic and cultural media representation, the dominance of whiteness is highlighted and can thus create an incorrect image for the young, those who are most prone to idolization in its totality.

Evelyn Hugo is of Cuban origins and born to poverty. She spent her childhood in the area of New York, called Hell's Kitchen. That neighbourhood was known for its violence and poverty. It was considered, before the 1980s, a dangerous place to live (Jacobson n.p.). The excerpt from the novel seen below describes the situation and its rapid change well.

Born Evelyn Elena Herrera in 1938, the daughter of Cuban immigrants, Hugo grew up in Hell's Kitchen neighbourhood of New York City. By 1955, she had made her way to Hollywood, gone blond, and been rechristened Evelyn

Hugo. Almost overnight, Hugo became a member of the Hollywood elite.
(Reid 2)

Here we can see another hint at racism in the media, and the way Hollywood wants to be portrayed, at least in this representation of history. By referring to whiteness (real or fabricated) one becomes "elite". Evelyn's persistency in passing white and hiding her origins, both racial and economical, also comments on the racist norms set up by the society. Passing white is a critical term associated with the phenomenon stretching from late 19th century to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's (Moynihan 2) and is seen in many different ways, such as identifying in coloured race but being treated as white (Delgado and Stefantic xvii) or in the case of Evelyn doing so purposefully to gain a different status in society. However, this path of being ashamed of who you are and hiding your true identity was ultimately harmful to Evelyn, since she ended up being alone and stranded, filled with repentance. Idolization, as stated earlier by Raviv et al., is often manifested by modelling the celebrity (Raviv et al. 631). The novel hence suggests that idolizing a mere image created by the media can be truly problematic, especially in the case of the youth with their limited skills of media literacy. It is thus better to remain true to oneself and not base one's beliefs of beauty or norms in the falsified image generated by the media.

Also, the renaming of Evelyn Herrera, brings up more detailed problems of false identity, that are still seen in today's world. Racism, as portrayed in the novel, is more focused on some nations and ethnicities, for example the French were idolized, especially in the film industry in mid-20th century. When Evelyn suggested her new name to be "Evelyn Hugo", a producer in Sunset Studios commented "Sounds French, he said, I like it" (Reid 52). Simultaneously, she was told to change her name, then Evelyn Diaz, because it did not sound American. The reason why migrants want to change their given names and to become more localized, or in Evelyn's case to sound more American, is connected to

dissociating with the position of powerless, stigmatized migrant (Obojska 333). With the new name, Evelyn Hugo, she could play the roles of “a nice blond girl” (Reid 48), because it did not have a Hispanic ring on it. She also kept dying her hair blond for the rest of her life, in order to maintain that set status.

The world is still much the same. According to a British psychologist and immigration researcher Berry (2005), people who clearly look different find the acculturation process harder because they experience more racism. They stand out and that is still seen as a negative thing in our society. However, analysing the story of Evelyn Hugo, the decisions she has made in her life to fill in the norms of the ideal representation of media, the ideal image of a star, as explained earlier by Lyons and Primbet, have not resulted in the desired outcome. Thereby, it can be seen *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* aims to provoke the reader to make a decision to deconstruct those set norms and to question the notion of idolization by modelling by setting a warning example. The end of Evelyn’s story is not filled with happiness, on the contrary she is heartbroken and lonely, as seen in the following quotation:

That’s how my story ends. With the loss of everyone I have ever loved. With me, in a beautiful Upper East Side appartement, missing everyone who ever meant anything to me. [...] Make sure the reader understands that all I was ever really looking for was family. Make sure they know I am heartbroken without it. (Reid 358)

Furthermore, novel suggests that being wealthy and famous is not something people should idolize. Becoming an icon means losing who you really are, losing what matters in life. Evelyn wants family, she wants love and due to her life choices as an idolised star, she ends up losing that dream. Evelyn Hugo denied who she is and was constantly afraid of

losing the status she had built, leading to a life of pretending and ultimately hiding from the truth, sheltering in the false image created by the industry and media. Towards the end of the novel, the narrative becomes blunter in presenting its point of view about idolization and stardom as can be seen in the quotation below:

