

“Such exquisiteness and such horror”:  
Postfeminism, Sexuality, and the Female Body in the Novels of Darcey Steinke

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## Introduction

Attention paid to female sexuality and female bodies in our culture has recently been increasing exponentially, most notably in a postfeminist context. “Postfeminism,” a term that is both widely used and widely misunderstood, essentially refers to “after feminism,” or what happens once the goals of feminism have been achieved. According to Esther Sonnet, “The ‘post’...signifies a ‘going beyond’ or moving on from feminism, with the implicit assumption that its critiques and demands have been accommodated and absorbed far enough to permit ‘return’ to pre-feminist pleasures now transformed...by a feminist consciousness” (Sonnet, 170). Sonnet’s description states that where the goal of feminism was to establish equality between women and men, one goal of postfeminism is to assert the right and ability to revert to traditionally feminine views and activities under the assumption that a feminist framework has already been established, and has therefore transformed the meaning of those activities and views.

According to Rosalind Gill, there are a few stable features that constitute postfeminist discourse, including the notion that femininity is a bodily property, the shift from objectification to subjectification, the emphasis upon self surveillance, a focus upon individualism, and resurgence in the idea of natural sexual difference, among others (Gill, 5-6). The postfeminist woman is constantly vigilant of her appearance and presentation; carefully monitoring her body to make sure it stays in shape, since in a postfeminist context, the very idea of being female rests in maintaining the standard of an aesthetically pleasing figure, among other factors. The idea of the natural sexual difference marks a return to pre-feminist thinking, in which emphasis is placed on an inherent difference between women and men, physically and otherwise. The suggestion here is that while the postfeminist woman is very much in control of her body and sexuality, she is also controlled by her body and sexuality to some degree. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon note that today’s

postfeminist woman uses sexuality as a reaction to the constrictive views of her second-wave feminist predecessors:

Many women coming of age in a post-second wave environment have reacted against the image of 'the women's libber' that they perceive as inadequate and restrictive, and they have adopted postfeminism – in particular those postfeminist strands...that embrace femininity/sexuality as an expression of female agency and self-determination. (Genz & Brabon, 12)

As the passage illustrates, while second-wave feminists worked to empower themselves by downplaying their femininity and sexuality, postfeminist women empower themselves by placing emphasis on them, using them as a means of self-definition and self-assertion.

Subsequently, a huge weight is placed on the female body in postfeminist culture:

One of the most striking aspects of postfeminist...culture is its obsessional preoccupation with the body. In a shift from earlier representational practices it appears that femininity is defined as a bodily property...Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood being regarded as central to femininity...in today's media it is possession of a 'sexy body' that is presented as women's key (if not sole) source of identity. (Gill, 6)

As Gill suggests, then, the postfeminist woman uses her body and sexuality for self-expression; however, her use of her body and sexuality also affects her development as a person and exerts influence over her relationships. In the same vein, postfeminism also heralds a shift from sex object to sexualized object, as Gill explains:

Where once sexualized representations of women...presented them as passive, mute objects of an assumed male gaze, today...Women are not straightforwardly objectified but are presented as active, desiring sexual subjects who choose to

present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner because it suits their liberated interests to do so. (Gill, 9)

Similarly, postfeminist writers today widely focus on sexuality and the female body, both of which their characters use as vehicles for self-discovery and self-expression. In this paper, I will employ the ideas of postfeminism to examine the depiction of female sexuality and the female body in the novels of Darcey Steinke. Specifically, I will explore two areas that affect and are affected by them in her work: the Self, or how development, self-perception, and body image affect and are affected by sexuality, and the Other, or the interaction between a woman's sexuality and another person, as well as the influence of that interaction on self-perception and development.

Steinke, an American novelist, was born in Virginia on April 25<sup>th</sup> 1962. The daughter of a clinically depressed former beauty queen and a Lutheran minister, most of her upbringing focused on religion; as such, the majority of her written work contains layers of spiritual undertones. Steinke is the author of four novels, *Up Through the Water* (1989), *Suicide Blonde* (1992), *Jesus Saves* (1997), and *Milk* (2005), all of which will be discussed in this paper, and has also contributed to a number of pop culture publications, such as *Spin Magazine*. She has also published a memoir entitled *Easter Everywhere* (2008), in which she details her religion-focused childhood, as well as her spiritual experiences in her later life. In her work, Steinke often blends sexuality with spirituality, rendering the sexual experience as cathartic, almost transcendent. She creates strong female characters that crave not only to be acknowledged and understood, but authentic and fulfilled as human beings. Though she does not expressly classify herself as a postfeminist writer, Steinke does support some postfeminist ideas about female sexuality, such as the idea of women using their bodies and sexuality for self-definition, self-expression, and

personal empowerment. However, her literature also challenges those same ideas: though her women are technically empowered by using their bodies and sexualities to achieve their ends, most of them do not end up fulfilled; that is, though most of them achieve what they aim for, the achievements come at a steep price and the women seem to fall short of satisfaction. In her writing, Steinke takes a postfeminist, hyper-realistic approach to the portrayal of female sexuality and the female body. Steinke's women use their bodies to feel alive, in whatever way they deem necessary – whether it be for love, for sex, for revenge, or for money, their bodies are their means to an end. They use sex to cope with loneliness and they have an acute sense of their physical and emotional decay. Steinke's women are raw and honest characters – they are not delicate, and they do not pretend to be. They are neither Madonnas nor whores, but a strikingly human blend of both. Their personalities are manifested in the paces they put their bodies through. In keeping with postfeminist ideals, their sexuality is their self-expression; however, as Steinke shows, self-expression does not guarantee fulfillment. In this sense, Steinke critiques the postfeminist approach of using one's body to achieve one's goals, as not all goals can be achieved through the use of one's body.

