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**The Performance of Gender Ambiguity in  
Patti Smith's *Just Kids***

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**Abstract:** Gender is considered fixed by society and women are confined to their defined roles; however, gender is not black and white. Patti Smith opposed these traditional roles. This essay will argue that Patti Smith, in her autobiography *Just Kids*, blurs fixed ideas with regard to gender. By applying feminist criticism this essay suggests that Patti Smith uses gender in her aspiration to become an artist. Furthermore, an additional emphasis will be placed on literary devices, which will be connected to how Smith uses gender ambiguity and how this plays an important part in her aspiration to become an artist. My findings will show that gender still plays an important role when it comes to one's life choices; however, by exploring her own gender Smith manages to shift the rules. This essay will argue that without Smith's exploration of the performance of gender ambiguity, she could not have achieved greater fame as an artist.

**Keywords:** Gender, Patti Smith, *Just Kids*, ambiguity, artist, blurring, fluidity, identity, androgynous.

“We used to laugh at our small selves,  
saying that I was a bad girl trying to be good  
and that he was a good boy trying to be bad.  
Through the years these roles would reverse,  
then reverse again, until we came to accept our dual natures.  
We contained opposing principles, light and dark.”  
Patti Smith, *Just Kids* p. 79

# Table of Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2. GENDER PERFORMANCE .....	6
CHAPTER 3. CREATING A NAME .....	11
CHAPTER 4. LITERARY DEVICES .....	15
5. CONCLUSION .....	19
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	21

# 1. Introduction

The photograph that Patti Smith's friend and ex-lover Robert Mapplethorpe took of her in Sam Wagstaff's penthouse (Smith 251) in 1975 shows an artist portrayed in a formal tie and suspenders showing a radical androgynous side of herself (Noland 591). Smith appears with her dinner jacket thrown over one shoulder, short hair and a casual look upon her face. In this photograph as a woman, Smith is an object, but she is challenging the expectations of society about how a woman should act. Her chin a bit uplifted suggests stubbornness, of not giving way to society's fabrications of gender. In the photo she gives an air of both masculine and feminine presence. Gender is important when it comes to social expectations and norms. The key focus in this essay is gender ambiguity with regard to *Just Kids*. As an introduction to my essay a short summary of the book will now be given.

In *Just Kids*, Patti Smith is a young woman who had an idyllic childhood; she came from a poor but happy family. She saw art and magic in everything when she was playing as a little girl. However, she wanted more of life than what she saw around her. When she got pregnant and gave up her child for adoption, she started to realise that there is more to life than working in a factory. She was different from the other female factory workers; she was for example accused of being a communist when she read the poet Rimbaud at work. She soon left and came to 1960s New York, which was then full of struggling artists and exotic bohemians. There she met Robert Mapplethorpe, an aspiring artist and photographer who first became her lover and later a lifelong friend. In her autobiography Smith gives vivid descriptions of a New York City most readers have dreamt of visiting. She searched for liberation from society and its norms. The reader follows Patti Smith's and Robert Mapplethorpe's journey from poverty and their struggle to becoming successful artists. She later becomes a rock'n'roll artist and performer, and he a controversial photographer. Smith is both a rock artist writing songs, as well as a poet. She has the capability and experience and knowledge of the written word to create an enchanted story, which gives the reader, in different stages of life and from different backgrounds, a sense of connection with the author when reading the book.

The book is a semi-autobiography since it contains both elements of real life experiences and characteristics of a literary novel. In order to enable a deeper understanding of the subject at hand, a background concerning the women's literary movement will be presented.

The women's movement was from the beginning a literary one (Barry 116): "Feminist criticism began by studying the often-disturbing images of women in literature written by men and opposing those images of the authority of women's experience" (Parker 141). The image of the woman was most of the time portrayed in accordance with traditional role models: good mothers and wives, which is seen as a rather narrow and old-fashioned idea today, notes feminist critic Toril Moi (Parker 139). The representation of women in literature had previously shown the world what was considered "feminine" and what were acceptable dreams and goals for a woman. Women's literature has both historically, as well as today, mainly focused on social status, marriage and motherhood (Barry 117). Literature did not often portray women following aspirations and dreams aside from motherhood and marriage. Another aspect of womanhood is explored in *Just Kids*: aspirations and dreams. This essay will explore these aspirations.

For a deeper understanding of the use of the term "gender ambiguity," a definition will be given. Gender ambiguity is one of the most important key words in this essay. It is therefore of particular importance that a common definition should be presented. Ambiguity suggests an uncertainty, something that could be interpreted in several ways ("Ambiguity"). Salih interprets Judith Butler's theory of gender performance as a social behaviour. Gender ambiguity is therefore defined as a social behaviour when it comes to men and women that could be interpreted in more than one way. In addition, gender in this context is not the biological sex, but the different norms and cultural constructions with regard to gender (Butler 23).