When you write the ending, Monique, make sure it's clear that I don't love this apartment, that I don't care about all my money, that I couldn't give a rat's ass if people think I'm a legend, that the adoration of millions never warmed my bed. [...] Say that Evelyn Hugo doesn't care if everyone forgets her name. Evelyn Hugo doesn't care if everyone forgets she was ever alive. Better yet, remind them that Evelyn Hugo never existed. She was a person made up for them. So that they would love me. Tell them that I was confused, for a very long time, about what love was. Tell them that I understand it now, and I don't need their love anymore. (Reid 358)

This quotation is from a conversation between Evelyn and the reporter Monique in the present-day timeline. With the knowledge of the past and the understanding of the present, Evelyn wants to clarify what truly mattered to her. Being famous is no longer a glorified goal to be aimed at, idolising her life and the choices she made is not reasonable. Living life in hiding of your true self is a road to unhappiness and loneliness. The novel, with this line by Evelyn suggest that money and fame do not mean anything in the end. The "them" Evelyn keeps referring in this quote means the public, her "fans" and those interested in the lives of celebrities and stars.

In conclusion, it can be suggested that *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* creates a strong point against the idolization of stars and celebrities since it is ultimately the reinforcement of cerebralized identities and false image, the fabricated facade provided by the media. The

power of media, in influencing the ways we see and understand the world around us, is massive, since the facade provided creates a fake sense of beauty and being. Modelling this false image leads to problems with one's own identity and self-criticism, as could be seen in the case of Evelyn as well. The novel thus encourages the reader to try and deconstruct these fabricated personas of media and false image created by the film industry in order to create a possibility for the creation of new norms and ways of thinking.

3.3 Deconstructing the Mediated Persona

Now that we have analysed the purposefully manipulated personas of the novel as well as itemized the representation of stardom, we can move to the last part of the analysis, the deconstruction of those mediated personas. That can be seen in media representation and analysed by addressing the way the media and film industry treat celebrities as well as in the facade they aim to sell to the public to be idolised. By analysing the problematic norms and believes set out by the media, such as racial, patriarchal or appearance orientated ways of classifying the society and the world around us, the need to deconstruction and ultimately rebuild the system of norms is brought forward.

The novel is constructed in a way that every now and then parts of gossip articles introduce new storylines. These articles are a blunt way to show what the public wants to really read about in the news or what interest people. As Riley states, people are often interested in celebrities just because they are famous. Who they really are and what made them such does not matter to the audience, according to Riley (Riley 15). Lyons, however, suggests that people are increasingly more and more interested in the exclusive, revealing stories of celebrities, they want to know what is "really" going on (Lyons 680). They, as in the public, are not interested about the real things and feelings celebrities might encounter, nor the socially influential acts, like donating money or creating fund-raisers. Instead, what seems

to draw people's constant attention is the scandals and tragedies, as well as the looks of others. This can be seen as the yearn for "realness" or the version of reality and truth the audience longs for. The simulation created for the public is merely a version of reality, even if it sold as an unveiling truth of the celebrity. Some of these articles in the novel have a comment section included, where the gossiping gets almost out of control. This is a clear way to show how shallow the society is and what type of "realness" they want to see. This is pointed out in a quite literal way as well for there is a direct comment on this in one of the comment sections in the article.

EvelynHugolsASaint says: This is a woman who has donated MILLIONS OF DOLLARS to charities for battered women's organizations and LGBTQ+ interest, and now she's auctioning off gowns for cancer research and all you can talk about is her eyebrow game? Seriously? (Reid 11)

The quotation above is from the present-day storyline, dated 2017. Therefore, this can also be seen as a slow change amongst the public. People are starting to pay attention to the more meaningful matters in life and by doing so, developing and reconstructing the society for the better. The idea being that standardized outer appearance should not be the aim and instead, people should accept and praise being different and unique in a positive way. The novel clearly messages that the glamorous life many idolize, and the "perfect" looks most dream about, is not what matters in life. And more importantly, they are not a token for a happy life. Evelyn Hugo words it quite frankly in the novel as well, stating that "[...] life doesn't get easier simply because it gets more glamorous" (Reid 44) deconstructing the illusion of idolized life, worded here as life of "glamour".