### **Part I: Sexuality and The Self**

In Steinke's novels, sexuality plays a large role in women's perceptions of themselves; that is, the ways in which their sexualities are expressed affect how the women view themselves, both physically and mentally. One striking manifestation of this is in the rift between youth and age, or between girl and woman, most saliently played out in *Up Through the Water*. The two main female characters, Emily, a divorced mother in her 30s, and Lila, a teenager dating Emily's son, Eddie, represent women in two different stages of life. Though they are both interested in

sex, Emily and Lila fundamentally differ in sexual experience. While Emily frequently engages in casual sex, Lila is a nervous novice. Emily uses the freedom found in frequent sexual encounters to preserve her youth; at the same time, Lila fears the idea of pregnancy, a possible consequence of sexual expression:

There was...something desperate and horrible about a red mucuousy thing attaching itself to your innards. Lila hadn't said this exactly, but she had mentioned the weirdness of a creature stealing your food and lounging on your organs as if they were throw pillows. (*Water*, 134)

The parasitic imagery here implies that when a woman is pregnant, her body literally becomes host to an invasive alien form that cleaves to her insides, draining her energy. In this sense, a woman's body is no longer her own possession; rather, it is transformed into a vessel for a new life form to grow in. Though pregnancy is a possible side effect of heterosexual sex, the implication is that it is the *opposite* of sexuality; that is, it is associated with a destruction of the self, a physical decay that is the direct side effect of giving new life. After Lila and Eddie have sex, Lila worries that she might be pregnant and is apprehensive about what might happen to her body should her test come back positive:

She put her hands to her waist and stuck out her chest to admire her lean body. She ballooned her stomach, then contorted it all out and arched her back. "That's what you'll look like," she said... "Like a fat old cow." Lila made her face look serious. She saluted her image. 'Good luck,' she said, then ran out of the house. (*Water*, 121)

Lila's fear of her "lean body" being replaced with that of a "fat old cow" suggests a fear of immobility and decay. Her adolescence signifies her potential for freedom; her body, still

physically fresh and young, is an extension of her youthful mindset. Preserving youth, an extension of the postfeminist idea of physical self-monitoring, is a common theme in Steinke's novels. Since they are intensely aware of their impending or steadily advancing physical deterioration, almost all of her female characters are concerned with it at one point or another. For instance, when Lila observes Emily on the beach, she is nervous and apprehensive about coming to terms with the future of her own body: "She was watching Emily move, the way you could nearly see her joints work. The skin on her chest and shoulders was patch-brown and slightly wrinkled. *I'll look like that*, Lila kept thinking" (*Water*, 141). Although at this point she is not outwardly worried about the physical deterioration that comes with bearing children, she realizes that time plays the largest role – she will age regardless, and eventually lose her beauty.

In contrast, as Emily observes Lila, she finds it difficult to remember the freedom of youth: "Emily watched Lila walk on the beach. She couldn't remember herself ever looking like that, every part so new and nested perfectly together. She did remember when her hips spread, a little with Eddie, but more later" (*Water*, 137). This passage suggests that the body is a testament to action or inaction. Lila's youthful, fresh body speaks to her relative inexperience; conversely, Emily's mature body is a blueprint of her sexual experiences. The spreading of the hips is a natural side effect of pregnancy; however, "but more later" implies that a woman does not have to be pregnant to show physical change – experiences themselves, as well as age, become visible on the body, which becomes a testament to lived moments. In addition to the common theme of experiences showing on the body in Steinke's novels, there also appears to be a sense that women cannot get away from any of their experiences, even those that do not leave outwardly visible marks:

Things women did stayed with them. Like having abortions, like losing their virginity, like Eddie's mother: no one on the island forgot the things she did. Even Lila would sometimes look at her on the beach in her bikini and imagine the men she'd been with standing around her. (*Water*, 120-1)

Though abortions and losing one's virginity do not leave visible marks on the body, the implication here is that everything women do leaves a mark of some kind, physically visible or otherwise. This idea is in keeping with the postfeminist idea of the inherent difference between the sexes, as well as the old double standard of sexually experienced women versus men. While women must inevitably bear the weight of their experiences, as Steinke mentions, men seem to be able to walk away unscathed.

Similarly, in keeping with the parasitic imagery of the mother-and-fetus relationship, there seems to be a paradoxical relationship between living one's own life and giving life to another. As aforementioned, pregnancy is frequently presented as a form of decay in Steinke's novels, a life-altering change that physically deteriorates the body and seems to vastly hinder sexual expression, though it is caused by sexual expression. In *Milk*, for example, sexuality and motherhood appear to be mutually exclusive. At the beginning of the novel, Mary, a young new mother, is at home on Christmas with her husband, who has stopped feeling attraction to her ever since her pregnancy, and her baby, which is never named, again emphasizing the idea of an inhuman "thing" rather than a developing person. Mary's husband frequently smokes marijuana, and the implication early on is that she is the only one who really takes care of the baby. Once Mary puts the baby to bed, she showers and goes to put on the sexy teddy her husband bought her for Christmas. However, as she squeezes into the little outfit, she ends up struggling with her deteriorated body. Though she would like to entice her husband by embodying a different, sexier

persona, her changed body makes it impossible – “Her stomach muscles were still loose and she had ten more pounds to lose...She was chilly in the outfit and in the raw overhead light her skin looked powdery and loose as a latex hospital glove” (*Milk*, 6). Here, her own used body is in stark contrast with her idea of how it should look, which is a result of the internalization of societal values. As Rosalind Gill states, femininity is defined as a “bodily property” in the postfeminist context (6); that is, possession of a fit and attractive body is integral to femininity, whereas motherhood and childbearing are not. Gill goes on to say that “The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling” (Gill, 6). Thus, should one fail to recover the standards of an attractive figure after pregnancy, one runs the risk of becoming somehow *less* of a woman. In this way, motherhood poses a threat to femininity in the postfeminist world – because having children stretches a woman’s body and often adds weight to it, one risks losing one’s femininity should the body not be restored to its previous state.