One aspect of analysing gender ambiguity in this essay will be to look at the relationship between Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith with particular focus on Smith, as a way to analyse resistance to typical male and female characteristics. Another of Smith's aspirations is the effort she and Mapplethorpe put into their romantic relationship. It could be argued that Mapplethorpe's and Smith's relationship in *Just Kids* is different from our normative society. As the book progresses, Mapplethorpe realises he is gay, and it could be argued that Mapplethorpe and Smith stayed together as long as they did due to Smith's rather androgynous side which is another aspect regarding gender ambiguity. In the book, Mapplethorpe is portrayed as a struggling but focused artist. Most areas, especially the field of cultural artistry have always been more male dominated. It is easier for male artists to gain fame and fortune than for female artists. It could be claimed that Smith uses strategies, for example, of experimentation and performance with gender roles, which may have helped her become a successful artist, albeit a female one.

This essay will argue that Patti Smith, in her autobiography *Just Kids*, blurs the boundaries with regard to gender. This can be seen by looking particularly at how she uses gender ambiguity, and how this plays an important part in her aspiration of becoming an artist.

In order to support my claim, reviews and essays, which discuss Smith's book, will be used as part of the critical framework. Since Smith's book is fairly new it has been a challenge to find critical sources that analyse the book. I have two essays about Smith but not on *Just Kids* specifically. Hence, the previous works that will be used are mainly book reviews of *Just Kids* in *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Washington Post* and *New York Times*. I will also look at an interview with Patti Smith. The reviewers that will be discussed are Hand (2010), White (2010), Carson (2010) and one of the two critical essays written by Mesle (2010). The information concerning the other Smith essay and the interview with Patti Smith will be given, the latter in chapter three, *Creating a Name*, and the former in chapter two, *Gender Performance*.

The novelist Elizabeth Hand claims *Just Kids* "is one of the best books ever written on becoming an artist" (2010); it portrays the hard journey before the days of sponsorship and miles away from today's SoundCloud and YouTube. Smith's self-creation as an artist will be looked at in order to address my research claim. The creation of her name is relevant because it highlights the aspect of how Patti Smith broke free from traditional gender roles in her struggle for independence and it was from this struggle that the discovery of her androgynous side started.

Furthermore, the American novelist Edmund White states in his review in *The Guardian* that Smith had to "fashion her look, her personality and her verse" and that she was carefully and even painfully self-sculpted in her writing of the book (2010). She was determined to find "influences that would help her to explore and to firm up her peculiar sensibility [. . .] edgy, lyrical, demonic and hierarchic" (White 2010). White further states that *Just Kids* is a book about "how an artistic career can be launched" (2010). Smith had a gift for phrase making; at the beginning of her career she gave a carefully staged reading at St Marks, with regard to how she dressed, how she poised herself on stage and how she expressed herself. As stated at the beginning of the essay, Smith had her picture taken by Mapplethorpe, in which Smith raised concerns about "how to be in the photograph" (Smith 190). This highlights the idea of Smith's self-creation as an artist. What is more, Mapplethorpe was "tactical in plotting his rise in the world" (White 2010), in which Smith would have been affected. Smith has carefully crafted her own image, both by herself as well as with the aid of

Mapplethorpe. This essay will look further into this particular aspect in chapter three, *Creating a Name*.

Moreover, another review written by the author and movie critic Tom Carson in the *New York Times* states how Smith “can’t help being the Smith her fans know and love. If a given event occurs within hailing distance of Arthur Rimbaud’s or some other demigod’s birthday, she won’t fail to alert us,” (Carson 2010) thus highlighting the notion that Smith was carefully constructing herself. She likes being a part of the in crowd while she focuses on her own journey and individuality.

Mesle provides the last criticism used in this essay, mentioned in the introduction. Mesle states that Smith evokes a referential language. The reader who felt drawn to this period of time ought to be impressed by the character Patti Smith, since she knew a lot of people and was also seeking to discover who she was. Mesle further claims that Smith uses a “carefully wrought narrative” (2010) that guides her readers unknowingly by writing about fantastic and random events with the stars of the seventies such as Jimi Hendrix, Allen Ginsberg and Janis Joplin. Having briefly mentioned the critical reviews this essay will now move on to present the theory that will be used in the essay.

I have chosen to look at feminist theory in this essay since Smith is regarded as a feminist icon. I find it particularly interesting to apply feminist criticism to Smith’s writing in order to analyse if her novel can be considered feminist literature, especially regarding gender ambiguity. The primary theorists that will be used are Judith Butler and Rita Felski. Secondary theoretical ideas that will be used are those of Salih and Moi. I will firstly give some background information concerning the female reader and literature for a deeper understanding. This will be followed by a discussion of a classification of feminist criticism: the French and the Anglo American.

Is there a notion such as a female reader? The sex of the naïve reader is considered to be the “fairer” sex: the female. Literature is filled with female protagonists mistaking literature for life, in which they yearn for a life constituting a romantic novel. Moreover, female readers often read novels with an element of daring sexual energy. The archetype of the female reader is still the housewife fantasising about her love life through the romantic novel (Felski 31). It may be a notion of the Victorian period. However, *50 Shades of Grey* re-established the genre. The romance novel is the new heroic myth. As Felski puts it: “From Arthurian romance to Harlequin romance: could there be a more telling illustration of the changing fortunes of a word” (Felski 25).