Another take on the slight shift of style in the articles presented in the novel, can be a literary choice. The articles presented in the novel, especially the ones dated in the 1950's

and 1960's, also have a different tone, using an almost naive way of writing, as can see in the quote below:

Sub Rosa, March 4, 1957. Don and Ev, Forev! You heard it here first folks: Hollywood's newest It Couple, Don Adler and Evelyn Hugo are tying the knot! [...] You can bet your bottom dollar that the nuptials will be the event of the season. (Reid 70)

This can be understood as a way to show the change in the style of communication in the mass media or be a stylistic decision to parody the style of magazines in the 1950s and 1960s. Parody is a typical method used in postmodern texts (Pollheide 20), especially when the past is presented. The humorous way of writing about the union between Hugo and Adler is controversial, however, because off camera, Hugo suffers from domestic abuse and physical oppression. "We were married for two months before he started hitting me" (Reid 73). This revelation is another self-reflecting point for the readers for they can see the way Hugo and Adler's marriage is discussed in the public as well as knowing what it truly is. Below is a quote from the novel that shows the way the press is handling the situation:

Sub Rosa, June 22, 1959. Cold, cold Evelyn. [...]
 Don wants a baby [...]. We know any child they have would be sure to send us into fits of swooning. But Evelyn's saying no. [...] More than that, Evelyn doesn't even attempt to keep a clean house or mind her husband's simple request, and she can't be bothered to be kind to help. [...]
 Poor Don's at home, yearning for a child, while Evelyn's out having the best of her life. (Reid 99)

This is a straightforward attempt to criticise both the media and the patriarchal society. The reader is reminded of the importance of obtaining a critical eye when using the mass media as a source of information, especially with the celebrity culture. The people in our society are quick to jump into conclusions without giving the matter a second thought. In the quoted text above, the press is right away teaming up with the male in the relationship, referring to Don with words as “poor” and the allusion of him being kind and caring. The reader has now, however, gained sufficient amount of information that makes Evelyn’s choices understandable if not necessary. She is the victim of domestic abuse and is “cold” towards the press due to her difficult situation of being the abused and oppressed wife of a well-loved co-actor.

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, the harshness of the media is obvious. Celebrities are addressed as if they were objects instead of actual human beings. As shown in the quotation above, the magazine is involved in pointing out how they would like Hugo and Adler to have a child, as the opinion of the public would be as important as that of the couple. People are, even today, keen to have strong opinions on matters that do not truly concern themselves. And again, the media, or here the press changes the way we see and understand the world around us. It provokes us into straightforward simplified way of thinking and aims to sell one all-explaining truth. However, as postmodern novels often point out, the notion of truth is not that simplified, and as Hutcheon said, there are always other truths to be reflected.

Secondly, the passage from the novel discussed above is a strong critique towards patriarchal society. The whole novel withholds this mindset, showing how men are treated differently than women. Evelyn Hugo is a victim of domestic abuse. She is fleeing the norms of a marriage in the 1950s, to be a stay-at-home wife, cooking, taking care of the children and the household, and doing all by making it look easy (De Leo 9). Evelyn is

unwilling to start a family or become a stay-at-home wife, for many reasons. She believes in having a say in her own career whether or not she is married. Displaying questionable norms and aiming to break free of them is a postmodernist way of aiming to create something new. The deconstruction of those norms means a possibility for new ways of thinking and construction of the present.

In *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*, issues regarding patriarchy are mostly discussed in the context of film industry and in the set roles of man and a wife in a marriage. As mentioned, Evelyn is married to a violent abuser. However, in the eyes of the press, Don Adler, the husband, is the victim, and without further investigation all blame falls on the shoulders of Evelyn Hugo. This must be due to the fact, that Evelyn Hugo is, according to the novel, a controversial female character, as Don Adler, at least in the eyes of the public, is a well-behaved male. This reinforces the perspective of the media's patriarchal tendencies. Moreover, it has to be taken into consideration that this specific quotation is supposedly from the late 1950s but the inequality of men and women is still an ongoing problem in the world.

Furthermore, this ongoing deconstruction can also be seen as a sarcastic hint to the fact that even in the more than 60 years our society has not been able to shatter this patriarchal way of constructing our reality. The turmoil that Evelyn encounters in the historical context of 1950s is still a very close reality of many other female celebrities in the 21st century. One example out of many is Natalie Portman, an Oscar-nominated actress, who has openly discussed about her experiences of "sexual terrorism" (Sanchez n.p.). The novel thus hints that idolization of celebrities, as portrayed in the novel via its hyperreal characters, leads to the reinforcement of society's injustice and inequality. This point is further confirmed with the following quotation:

'Don Adler won an Oscar for it, didn't he?