Though Mary’s husband is fully aware that she desires him, he does not respond to her sexually. Since the reader has access only to Mary’s point of view, the implication is that she considers him to be put off by her post-pregnancy body. When she attempts to get intimate with him, she suddenly becomes conscious of the vulgarity of her ruined body stuffed into the little teddy:

He probably didn’t want to – he never did anymore – but she had to try and so leaned her head down and kissed his lips. A modicum of pressure was returned, but when she moved her tongue into his mouth, his teeth were a smooth hard line and he turned his head. She looked down at the black patch of her pubic hair beyond the lavender nylon of her panties. (*Milk*, 7)

Here, the physical reality of her body is at odds with her desire to be viewed as a sex object – though she is making all the right moves, so to speak, her perception of her physical appearance stops any further attempts at intimacy with her husband. The image of the “black patch of her pubic hair” escaping her panties suggests not only a failure to maintain her body, but also a potential loss of self. Though Mary has likely been too busy taking care of the baby to groom her pubic hair properly or lose those last ten pounds, the emphasis is only placed on her failure to do so. The figure of the mother presented here, then, is that of a woman who loses the ability to express herself sexually as a result of a pregnancy, which was itself an effect of sexual expression. There is also a certain vulgarity in the image of pubic hair – it appears to be wild, almost animalistic. A similar image is presented in *Suicide Blonde*, when the main character, Jesse, observes her body in the bathtub: “My breasts swung down, reminding me of the utilitarian tits of mammals. And through the scope of my cleavage I could see the hair between my thighs. The tiny black curls seemed scrawny, even obscene” (*Blonde*, 8). Here, “utilitarian tits” evokes the image of breasts meant for the sole purpose of feeding young, whereas the description of the pubic hair as “obscene” suggests a certain shame associated with letting the body spin out of control, a primal looseness associated with letting the breasts swing and the hair grow.

Steinke further explores the decomposing female body in *Suicide Blonde* through the juxtaposition of Jesse and Madam Pig. Jesse, the heroine, is in her late 20s and is acutely aware of her steadily aging body. She tries to preserve her image as best she can to keep the interest of her generally detached boyfriend Bell, through dying her hair blonde and, as Mary does, donning a sexy teddy to pique his interest. At the beginning of the novel, as Jesse is busy bleaching her hair while waiting for Bell to return home, she considers the image of her body:

My body was like a part of the room, a chair or a vase. I remembered the first time I saw my mother naked. She stood before a mirror, pulled at her hips, pressing her stomach, checking as I was now for signs of decay. The female body, I thought, has the capacity for such exquisiteness and such horror. (*Blonde*, 5)

Jesse views her body as an object, “a part of the room” like anything else. Like the chair or vase, the body is supposed to remain stable and unchanging, perfectly monitored at all times. Jesse remembers observing her mother’s body as a young girl as she checks her own for “signs of decay” – her mother, who always wore a “bright shade of red lipstick” in a desperate attempt to keep her father’s interest, ultimately failed at doing so and he ended up leaving the family, a memory Jesse frequently revisits. Here, like Mary, Jesse is at odds with her body – her desire to be an “object,” to be on display and sexually desired by Bell, is hindered by her perception of her physical reality.

While Jesse is on the edge of physical decay, Madam Pig, an aging, overweight alcoholic for whom Jesse keeps house a few times a week, is crossing the threshold from decay to death. Extravagant and decadent in every way, she is an enigmatic figure who, much like Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, is in possession of a large amount of mysterious money which she doesn’t mind spending. Everything about Madam Pig is huge: her dresses, her body, her personality. Very thin herself, Jesse contemplates the differences between their figures as she sorts out Madam Pig’s laundry:

Pig’s underwear, all in pastel colors and the size of office trash bags, reminded me of the style I wore in grade school. Why did fat embarrass me? Fat people couldn’t hide their weakness or sorrow like most could. I used to wake at night and pull a pillow to my stomach, worrying about getting fat. (*Blonde*, 40)

Here, “fat” is indicative of emotional pain, which, as Jesse notes, shows itself on the body. Jesse, like Lila in *Up Through the Water*, used to mime being fat as a young girl and worry about what that might do to her self-image. Steinke shows that, in a postfeminist context, the figure is integral to the display of personality; or, that people’s bodies are physical pictures of their mental states. Rosalind Gill elaborates on this point, stating that while the physical exterior reflects the interior life, it can also act as a mask for a troubled interior:

The body is indicative of mental state. Importantly the female body in post feminist media culture is constructed as a window to the individual's interior life: for example, when Bridget Jones smokes 40 cigarettes a day or consumes 'excessive' calories we are invited to read this in psychological terms as indicative of her emotional breakdown. A sleek, toned, controlled figure is today normatively essential for portraying success. Yet there is also – contradictorily – an acknowledgement that the body is a canvas that affords an image which may have little to do with how one feels inside. (Gill, 6-7)

Both Jesse and Madam Pig, in fact, are in pain – while Jesse is experiencing the loneliness of a slowly unraveling relationship, Madam Pig laments the fact that she has become an obese recluse with no real relationships outside her friendship with Jesse. The main difference between the two women, however, is that one shows her pain outwardly, while the other directs it inward. Though their levels of pain may be comparable, only Madam Pig’s is outwardly visible.