Feminist criticism of literature is often divided into two categories: French Feminism and



Anglo American criticism. French feminism is about how “The literary text is never primarily a representation of reality, or a reproduction of a personal voice expressing the minutiae of personal experience” (Barry 120). Whereas Anglo American criticism tends to “treat literature as a series of representations of women’s lives and experiences which can be measured and evaluated against reality. They see the close reading and explication of individual literary texts as the major business of feminist criticism” (Barry 119). This essay will use the French Feminist view of literature.

Feminist critic Rita Felski writes about the importance of a connection between gender and literature. Critics who are opposed to feminist criticism claim that you cannot have both literature and feminism (Felski 6). However, Felski states literature is almost always about gender, which will be argued in my analysis of *Just Kids*. The results of this essay will reinforce Felski’s claim about gender. Even though gender is not the only important question in books, it undoubtedly matters (Felski 12) since the main characters in books are most of the time either male or female (Felski 11). Smith experiments with her gender in order to change her possible outcomes as a woman and aspiring artist. Depending on your gender, you play a certain part in literature.

Furthermore, the other feminist critic used in this essay is Judith Butler. The ideas of Judith Butler about the performative nature of gender are particularly suited for an analysis of Smith’s image of herself in *Just Kids*. Butler claims gender and gender identity are constructed by a heterosexual system and argues that what we call the feminine and masculine, both in terms of biology and culture are designed. (Cavallin 219)<sup>1</sup> Gender as performative means that through all our actions, behaviour and language we constantly produce gender. This might reproduce settled forms of doing gender, but the performative nature of it also means that there is, in every action, room for doing it otherwise (Butler 34). What you do is constructed through the deed (Butler 181). Butler further states that there is no doer behind the deed. What is more, identity is created through repetition, but is also thus susceptible to change, since a slightly different identity might be enacted. Thus, according to Butler you cannot separate the gendered body from the various acts that constitute it (Salih 57). It could be argued, therefore, that gender is social behaviour. Moreover, people who do not conform to the gender assigned to them by society are punished for it (Salih 58), which can also be seen in *Just Kids*. Drawing on these theories I will look at how Smith is engaged in various forms of gender performativity.

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<sup>1</sup> Own translation, Anna Cavallin in Åsa Arping *Feministiska literaturanalyser 1972-2002*

## Chapter 2. Gender performance

During the time in which *Just Kids* was set women relied on their husbands in many aspects of life; however, a woman does not need a man in order to define herself or to be happy (Radway 220). Smith and her fellow female New York friends live according to Radway's view. They ate what they wanted, danced with whom they wanted to dance with and slept with people outside of wedlock. Today, feminism focuses on women's ability to choose their own path in life; Smith was a pioneer for this in the way she led her life as described in *Just Kids* (Parker 143).

Smith is using her gender ambiguity in order to follow her dream as an aspiring artist. This chapter will discuss questions regarding the performance of gender in Smith's text. In order to do so, an analysis will be developed within the following areas: the subjection to patriarchy, the importance of gender, androgynous choices, Smith's childhood and sexual ambiguity compared to gender ambiguity.

One important component with regard to gender ambiguity is that it is not in any way fixed; she uses gender ambiguity in different forms in different situations. Sometimes she may employ more "feminine" characteristics, sometimes more "masculine" characteristics, and sometimes she may strive towards ambiguity. In order to dominate her surroundings when she first performs with her poems at St. Marks, she advocates "masculine characteristics" when she wears snakeskin boots and has an aggressive reciting style (Smith 180). However, it could be suggested that Smith is spontaneous in this characterisation. It could also be claimed that she is playing with her fixed role as a woman.

When it comes to patriarchy Smith has always been an opponent. However, in an interview with Bockris, Smith insists, "I ain't no women's lib chick. So I can't write about a man because I'm under his thumb but a woman I can be male with. I can use her as my muse. I use women" (Bockris 9). This extract shows the extent of patriarchy when a female feminist icon says she uses women. This statement also highlights the gender ambiguity. Smith sees herself not as a typical female or, for that matter, male. She further confirms her subjection to patriarchy as a woman among other women when she claims she is "under his thumb," i.e. being under someone's control. Smith is just as all women – a slave under men, under patriarchy. However, she fights patriarchy with the transition into a more androgynous lifestyle.

Furthermore, it is of particular importance to see the struggle Smith is faced with, both being under men's thumb as well as using her fellow sisters as muses, which may be a way in

which she reproduces the objectification of women. Smith further claims that she uses women just like men do – uses them as muses, hence, uses them as an object. Smith’s comment (Bockris 9) about being a male with women, suggests that when Smith is around women she feels more like a man. Women are “pretty but brutal” writes Smith; maybe the way women behave is influenced by the amount of interested males there are at that particular moment (Smith 126). This is connected to Butler’s idea about the heterosexual matrix in which feminine expresses female and masculine expresses male (Butler 208). It could be interpreted as Smith trying to rework the heterosexual matrix by not performing as the feminine part to the same extent as the other women in the example above, whose gender performance is very apparently dependent on the masculine presence (Butler 7).