Evelyn rolls her eyes. 'That bastard won an Oscar, and I wasn't even nominated'

'Why not? I've seen it,' I say. [...]

'Because I wasn't allowed to be applauded for it. It had an X rating. It was responsible for letters to the editor at nearly every paper in the country. It was too scandalous, too explicit. It got people excited, and when they felt that way, they had to blame someone, and they blamed me. What else were they going to do? Blame the French director? The French are like that. And they weren't going to blame the newly redeemed Don Adler. They blamed the sexpot they'd created whom they could now call a tramp. They weren't going to give me an Oscar for that. They were going to watch it alone in a dark theatre and then chastise me in public. (Reid 269)

In this quotation Evelyn explains the reasons behind her not being even nominated for an Oscar, the highly praised award in film industry while Don, her ex-husband, manages to win one. The "it" Evelyn keeps referring here is the movie she and her then already ex-husband Don both starred in. The "X" rating for a film means that the film contains content suitable only for adults, in the case of this movie, sex and open sensuality. Since, at the time, such sexually liberal film was controversial, even shocking, the "blame" needed to be put on something or someone. In this case it was Evelyn, while the male actor (starring the same movie) is only praised for it. Evelyn is, as she herself phrases it, "the sexpot they'd created" – in other words, she is a creation of media, open to belittling and contempt due to her sex.

Another point that highlights the problematic way of thinking in our society is the way Evelyn is manipulated to view her own self and origins. For the most of her life, Evelyn was

driven by the mentality of never going back or letting anyone of her loved ones to experience the lower-class life she was originally destined to. She is of Cuban origins and born to poverty. Even though escaping her true origins was a massive turning point for Evelyn Hugo, it did not lead to anything good. However, this ideology of the belief that with hard work and willingness one can rise in the social structure, this novel aims to shatter this belief by showing the cost of it.

This belief is known as The American Dream, a commonly known concept in the US. However, this idea of a "dream" becomes complicated, and in fact, almost toxic to the positive development of a socially equal society. A part of the basic idea of the American Dream is that despite the class, a willing and hardworking citizen can and will succeed or in other words rise in the social structure (Berger 49). However, according to Berger, the problem is that success is defined by individual initiative, making it seem that those who do not succeed have no one but themselves to blame (Berger, 49). Hence, failing is seen due to lack of willpower and determination (Berger 49). Berger continues, that in historical fiction, the concept of a "self-made-man" is discussed with the contemporary perspective, making it seem almost parodic (Berger 49).

Furthermore, in the novel, Evelyn Hugo was willing to sacrifice nearly everything in her attempt to accomplish her childhood dream of obtaining a glamorous life. She changed her name, changed her looks, and end up losing everyone in her life trying to keep up her appearance. However, the cost for all this was ending up alone and disappointed in her life.

The novel has purposefully created a hyperreal protagonist who is forced to face what seems like a never-ending supply of injustices of our world. With this the novel aims to both create a relatable character for as large an audience as possible as well as to create an information overload to the reader. When the problems of our society, from the point of

view of the film industry and idolizing stardom, have been accommodated in one simple context, it is easier for the reader to contextualize their reading and create new ways of viewing and understand our society based on their reading. By doing so the novel becomes a medium for deconstructing the falsely fabricated image and start to see the problems behind stardom and the idolisation of celebrities.

4. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine how Taylor Jenkins Reid's novel *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* uses the means of a mock-autobiography to critique the glamour and superficiality of contemporary celebrity culture. Analysing the features of the mock-autobiographical narrative, hyperreality, and fabricated history, as portrayed in the historical film industry context of the novel, I set out to analyse the complexities of celebrity culture such as idolisation as portrayed in the novel and prove how they ultimately challenged the media influenced societal norms and values of our contemporary society.