Perception of the body within a postfeminist context also depends heavily on the male perspective. Though the male perspective may not always be outwardly present, it is internalized by women instead – Gill notes that the “modernization of femininity” involves a “shift from an external, male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze” (Gill, 10). This means that

although the postfeminist woman is technically freed from the judgment of the overt male perspective, she instead internalizes that judgment. When Jesse helps Madam Pig into her bath, she realizes that she experiences a disconnection between Pig's physical appearance and her own perception of it:

Her body underwater was gelatinous and rosy as a Rubens. If you didn't know what a body was supposed to look like, Madam Pig's body would be like a sloppy dream. Her breasts were buoyant and her ancient nipples bobbed at the surface. No matter how many times I saw her naked I was always surprised and a little horrified. But the philosophy of the tub, a woman and her bath, was different than the bedroom – there should be no taint of male criteria. (*Blonde*, 41)

Here, Jesse observes that if one does not know “what a body was supposed to look like,” Pig's body is wonderful in its abundance. This indicates the existence of preconceived notions of a female body, its actions and proportions. Jesse notes that each time she sees Pig naked, she is “a little horrified,” due to the existence of her own preconceived notions of what a body should be. However, she also realizes that there is a marked difference between a woman alone with herself and a woman on display for a man – when there is “no taint of male criteria,” the female body seems to be blossoming and developing rather than merely going through the stages of decay.

At the end of Chapter 2, however, once Jesse helps her out of her bath and puts her to bed, Madam Pig shows her a series of photographs taken when she was younger with the warning, ““You don't want to end up like me”” (*Blonde*, 44). This statement, in a way, implies that it is better to die young and beautiful than live to an old age at the expense of one's beauty. Jesse disagrees with Madam Pig's suggestion, but also cannot help thinking that she is somehow right: “I wanted to yell at Pig that there was no more poignancy in the aging of a beautiful

woman than a plain one...And besides, it didn't seem possible I could end up like Pig" (*Blonde*, 44). Jesse understands that both beautiful and plain bodies experience the same brand of decomposition. However, in keeping with postfeminist ideals of preserving one's youth and beauty, she resists seeing herself ending up like Madam Pig further down the road – the picture Pig presents to her somehow seems far removed from Jesse, as if she is certain that she will never let herself go that far; lose herself to that vast degree.

As described to this point, a woman's perception of her body plays a large role in sexuality and sexual self-expression in Steinke's novels. Sexuality, however, also has a large impact on self-development; that is to say, the sexualities of Steinke's women directly affect their personality development and definitions of self. Simply put, the women use sex to define who they are and who they want to be and, more importantly, what they want to be. In *Suicide Blonde*, Jesse notices how image is everything – "I thought about how malleable women are, with clothes they can look like virgins, or whores or housewives" (*Blonde*, 89). Like a chameleon, a woman can, with the right projection, literally become a different person from one moment to the next. With the correct accoutrements, she can make herself appear a virgin or a whore and so affect how others view her, regardless of whether she actually is one or the other. In the postfeminist context, women are empowered by their ability to create and project images; they are the masters of the illusion, so to speak, and can control situations by controlling appearances.

Similarly, women use sexuality as an aid in personality development and self-enhancement. In *Up Through the Water*, Emily uses her sexuality to develop herself; specifically, her sexuality is a statement of her freedom. Like the ocean in which she swims daily

and feels free, she keeps herself unfettered through her boundless sexual desire; she loses herself through letting her body go. In Chapter 10, Birdflower, Emily's hippie boyfriend du jour, takes her to a bar where girls are mud-wrestling. She observes the bodies lost in the mud, the way the brown muck covers and changes them; the way they could be anyone at all – "*You can't tell them apart, she was thinking. They could be anyone.* She could see only through a mass of men's legs and around their hips, a jungle of body parts" (*Water*, 94). The covering of mud reduces the women to only their bodies, to freeing forms of physical expression. Watching them, Emily muses on the tempting transformative properties of the mud; how under it, she would like to become just a body, indistinguishable from the others:

Emily braced her hands on the table; she felt as if she were being sucked into the mud. She saw herself in the pit: brown mud hiding the everyday her, letting her become someone only her body knew. With their strong arms the women pulled at her waist, kneeled over her, and pinned her arms. When she tired and looked into the face above, she found that it was her own muddied features. She jerked. The woman pressed up to her lips and kissed her. The room was only dim red as her other self disappeared into the mud. (*Water*, 94)

At this point, Emily feels herself a part of the scene, and starts to move instinctively towards the ring, until Birdflower stops her with a "'Where the hell do you think you're going?'" (*Water*, 95). Though she wants to lose herself in anonymity, to become a tangle of moving limbs, different sides of her emerge rather than get lost – though one side of herself is disappearing into the mud, her other sides are pinning her down and kissing her. The idea that she is simultaneously holding herself down while sinking into the mud implies a sense of agency, a sense of ownership over one's body; the power to hold it and let it go as one chooses.

Like creating the self through losing the self, Steinke's women find self-development in self-destruction. In *Suicide Blonde*, Jesse breaks herself apart to make herself whole; she pushes her sexual boundaries to explore what she's afraid of in an attempt to "kill off the soft parts" of herself and thus make herself more resilient. When Madam Pig tells Jesse that she has a daughter, Madison, whom she would like Jesse to find, Jesse sets off to the nightclub where she allegedly works in search of her. On her way there, she impulsively stops at a strip club where she pays for a private peep show. When the screen in her booth comes up, she observes the women behind it with a mixture of curiosity and lust:

They never talked or looked at the leering men in the windows as they swung their butts and opened their pelvises. I felt a tightening between my legs. Did I want that woman that rubbed her nipples and grabbed her crotch or was my desire elicited by the massive lust emanating from the other booths? I left quickly wondering if being wanted so intensely could make a woman feel strong. (*Blonde*, 50)

Here, Jesse wonders whether strength is the product of being wanted; whether empowerment is the product of constantly being out of someone's reach. She admires the women's ability to dissociate from their bodies and use them for their own profit. Jesse also feels an intense desire that she cannot ignore, though she is not certain whether it is caused by the women themselves, or by the knowledge that they are also wanted by a number of other viewers. Jesse unmistakably gets sexually aroused watching the woman, after which she leaves "wondering if being wanted so intensely could make a woman feel strong," suggesting that Jesse is unsure whether she wants the woman or wants to be her; whether she wants to experience her or simply wants the ability to do what she does. Though Jesse does have more lesbian sexual fantasies later on in the novel, it

turns out that it is the confidence of these types of women, rather than the women themselves, that she craves. She becomes increasingly comfortable with bold sexual overtures, her own and those of others, attempting to pull away from her “bland suburban past” and create a new sort of creature, one that is unaffected by Bell and his fickle moods.