Furthermore, Felski argues that characters in literature are either male or female (11); however, Smith is a female main character in her book but she nurses attributes considered typically male such as strength and determination. This might suggest some limitations with Felski's assumption that characters are *either* male or female, since such an assumption might inhibit properly taking into account the ambiguity, complexity and transgressions of these assignments of gender. To further strengthen this argument Smith refers to herself as a person with the attention span of a teenage boy (Smith 119), and that in general it takes her about 10 minutes to get dressed (Smith 118), characteristics in our normative society that would typically be considered “male”.

Another example of Smith’s fluid gender performance is when Smith writes a poem that is considered elegant by one of her friends. When Smith wrote the poem she tried to evoke “a strong feminine presence” (Smith 178), even though she “talked like a truck driver” (Smith 178). It could be argued that the elegance Smith tried to evoke could be seen as a feminine characteristic whereas her speech was masculine. Smith moves away from the conventional stereotypes and is rather a “macho woman – hip, tough, sexy, raging” (Kane 16). Furthermore, it could also be suggested that Smith wanted to go beyond the confinements of gender in her ambiguousness. However, even if her search for individuality was constant through the book, the rigid rules of gender are difficult to exceed. Butler explains that identity is created through repetition (Salih 56). By Smith’s various acts of repeating her ambiguity her gender becomes more fluid.

Smith had a very specific persona in New York. She had a masculine public style, a “female version of Keith Richards” (Kane 16): by obtaining her Keith Richard's hairstyle she suddenly becomes androgynous (Smith 140) and thus her gender ambiguity was created by her surroundings. This interpretation is valuable because it shows how Smith’s gender

performance is further strengthened by her hairstyle. According to Butler it is the acts of the gendered person who decides who you are (Salih 57).

Even if Keith Richard's hairstyle helped to highlight Smith's androgynous side, the presence of gender ambiguity was already present at the beginning of the book. Already when Smith was a little child, she associated with the boys. One particular warm day they were all playing without their shirts on, Smith being one of the boys. However, Smith's mother saw this and wanted her to cover herself up, since Smith, was about to "become a young lady" (Smith 10). This quote from the book is of particular importance because it shows Smith's awareness of the freedom of being of the male sex. There was a particular divergence between the expectations between the two sexes. Smith does not want to cover herself up and answers her mother with venom that she never wanted to become anyone else but herself (Smith 10). This clearly shows how Smith at this early age was concerned about her gender and the lifestyle that followed with it. Smith wanted to live, regardless of expectations of her sex. Already in her childhood she became aware of the restrictions of the female sex. "I ruefully watched my mother perform her female tasks, noting her well-endowed female body. It all seemed against my nature. The heavy scent perfume and the red slashes of lipstick, so strong in the fifties, revolted me" (Smith 10). The expectations of the behaviour of women have historically been set in stone. There have been strict rules of how a woman should behave. Smith's mother suits the traditional image of how women in literature and life were supposed to act: a mother, married and with some sense of social decorum. Smith realised this structure and hated her mother for projecting and re-establishing it in her daughter by forcing Smith to cover up her torso. Smith always wanted so much more than being a young lady (Smith 10). At the same time, Smith was fascinated by her friend Sandy's ability not to damage her manicure while changing vinyl records on the music recorder (Smith 101). In addition, girls interested Smith for being good material for her work as an artist (Smith 199). Smith looked at how they dressed and held themselves and used them as muses. Given this, it could be argued how Smith's exploration of both genders helped her expansion of her androgynous side.

Smith's insight into Mapplethorpe's struggle with homosexuality (Smith 66) reflects Smith's own struggle with her gender ambiguity. What further helped in Smith's journey towards an ambiguous lifestyle is her entangled life with Mapplethorpe. In the book Smith has a romantic relationship with Mapplethorpe, later coming out as a homosexual. Smith could accept his sexual preferences, (White 2010) even if she had a hard time doing so at first. Butler would coin Mapplethorpe's behaviour as compulsory heterosexuality (Butler viii). A

parallel can therefore be drawn between Mapplethorpe's sexual ambiguity and Smith's gender ambiguity. Smith and Mapplethorpe loved one another (Smith 78). At first, they are both uncertain in their respective ambiguities, which later on becomes more fixed. Both have their separate journey; however, it is an intertwined one. Mapplethorpe struggles with his sexual orientation and opposes the side of him that has an interest in men. As Mapplethorpe's parents were both strict Catholics he tried to deny his sexual preferences. The sexual ambiguity in Mapplethorpe included a curiosity to hustle, which he started to do in order not only to financially contribute to the household (Smith 135) but maybe also for the pleasure (Smith 158). It could therefore be suggested that the similarities in Smith's appearance to men with regard to her performance of gender is what made Mapplethorpe continue his relationship with her. In addition, they had a rather ambiguous relationship. Moreover, they both had a similar way of dressing (Smith 201) according to an androgynous fashion, which further highlights their similarities. Even if Mapplethorpe helped financially when he was hustling, Smith was the primary breadwinner (Smith 56), taking on the responsibilities of the "man" in the relationship. She did this in order for Mapplethorpe to focus on his dream as an artist. It could be argued that Smith is taking on more feminine character traits by giving up her dream for Mapplethorpe's. However, since Smith focuses on the financial aspects of their relationship, her male characteristics still dominate, thus, further strengthening the idea of Smith's ambiguity within the existing social orders about gender.