The theoretical background was divided into two main sections, postmodernity and postmodernism, and postmodernism in culture. In the first section I aimed to determine what postmodernity is and what are the main features and ideologies of postmodernism relevant to this thesis. Those are the spirit of deconstruction, the attempt to understand and think about the present in the context of history as well as the concept of the plurality of truths. When it comes to postmodern narrative styles, the paradoxical characters, intertextuality and metafiction are in the center with the aims of this thesis in mind. Then, in the second section I focused more on explaining the postmodern innovation, mock-autobiographies and its features, such as fusing fiction and history, and hyperreal identity, that would later be used in the analysis section. Secondly, in defining postmodernism in culture, I looked into the celebrity culture and power of mass media from the point of view of postmodernism. They set up a facade that offers a platform for idolization.

Then, I began to first analyse the purposefully manipulated personas and hyperreality as portrayed in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. Mock-autobiographical texts tend to rely on real personas from the history, and fuse multiple storylines together to create a hyperreal portrayal of a relatable main character. The similarities between Evelyn Hugo and Elizabeth

Taylor, like multiple marriages, marrying young and being a controversial figure in media, as well as those of Harry Cameron and Montgomery Clift, such as their sexual orientation, relationship between Evelyn/Elizabeth, cannot be overlooked. This fusion of history and fiction can be seen as a purposeful confusion of the reader, aiming thus to provoke the reader to question the "reality" we see and consume through media. Alongside with controversial topics and behaviour as presented in the novel, and with paradoxical features of the personas, these hyperreal, fabricated personas create the feeling that this could have happened and would have made sense, bringing a sense of closure to the reader as well. Thus, the humanity and relatable experiences of the characters reinforce the experience of realness to the reader.

Secondly, I set out to determine how those hyperreal personas were presented in the novel from the point of view of the public and media. Then those findings were analysed in the context of idolizing celebrity culture and false image. With the metafictional knowledge the reader gets, it becomes clear that Evelyn is a fabrication of mass media and film industry, aiming to match social the societal norms. However, since this fabrication is the picture sold to the public, the false image becomes the source of idolization, the celebritized persona to look up to. As contemporary culture is increasingly more and more interested in celebrities, and idolization, especially the young, the need to deconstruct this false image is strong. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* aims to create a medium of reflection by showing the different versions of reality. The truth lived and celebrated by the audience (public) and the truth of the celebrity, the source of idolization. Hence the novel aims to provoke the reader to make a decision to deconstruct the set norms and beliefs of our contemporary society and therefore, to criticise the notion of idolization by setting a warning example.

Lastly, I set out to analyse how those hyperreal personas and their idolization have generated a need to deconstruct those problematic norms and beliefs set out by the media

and which ultimately reproduce the system in its entirety. I aimed to analyse the problematic views, such as racial, patriarchal or appearance orientated ways of classifying people the society, and to prove how they were used in the novel as a medium of criticising the way our society is constructed and idolized. *The Seven Husband of Evelyn Hugo* purposefully creates hyperreal characters who face what seems like a never-ending supply of injustices of our world. As a result, the novel aims to be both relatable and to have storylines that make sense to the reader. When the problems of contemporary society, as portrayed in the context of film industry and idolizing stardom, have been accommodated and presented in a simplified form, the novel creates an easy platform for the reader to contextualize their reading and create new ways of viewing and understanding our society. By doing so the novel creates a medium for deconstructing the falsely fabricated image of those personas, as well as the problems behind stardom and the idolisation of celebrities. The novel thus provokes the reader to deconstruct that narrow and problematic way of falsified representation shown in media and celebrated in film industry.

In conclusion, *The Seven Husband of Evelyn Hugo* uses typical features of postmodernism, especially the means of a mock-autobiography to critique the idolisation of contemporary celebrity culture, critiquing simultaneously the reality and value system created by the media that aims to influence people's way of seeing and understanding society and the world around us. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* was first published in 2017, roughly six months after the new president of the United States, Donald Trump, was inaugurated. The novel challenges a substantial amount of different social issues, highlighting especially the unjust treatment of racial and sexual minorities, as well as the patriarchal world in which the characters of the novel struggle to fit and live in. While the dominant part of the novel is set between the 1950s and the 1980s, introducing therefore a set of social issues in a historical context, the reader is left to wonder what if anything has actually changed in the contemporary world. Hence, while *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* can be analysed in the context of the media influenced idolisation associated with celebrity culture, the

features of mock-autobiography and postmodernism could also be developed to into further analyses using the framework of gender studies or ethnic and racial studies and focus further on those issues as presented in this falsified yet hyperreal context of Hollywood's Golden Age.

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