Once Jesse finally finds Madison, Madison invites her to stay the night at her apartment while she finishes up at work. When Jesse goes there and lies down to sleep, a stranger slips into bed with her instead of Madison. She is startled and horrified when the stranger begins to have sex with her, but does not pull away until the last minute. Instead, she lets him use her, simultaneously using her body to cross her mental boundaries between promiscuity and commitment to Bell. Later, she considers the reasons behind her action:

I was suspicious that I had let the stranger fuck me because I was intentionally trying to devastate myself, encourage confusion and misery, so that I would have no impulse to pose or lie. I felt I knew what was best for me, but that somehow, because of a certain well-practiced falseness, a sort of stupid conventional programming, I couldn't do it. But was I right to undermine my life in an effort to right it? (*Blonde*, 58)

This passage illustrates Jesse's attempt to create herself anew through her sexuality; to get to the very bottom, the ugliest part of herself and face it head-on. She experiences a sort of catharsis, a paradoxical deep cleansing through the act of making herself unclean. She wants to eradicate the “impulse to pose or lie,” to strip herself of her self-imposed pretenses about who she should be and be honest with the woman she is and the one she wants to become.

Similarly, in *Milk*, Mary's sexual experience is linked to religious catharsis; that is, her sexual expression makes her feel closer to God. With her disinterested husband out of the house,

she cannot ignore her burning need for sexual attention and starts to touch herself, subsequently assuring herself of God's presence:

The sensation of the baby's lips on her nipple lingered...so she dragged her pointer finger over her tongue and slid her hand beneath the waistband of her underpants. She felt her clit begin to rotate. Only God could infuse something so rudimentary with life. She was made of cosmic refuse – stardust, smoky vapor – and so occasionally if she concentrated, she could tease down the life force for her own selfish use. (*Milk*, 22-3)

Mary's experience of masturbation is, like Jesse's experience with the stranger, cathartic in a way. Jesse, emotionally broken by Bell's inattention, allows herself to have sex with a stranger to deconstruct herself and the "good girl" she thought she was, while Mary, rejected by a flesh-and-blood man, seeks refuge in the sexualized idea of God. This passage illustrates the innate completeness of the body; specifically, Mary reads the perfection of the female anatomy as the result of divine intervention. As she touches herself, Mary frees herself by reducing her body to "stardust" and "smoky vapor," during which she assures herself that "only God could infuse something so rudimentary with life." Through this, she uses the divine influence as inspiration to transcend her body through physically using her body; that is, she sees divinity in her physical self and expresses her sexuality in a spiritual way.

In Steinke's novels, women's self-perception and body image are influenced by and largely influence sexuality. On the one hand, negative self-perceptions lessen sexual expression, yet they also spur attempts to increase it, as seen in *Milk* and *Suicide Blonde*. On the other hand, sexuality also influences self-perception – women use their sexuality to feel younger or older

than they are, to objectify themselves, and to get in touch with their spirituality. As such, sexuality appears to be integral to not only self-expression, but self-discovery.

## **Part II: Sexuality and The Other**

As previously discussed, women's self-development and self-perception in Darcey Steinke's novels are directly affected by their sexual expression as well as images of the body. However, their sexual self-expression also affects and is affected by the Other; or, a personality external to themselves that has an impact on their sexuality, be it a partner, sex object, or perceived observer. Specifically, Steinke's women exhibit characteristics of 'do-me feminism,' which Genz and Brabon point out to be "A highly sexualized version of power feminism...that sees sexual freedom as the key to female independence and emancipation" (91). Through the shared sexual experience with the Other, Steinke's women assert themselves and define their personalities.

One salient image in Steinke's work is that of the unavailable lover, or the disinterested male partner who needs to be cajoled into affection. There is also a pervasive theme of putting on a costume, of changing one's exterior, to transform the self into a desirable sex object. The women sexualize themselves, putting their bodies in compromising positions in order to win back their lovers to almost no avail. In *Suicide Blonde*, Jesse's boyfriend Bell is pining for Kevin, his former lover, who has just announced that he is getting married to a woman. Bell's homosexual past haunts Jesse throughout the novel, as she constantly tries different methods with which to win Bell's attention, from changing her appearance to objectifying herself. According to Genz and Brabon, "Raunch culture and do-me feminism blend the sometimes conflicting ideologies of women's liberation and the sexual revolution by heralding sexually

provocative appearance and behaviour...as acts of female empowerment” (91). Here, empowerment not only stands for asserting oneself, but also for using one’s body to achieve one’s ends. At the beginning of *Suicide Blonde*, we see Jesse changing her physical appearance to entice Bell – she dyes her hair blonde and, just like Mary does in *Milk*, puts on a sexy teddy in a desperate bid for Bell’s attention:

His melancholy made me think he was getting sick of living with me. And this, in turn, made me want to please him, to show him I was not one of his worries. So when he went walking I put on my black teddy and arranged myself on the futon. Looking at my breasts covered in lace flowers, I thought I seemed overly anxious, like a Danish or a little excitable dog. I looked desperate...using the one thing that would keep him near. (*Blonde*, 4)