Smith manages to avoid being punished by society even if she does not advocate the gender given to her by society (Salih 58). It could be argued that Smith manages to develop her ambiguity by her lack of recognising the rigid gender roles. In *Just Kids* Smith's ambiguous lifestyle sometimes appeared puzzling even for the bohemian community, which she belonged to. Mapplethorpe would attend parties accompanied by Smith with the reason to "check out the dames" as she considered them "good material" (Smith 199). People thought of her as a "latent homosexual" (Smith 199). It could be suggested that Smith's unwillingness to submit to the social expectations in behaviour made her out to be even more intriguing by her surroundings. Smith's performance could also be seen as a detachment from existing norms.

In conclusion, her mother presented her with the restrictions of their female gender. However, Smith wanted more than her mother's lifestyle. Smith is therefore a forerunner by aspiring to more than marriage and children. Her transition into a more gender ambiguous lifestyle had the biggest impact in her opposition to patriarchy. However, even if Smith uses

gender performance as power, she also uses women for material in her artistry, which could be seen as contradictory.

In my next chapter I want to develop this argument by explaining how Smith's ambiguous lifestyle plays a crucial part in her goal to reach recognition and fame. Without her fluid gender it may be suggested that Smith may never have met and interacted with the people that she describes in *Just Kids*. It could thus be argued that the creation of a name and the performance of gender ambiguity were in her case closely connected, with the former depending on the latter.

## Chapter 3. Creating a Name

The aspiration for art is constant throughout the book. It already begins at the beginning of the book when Smith's family visit the Museum of Art in Philadelphia and she "came face-to-face with art" (Smith 11) for the first time, and at the very end of the book where "only a fool would regret being had by art" (Smith 275). Art is the constant recurring object of desire in *Just Kids*.

This chapter will look into the creation of a celebrity name in connection with gender and art. Scenes from the book highlighting Smith's interaction with famous people will be discussed to suggest how Smith becomes famous. Thorough Smith's choice of highlighting certain events in *Just Kids*, her interaction with famous people plays a big role in the creation of a name for herself. This chapter will also analyse the creation of a name as well as the literary construction of an artist. The emphasis will also be put on how self-creation is enabled by Smith's blurring of the set gender roles in her quest to become an artist. Lastly, the assistance of Mapplethorpe's contribution towards Smith's famous persona will be analysed.

It could be argued that the norm about typical male characteristics is, for example, being strong, focused and determined, which are character traits that Smith possesses in *Just Kids*. By creating a famous image with an androgynous air, Smith was considered more cool and more artsy as if she would have been portrayed as typically female. Smith considers herself to be under the male thumb (Bockris 9), and at the same time performing maleness. It could be claimed that Smith could not have been able to create the name she wished to without the aid of gender fluidity. Furthermore, it may have been harder for Smith to establish her name as a typical struggling female artist than as an androgynous one. Even if the existing social order with regard to gender was set, Smith lived in a bohemian community where being androgynous was considered cool (Smith 140). Smith developed the depth of her character and created an interest in herself among her audience. Her first meeting can highlight this with the poet Allen Ginsberg who offered to buy her a sandwich since she looked like a "very pretty boy" (Smith 123). Without the blurred boundaries of Smith's gender performance she may never have encountered Ginsberg. He later on became one of her teachers (Smith 138) and helped Smith in her journey of becoming an artist.

The encounters with famous people helped Smith to become an artist. According to Sarah Mesle, Smith guides her reader with a firm hand by portraying scenes with famous people, for example, her meeting with Ginsberg buying her a sandwich, (Smith 123) or hanging out with Janis Joplin (Smith 165). In choosing to portray events with people who are

considered famous artists, Smith shows her reader she is a person to be taken seriously. As if by default, Smith is accepted by association. Smith is searching for beauty and magic and immortality. She wanted to join the great poets, Blake, Rimbaud and Burroughs (White, *The Guardian*), thus aiming high, not being content with being one of the many but one of the few. This can be illustrated by what Smith said in an interview in the early 70s in which she states, “I like people who’re bigger than me. I’m not interested in meeting poets or a bunch of writers who I don’t think are bigger than life. I’m a hero worshipper, I’m not a fame fucker, but I am a hero worshipper“ (quoted in Bockris 12–13). This can also be seen in her meeting with Dalí and talking about her stuffed crow bird (Smith 133), or how Ginsberg and Burroughs were her teachers and the Chelsea hotel her university (Smith 138). It could be suggested that these experiences occurred not only because of her personality but also particularly because of Smith’s androgyny. By making herself more fluid she becomes more available to a larger spectrum of people. Smith also refers to people and art of historical importance. Consequently, she succeeds in creating the notion of historical importance and grandeur by presenting her interesting meetings with famous artists. A sense of connection between the privileged group of well-known artists and Smith is established by the given interactions in the book, for example, with Ginsberg and Joplin.

The performance of identity connects to the construction of a name. In an interview organised by the Museum of Modern Art in Louisiana Smith talks about the advice given to her by William Burroughs: build a good name, keep your name clean and that name will eventually be its own currency. Smith stayed true to her name. She worked hard, her mind was set on becoming an artist; even if she sometimes wavered she stayed true to her quest. In her book Smith claims, “committing to great art is its own reward” (Smith 57), and how her own and Mapplethorpe’s work was their mutual children (Smith 274). It could be suggested that the works Smith mentions are their achievements as artists, thus further highlighting the art component. Moreover, at that particular time in her life Smith chooses to follow her dream to create art, and not to start a family. Smith creates an unusual family through her work of art with Mapplethorpe and moves away from the traditional norms and expectations that a woman’s highest achievement is through marriage and children. Furthermore, it could be argued that an artist is always true to his or her calling. Since Smith highlights her connection with art throughout the book, she therefore manages to create an identity as an artist.

The building of a name further connects to the phenomenon of self-branding. It could be argued that Smith created a name for herself by performing an identity that she constructed with the assistance of gender. Smith’s commitment to a sort of self-branding, as well as her



combining it with art creates an intertwined appearance, which helps her in her pursuit of a name. In her book, Smith works with some form of branding; she wants to enhance the image she is giving (Smith 125). When meeting Jefferson Airplane and Jimi Hendrix, she feels a sense of belonging (Smith 105). White criticizes Smith's self-enhancement through her meetings with fellow famous artists, calling it painfully self-sculpted (2010). However, this self-branding or self-sculpting helps Smith in her search for identity in her gender performance. Since she uses performance in her building of her name, it could be argued that Smith may have irritated other artists. However, even though Smith mentions an almost excessive number of recognised artists, she also portrays herself as a genuine artist throughout the book. It could also be suggested that through Smith's self-sculpting, she embraces her stardom.

In *Just Kids* Smith creates an image of herself as a poet. This is done by stressing the importance of her interacting with Bob Dylan asking her if she is a poet (Smith 141) or how "[T] he floor was littered with pages of onionskin filled with half-written songs" (Smith 152). Smith had a love for the acclaimed poet William Blake (198). She further states "I was there for these moments, but so young and preoccupied with my own thoughts that I hardly recognized them as moments" (Smith 159) while attending a Janis Joplin concert backstage. Smith chooses to highlight this moment even though she admits to almost not remembering it taking place. By admitting this it becomes particularly clear how Smith has chosen to emphasise this moment because of Janis Joplin's fame. Smith moves on to explain how she was one of the few who achieved the stardom desired by so many but reached by so few (Smith 209). It could be argued that her aspiring dreams were possible due to her use of gender performance as power. By imitating other artists Smith created a fluid language, both with regard to gender as well as artistry. Smith's success shows that male and female are fluid categories. However, her gender fluidity is also contradictory throughout the book. Sometimes she prefers wearing dresses (Smith 73), and at other times she gets dressed as fast as men supposedly do (Smith 118). Sometimes Smith prefers to be feminine and sometimes not.

Another crucial component of Smith's construction of a name is through the relationship she had with Mapplethorpe. Without Smith's vagueness in her gender, her relationship with Mapplethorpe may not have lasted. Since the couple lived together, as well as worked side-by-side, Mapplethorpe must have influenced Smith's career. Her performance style affected her identity, both as an artist as well as a person. This clearly shows how Smith's awareness in creating herself is brought to life.

Mapplethorpe helped Smith in several ways in gaining success as an artist. He pushed her to continue to draw when she lost inspiration (Smith 128), took the elusive photograph described at the beginning of this essay (Smith 251) and he was the artist in Smith's life (Smith 157). Mapplethorpe's help with Smith's career was further enhanced by Smith's own performed gender. As previously mentioned, without Smith's androgynous lifestyle her relationship with Mapplethorpe would probably not have lasted. In Smith's experimentation with gender, she defined herself within the areas of gender while maintaining her fluid identity. She stated, "He saw in me more than I could see myself" (Smith 192).

In conclusion, it could be stated that Smith is a person who believes the search for art to be as fundamental as the search for an identity. In *Just Kids* Patti Smith claims "I drew no line between life and art" (Smith 186). She lived as an artist through and through, in her choice of moving to New York, of painting, of being in a romantic relationship and later friendship with Robert Mapplethorpe. This book is filled with references to art being life itself, thus creating a magical picture of Smith's lifestyle at the time the book took place. By choosing to write in this way Smith gives the reader a sense of the everlasting artist. Lastly, the creation of a name became reality; Smith even reached fame before Mapplethorpe. He tells Smith "Patti," he drawled, "you got famous before me" (Smith 258).

In my final chapter, I want to explore what literary devices Smith uses and how they are connected to her performance of gender ambiguity.