Here, Jesse attempts to use her body as a means to make a connection. However, when Bell returns home, he is clearly uninterested in her: “I’m bored,” he says, after kissing her for a few moments (*Blonde*, 4). Though she tries to make a sexual object of herself for Bell’s benefit, to make herself less of a person and more of a thing in order to show him she is “not one of his worries,” he does not take the bait. As such, Jesse feels that her “feminine power,” or her ability to use her body to control a situation, is diminishing when Bell is nonplussed by her sexual overture:

The teddy incident was terrifying because it exacerbated the sensation that my feminine power was diminishing, trickling like drops of milk from a leaky pitcher...The way I looked reminded me of some clichéd floundering female, so I took off my robe and lay across the couch. (*Blonde*, 5)

She is worried by the possibility of looking like a cliché, so she continues to rearrange outfit and positioning in order to avoid looking desperate. In this case, Jesse's outward displays of her sexuality repel Bell – the more forward she is, the more unavailable he becomes. Though Jesse is trying to use her body and sexuality to forge a connection with him, the opposite effect occurs – because her body fails to get the desired response from Bell, she thinks herself somehow inadequate. This reflects the postfeminist idea that the “sexy body,” or the aesthetically pleasing, outward projection of female sexuality, is a tool as well as an expression of individuality. Because Jesse fails to win Bell over with her body, she considers herself somehow defective as a woman, and consequently feels demoralized.

In response to unavailable partners, and also as a means of feeling and experiencing, the heroines of *Milk*, *Suicide Blonde*, and *Up Through the Water* often have sex with strangers, both intentionally and unintentionally. In *Milk*, when Mary finally leaves her husband, she describes her subsequent sexual encounters with another man as that of “a fragment of the world seeking another fragment” (*Milk*, 46). She does not seek to establish a relationship so much as a physical connection. Her loneliness is palpable, and she therefore views her body more like a puzzle piece in search of another that fits it, rather than viewing herself as a person in need of a partner. With strangers, there are no judgments or expectations – the women experience freedom in their anonymity, allowing themselves to be their most real and honest selves in a variety of ways. In *Up Through the Water*, Emily's rampant sexuality is her trademark, though she sometimes questions her motives herself – “Coming together with strangers, dark empty bodies moving on a bed, why did she do it? She asked herself this afterward, in the mornings, sometimes even during, eyes over a muscular shoulder” (*Water*, 11). This passage illustrates the idea of using the body to feel alive. Though she feels guilty after having anonymous sex at times, she

unconsciously feels it necessary to stave off ennui, suggesting that she does not have enough energy within herself to feel alive, and must therefore strain it energy from random sexual encounters. As described in the passage, Emily does not always know why she couples with strangers, but she always feels like she has to, which means that there does not have to be a reason so much as a feeling. While she means to be faithful to John Berry, the man she sees regularly, any notion of that seems to vanish whenever another opportunity presents itself:

For months bodies had blurred in her mind. Lips, puffs of underarm hair, the swell and curve of a fleshy calf. John Berry had become familiar, like a brother it seemed; he held her in the nights. But the thought of him fell away each time she strayed. He became a blind spot with the whoosh of her clothes landing on the floor. With strangers there were ten minutes of unornamented reality. A kind of mainline black rush of being alive in the most obvious, necessary way. Her whole life was lived for these: cheek to the hollow space between back and shoulder, arm resting in arm, legs wrinkled together. (*Water*, 59)

Simply put, Emily uses her sexuality to feel alive in the most literal of ways. Having sex with strangers keeps her blood flowing, eradicates the idea of predictability and inertia. There is no pretense, no question of how the man feels about her or how she feels about the man. Everything is stripped down to the bare bones of the act itself, of the feeling of it all. Emily realizes that she does this in order to constantly be able to experience and feel something new, to be able to express herself in the most basic, human, uncomplicated way. Here, there is a certain fear of the familiar, an apprehension that were she to have sex with John Berry, the rush of excitement would be absent. In addition to the physical excitement, she also seeks emotional refuge in strangers. It is precisely the idea of the stranger that is so appealing, the idea that she can be

honest with someone without having to explain anything, or really to speak at all; that she can choose to reveal as much or as little about herself as she wants. Subsequently, when things start getting too familiar with a stranger, she loses interest:

Every few years there'd be a guy who thought he could really figure her out. 'You seem like a person who'd been hurt badly,' he'd say. And she told him, no, she'd just come to the conclusion that absolute happiness wasn't possible. The husband, baby, house formula didn't figure and she'd decided that if she couldn't be happy she'd at least do what she wanted. Emily would further explain that absolute despair wasn't possible. They'd always relent for a while before telling her she seemed distant. (*Water*, 105-6)

Emily avoids having to establish herself as something and someone to someone else; she likes the fluidity and infinite possibility of the idea of the stranger, using her sexual expression to feel whole and alive. While Mary and Jesse desire their partners most, Emily desires all the men that are not her partners. In her infidelity, she asserts her autonomy.

Likewise, in *Suicide Blonde*, Jesse feels freedom in pouring her sexual need into a nonjudgmental figure: a statue of Jesus on the cross. Her empty sexual encounters with Bell and others lead her to the desire to let go completely, to express herself in a place where there is no taint of human male criteria. Here, her sexual experience becomes a cathartic, almost religious experience:

I knew that it was comforting to have someone around who knew all the bad things about you, the horrible things in your past...like a lover or a close friend, and I knew this was the purpose and place of Jesus...I stared into Jesus's raised eyes, then pushed my hips into his pelvis so it rubbed on the carved girth of cloth.