## Chapter 4. Literary Devices

In this last chapter literary devices used in Patti Smith's *Just Kids* will be explored. The chapter will first highlight the question of whether there are specific styles of writing depending on gender. Thereafter the use of biblical and mythological references will be discussed, with particular attention to the possibility that these may be used as a sanctuary for women in patriarchy, whether they reinforce patriarchy, or whether emphasis is rather placed on an indulgent aspect of them rather than a respectable, traditional form of religion. This will be followed by an analysis of Smith's use of the occult. Subsequently, the chapter will discuss spirituality and innocence, comparing the naïveté of a child towards life with an openness towards gender ambiguity. After that Smith's blurring of boundaries between different cultural forms will be discussed. Finally, this chapter will turn to a consideration of the gender roles in the relationship between Smith and Mapplethorpe and then to a discussion of how *Just Kids* challenges the traditional representation of women in literature.

Smith uses a particular writing technique, which may be seen as very imaginative and self-exploratory. With "the influence of images and representation of femininity in literature" (Barry 127), Smith can expand and play with the concept of gender. Furthermore, feminist critic Cixous values the feminine language highly. She explores the possibilities for feminine writing within a language that is based on masculine values. These limitations could be discernible in Smith's writing, since she writes in a traditional linear narrative fashion. Although Smith starts off with writing in the foreword about Mapplethorpe's death she follows the linear narrative fashion; starting with presenting her childhood (Smith 3), her first encounter with Mapplethorpe (Smith 25), and ending the book with saying goodbye to him (Smith 288). Cixous further claims that women write according to what they believe their own style to be and thus give their text a voice, but end up enhancing the masculine instead since there is no language to express yourself as a woman (Moi 108). In addition, Butler would agree that "woman" is not representable within language (Butler 13).

Another literary device, which I will highlight in this essay, is the use of biblical and mythological references. These references indicate Smith's investment in the mythical world as a meaningful one (Moi 116). As a woman in society, patriarchy defines who you are as a woman and how you should behave as a woman. The mythical world is meaningful in the sense that women may here find refuge from the structures of patriarchy and be themselves.

Moi claims that the uses of symbols may indicate a longing for a fantasy world in which you can be safe regardless of sex (Moi 116). Moi further states that the connection with the imagery of the mother protects the writing woman. Moi talks about Cixous's continuous return to biblical references. Since Smith highlights the performance of gender ambiguity throughout the book, biblical references are important in that they function as a shelter for women from the strict rules of society concerning the expectations of gender. In order to do this, Smith uses the presence of Catholic symbolism such as the leather lamb (Smith 206) and a picture of the Virgin Mother (Smith 131) in *Just Kids*. Smith can thus create a sanctuary with her biblical references. In contrast to Cixous ideas of the biblical as a haven for women, it might also be worth noticing that the biblical and mythological worlds are also part of patriarchy. Within Christianity there is one God, a Father figure who is the essence of a patriarchal structure. Seen from this perspective Smith's use of biblical references might not signify a break with or a refuge from patriarchy as Cixous suggests, but rather the result of living within a patriarchal society. On the other hand, instead of showing respect for religion Smith highlights the Dionysian and indulgent aspects of it (Smith 188), creating an image of opposing social norms and not caring about conventions. Thus, there is no unambiguous interpretation of her use of biblical references, the meaning of which is rather dependant on context and perspective. A parallel could be drawn to the interpretation of her performance of gender, which, depending on context and perspective, can be interpreted as either more feminine or more masculine.

Another literary device Smith uses in *Just Kids* with regards to religion is the occult. Smith states how art led Mapplethorpe "to the devil, and sex kept him with the devil" (Smith 63). The occult comes from the Latin word "occultus" which means hidden and rare ("Occult"). The occult may literally suggest that it is something that is not clear. Her valuing of the occult could also be reflected in her enjoyment of androgynous – and perhaps confusing – appearance. Her gender is in a way hidden and secretive, thus highlighting the ambiguous. For example, the Poet Ginsberg did not know the gender of Smith when offering to buy her a sandwich (Smith 123). Even though the given example does not connect to the occult in an exact meaning it highlight the hidden aspect of Smith's gender. Moreover, Smith's use of the occult as a literary device could also be a way of emphasising her unwillingness to succumb to ruling norms, since the occult is not considered normal and respectable in society. On the other hand, the use of the occult may also be a strategy for an up-and-coming artist's to create a name, as discussed in chapter 3.

In addition, it may also seem that the author wishes to paint a picture of spirituality. Smith enfold the portrayal of her youth in a shimmering veil, which gives the reader the sense of something special taking place, which draws you in as a reader. Moreover, the book also discusses issues of coming of age, of searching for something bigger than yourself; “I have to find out who I am” (Smith 74); “[W] here does it all lead? What will become of us? [. . .] It led to each other. We became ourselves” (Smith 79). It could therefore be that Smith uses spirituality as literary device in order to show her and Mapplethorpe’s relationship and identities are transformed over time. Another aspect of Smith’s writing is the lack of irony in *Just Kids*, which highlights the sense of naïveté and coming-of-age. She wants to give her readers a feeling of a youthful search for meaning and mysticism. Moreover, by writing with a lack of irony the idea of idealistic innocence is created, a modern-day alternative childhood fairy-tale, taking place between Smith and Mapplethorpe. A couple walking by Washington Square in New York made the comment, “I think they’re artists” [...] “They’re just kids” (Smith 47), shows the focus Smith wishes to point to the innocence of the story, as well as the constant presence of “the art”. Smith’s language of naïveté and the lack of irony could be linked to an open-minded and non-judgemental approach that children often have in unknown situations. When faced with gender ambiguous people, children may for instance be more acceptable and curious than adults. This openness amongst youngsters may suggest that Smith’s examples of naïveté are connected to gender ambiguity.

When Smith first started to perform, both in her gender ambiguity as well as in her artistry, she blurred a various lines between things commonly considered disparate. For example, she blurred the lines between popular music and poetry (Noland 587). Noland comments “the myth of the poet as antihero played a large role in the construction of Smith’s public identity” (589). Smith drew “attention to poetic textuality as a medium capable of subverting a whole set of distinctions between the high-lyric tradition and popular music, academic criticism and countercultural appropriation, music and social change” (Noland 589). Smith had a significant interest in poetry, and the great poets inspired her: Rimbaud (Smith 45) and Blake (Smith 253). She also uses high-culture references in her book and packages them in a countercultural way for her audience. This is essential to the rebellious lifestyle she lived (Noland 591). An example of her non-conformance, Smith chose not to marry the young man who made her pregnant. She states, “I was raised at a time when sex and marriage were absolutely synonymous” (Smith 17). She gave up her baby for adoption and moved to New York to explore her desire for an alternative lifestyle. Given this, Smith challenged the boundaries both between distinct cultural expressions, as well as the boundaries of the

socially acceptable.

When it comes to metaphors I would like to place specific focus on Smith and Mapplethorpe's discussion of not having any children together but instead thinking that "our work was our children" (Smith 274), i.e. art was their shared children. Mapplethorpe is throughout the book the driving force when it comes to art, as Smith expresses more of an uncertain attitude regarding art; however, at the end of the book their respective relationship to art is reversed. She is now the more self-assertive one when it comes to their artistry. Smith now takes on the role of the traditionally more masculine role as the leader in their relationship, even though they are not any longer intimate. She is portrayed as the stronger one.

It could be suggested that literature does not often portray women following other aspirations and dreams apart from motherhood and marriage. Smith's journey challenges this picture. Her journey towards artistry is seldom easy. Food is often scarce: having stale doughnuts and burnt coffee (Smith 111). At one time Smith and Mapplethorpe stayed at the Allerton hotel, where their living quarters "reeked of piss and exterminator fluid" (Smith 86). By using the words "reeked" instead of "smell" Smith creates a vivid picture of a more crude sense of unsanitary conditions. Given this, it could be suggested that Smith is adapting to a more masculine lifestyle, since women who only long for marriage would not expose themselves to such living conditions. Additionally, by emphasising the living conditions that Smith has to succumb to in order to follow her dreams, a subversion of the representation of gender occurs.

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay I discuss the three chapters *Gender Performance*, *Creating a Name* and *Literary Devices* with focus on Smith's performance of gender ambiguity in *Just Kids*.

I have argued that Patti Smith, in her semi-autobiography *Just Kids*, blurs the boundaries with regard to gender. This can be seen by looking particularly at how she uses gender ambiguity in different aspects of her life. Furthermore, this essay examines how this plays a significant part in her becoming an artist.

Patti Smith's gender ambiguity is highlighted in the photograph Mapplethorpe took of Smith (Smith 251). By posing in male clothing it was an expression of outrage at the norms of society. Representation by women in literature has been rather old-fashioned (Parker 139), both with regard to the expectations on women in literature as well as in life. Smith struggles to break free from these barriers in *Just Kids*. Smith aspires to a life as an artist together with Mapplethorpe. It is therefore argued that Smith uses strategies, such as experimenting with her androgynous side, in order to help her become a successful artist. In addition, it is clear that Smith created fluidity with regard to her gender. Smith creates what is her own interpretation of both the masculine and the feminine through her own fluid performance of these concepts.

Since Smith is considered a feminist icon I have used feminist criticism to analyse her work. Butler claims gender is performed (Salih 57), just as Smith performs her gender. Even if Smith's gender is already decided by society, she struggles to avoid the limitations of her gender. It is argued therefore, that by blurring the lines of gender, Smith was successful in performance, artistry and her relationship with Mapplethorpe.

It could be suggested, that the performance of gender ambiguity of Smith's celebrity in terms of her imitation of other artists, could be seen as an indication of a fluid gender identity.

Furthermore, by using different literary devices such as biblical and mythological references, which may suggest both a sanctuary for women, as well as a reinforcement of patriarchy. Given this, depending on context and perspective, the performance of gender ambiguity can be interpreted as either more feminine or more masculine.

This essay shows that Smith expands the representation of gender in her performance of androgynous behaviour. Therefore, this essay has reached the conclusion that without Smith's gender performance she would not have achieved her aspirations as an artist.

This essay has focused on the performance of gender ambiguity and how the blurring of boundaries has helped Smith in her dreams of becoming an artist. For deeper understanding and further research gender ambiguity might be explored further, focusing foremost on the relationship between Robert Mapplethorpe and Patti Smith.



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