A tightness came. I kissed his forehead, his upturned eyes, his open mouth. My tongue wiggled between his parted lips, I pushed against him and the cross rocked. (*Blonde*, 77)

She makes love to the statue, a nonhuman, nonjudgmental partner, and unloads emotionally onto it. Though the act itself seems initially shocking or even blasphemous, it is not meant to be seen as a profane mockery of religion, arguably. Rather, Jesse seeks to establish an emotional connection with the one being she feels understands and knows all about her without having to say anything at all; simply, she wants to have sex with the one man who will not judge her. Much like Emily's strangers, the figure of Jesus takes Jesse's sexual expression with no questions or expectations. Unlike the unavailable lover, for whom sexual expression is tailored to fit, here, the Other figure allows for honest sexual self-expression.

Regardless of whom it is experienced with, for most of the women in Steinke's novels, the sexual act itself is life-affirming – through it, the women transcend their everyday selves to express their deeper, more primal sides. In *Jesus Saves*, Ginger, the 17 year-old heroine, describes the natural necessity of sex with her boyfriend: “She put her hand on Ted's crotch, felt his rubbery cock tighten. That's what she was after, the dumb thrust of life, like the films on PBS that showed a seed sprouting, peeking through the dirt and lifting itself up” (*Jesus Saves*, 3). That “dumb thrust of life” is the most basic, primal form of self-expression; the image of the sprouting seed “lifting itself up” paints sex as an instance of cleansing, of rebirth. During this, Ginger feels most alive and most like herself, in keeping with the image of the postfeminist woman, who is a sexual creature and not afraid to express that.

In addition to providing a way for women to express themselves through their sexuality, the sexual act also plays a major role in how women see themselves and others. Specifically, in

*Suicide Blonde*, Jesse muses on the importance of the fantasy; that is to say, the reality of a given sexual situation is irrelevant, so long as there is a fantasy to make it worthwhile. This again revisits the idea of making use of illusion to control a situation. Much like Jesse transforms herself into a sex object to entice Bell, she creates her own sexual vision which is separate from the act itself:

I thought about my former lovers. I remembered how a man was inside me and I was nowhere, and in an effort to arouse myself I would think FUCK ME, and just the visualization of those words, I wouldn't even have to say them, would send me over. That was the first time my sex life became two things – the mechanical sexual reality and the ongoing fantasy. (*Blonde*, 101)

When Jesse thinks of making love to these nameless men, she remembers how initially disconnected she was from them; how, though physically connected, they were fundamentally separate from her. However, when she begins to see herself as a demanding submissive asking to be dominated, she begins to enjoy the sex and lose herself in it. This serves to show that it is not the act itself, but the perception of it, that is important: “Like everything in bed, you pretend; pretend you are inarticulate, more animal, more powerful or weaker than you are” (*Blonde*, 26). Jesse not only uses her body, but her mind, to construct the sexual situation so as to make it pleasing for her, which reflects the ideas of do-me feminism, a crucial part of which is the idea of women actively creating and controlling the nature of their sexual experiences.

In contrast with Steinke's other women, for whom the sexual act is life-affirming, Madison shows that the sexual act can be the exact opposite. While Jesse seeks to find herself through sex by losing herself in it, Madison only seeks to lose herself. Madison, a lap dancer and prostitute with a troubled past, is Jesse's “teacher” in the novel – when Jesse leaves Bell for a

time to decide what to do, she becomes Madison's understudy to some degree. She admires Madison's hardness, her ability to dissociate, but is also afraid of her in a way. Though, like Jesse, Madison wants to lose herself in the sexual act, she does not seek to recreate herself – her goal, rather, is to draw a blank; to cross out the person she is completely. Her aim is to “kill off the soft parts,” like Jesse tries to do, though in an extremist way: “Now I just try to forget myself by forcing my body into extreme situations,” Madison says. “You may think I'm a fool, but it's the way I saved myself” (*Blonde*, 135). Here, the body is a vehicle for change, for detachment and emotional blankness. The more Madison uses her body with her johns, the more of an unfeeling object it becomes. In a similarly detached manner, when Madison talks about the penises of her male partners, she describes them like pieces of machinery:

“Well, many powerful things seem based on them: rockets, skyscrapers, guns.

But, in a way, they're all pitiful. When I have one in my mouth I think of it like a dumb worm. It doesn't know the difference between a cunt, a hand or a mouth.

And while the men think I'm either servile or kind, depending on their feelings for me, I know that it's a service. When I give head, I'm like a mechanic. The cock is a car. The car's owner, just like the owner of the cock, knows nothing about me or how I really feel about him.” (*Blonde*, 95)

In this way, Madison dehumanizes the men she services and further detaches herself from the act of service. She sees herself as a “mechanic,” an expert doing a job, and the “cock is a car,” brainless and unfeeling, which she controls. In Madison's line of work, dissociation from the act is almost integral to successful completion of it. However, Madison wants to do more than dissociate – she wants to forcibly rip herself out of her own consciousness. In a postfeminist context, both Jesse and Madison are technically using their bodies to empower themselves, in the

sense that it is completely their choice to do what they do. The main difference, however, is degree: while Jesse seeks to recreate herself by forcing her body into extreme situations, Madison seeks only to destroy herself. While Jesse seeks self-definition, Madison seeks self-annihilation. In Chapter 8, Jesse watches as Madison anally penetrates a male customer with her fist, noting that “She wanted to escape her own consciousness in another’s flesh...Madison preferred the narrative, the ‘then I do this’ to the reality. She considered the sexual narrative holy and could thus disentangle herself from the act” (*Blonde*, 140). As Madison fists the man with increasing intensity, she disentangles from herself increasingly faster:

Madison moved her arm in and out, she seemed fascinated by the way the rubber glove disappeared inside the man’s asshole. She punched up hard, the man raised his head, gasped. Her arm in to the elbow, she flexed her bicep and grabbed for his bowels...Madison’s lips opened into a snarl and I could see the muscles of her neck strain and flex. He splayed his arms and legs wildly like a bug with a pin through its belly. “Madison,” I yelled instinctually. She looked at me, but her eyes were dead. She had gone away from me, away from the man, the room and Carmen’s, away from San Francisco too. Madison was on the lot behind the grocery store watching the flames...“Madison,” I yelled again, but she was concentrating now, reaching her fingers up toward his heart. *She wants his heart, I thought, because she doesn’t have one of her own.* (*Blonde*, 142)

Here, Madison feeds off the man’s energy, draining him to sustain her increasingly empty self. The deeper her arm goes into him, the more she detaches from herself and her environment; she literally forces herself into the body of another human being in order to escape her own. There is no honesty or vulnerability in her detachment; rather, she exhibits a sadistic cruelty and desire to

overpower another. Though Jesse is also seeking detachment to some degree, when she sleeps with one of her first johns, she realizes how fundamentally afraid she is of complete detachment, of Madison's state. While she at first used to want nothing more than to lose herself in a lover, here, she wants nothing more than to hold on to who she is:

He pulled hard and told me he could kill me if he wanted, that nobody would care. I felt his loose tummy resting on my lower back like a rat. His pace accelerated and he made a sound like clearing his throat as he came. He tried to lean over me, to grab my tits, but I jumped away and went into the bathroom, wet a washcloth and wiped my pussy... With my hands I pulled my hair straight back and looked into my eyes. *I am still myself.* (*Blonde*, 124)

Jesse senses the inherent dehumanization in the sexual act but goes through with it anyway, in spite of herself, to see how far she can go, to see how many times she needs to do this before she feels nothing at all. When she jumps away from the man and goes into the bathroom to clean herself up, there is a sense of self-preservation, a sense of wanting to retain herself. Unlike Madison, who wants to exterminate herself entirely through the sexual act, Jesse's act of self-preservation shows that while she does want to destroy herself in order to reconstruct herself, she is not yet comfortable with letting go completely.

In contrast, though Ginger also seeks to lose herself in Ted when she has sex with him in *Jesus Saves*, she does it for different reasons. Unlike Jesse, Madison, and Emily, Ginger cleaves to Ted, needing him as much as he needs her; blending into him seamlessly rather than working her own agenda against him:

Sex was psychic. His cock inside her. Her cock inside him. Not boy. Not girl. Just frenzied protons in an electrified atom. She squinted her eyes so the light from the

tape player looked like a quasar, like the big bang, like God making life out of nothing. The spirit of God hovered over the face of the water and she saw the smashed pomegranate, the figs swollen and split, honey dripping over everything. All the flesh inside her swelled with blood, tightened until it was hard to tell that they were separate. *Come into me*, she thought, and he did. (*Jesus Saves*, 37)

Here, the imagery presents a loss of self inside another human being, in which catharsis is achieved through sexual expression and closeness, and potentially, love. Ginger feels herself a part of Ted and is also feeding on his energy, though not in a parasitic, malicious way – their relationship is symbiotic; the gender differentiation vanishes and they are melted into one creature. She feels the most complete when Ted is inside her and she is inside him; she thus defines herself by blurring the lines that separate her from him. However, the image of the “smashed pomegranate,” with its figs “swollen and split,” suggests a certain unholiness in the sexual act, a sense of darkness, which Ginger, having been raised in a highly religious family, has been taught to see since childhood. In a similar vein, there is a clear link between sex and death in Steinke’s work; or rather, between orgasm and death. When Steinke’s women experience orgasm, they experience catharsis – they are almost phoenix-like in that parts of them die in order to be born again. In *Milk*, when Mary masturbates, her orgasm takes on the imagery of a car crash:

She tensed her pelvis and a swarm of butterflies careened up her spine. The vibrations entered her like radio waves, her bones felt molten and she was a twig pitched out into the universe. And that WAS IT: Her sex twitched and she felt the lobes of her brain open like a flower and she was inside of a wave, made from torn-up flower petals. Broken petals filling her mouth as she swung open the car

door and staggered away from the crash. Flames jumping from the engine, her head banged up and spacey, her pelvis tipped and aching as if she actually had gotten fucked. Blood beat inside her ear and as the impact dissipated, her sadness swelled. Nothing had changed. (*Milk*, 24-5)

The image of molten bones, of being a “twig pitched out into the universe,” discarded, is what sends her over the edge. As she climaxes, she has a vision of a car crash, broken flower petals filling her mouth and a car engine emitting flames. The “broken petals,” which are an allusion to decaying, discarded femininity, consume her as she moves away from the flames. In this sense, her sexual climax and comedown take on the form of trauma and recovery. Similarly, in *Jesus Saves*, Ginger uses the image of the humiliation, filth, and debasement of the sexual act itself to push herself to climax:

Sometimes it took a vision of herself, butt up, back arched, breasts hanging.

Sometimes it was a rhythmic bar of his tongue strokes that pushed her out of this material world into the pure purgatory of sensation, that moment when the dirty words – clit, cock, and pussy – filled up with blood and became the language of desire. This reversal cast the fetid garbage, Ted’s own palpable body odor, cigarette smoke, and sour milk into a metallic lick, the tangy taste of death’s cock.

(*Jesus Saves*, 124)

Not only does she visualize herself in a vulnerable position, she visualizes the “dirty words” for genitalia to excite herself, much like Jesse in *Suicide Blonde*, who reaches climax by visualizing the words “FUCK ME” in her mind. Here, Steinke creates a link between sexual expression and debasement, utilizing sadomasochistic themes of ownership, humiliation, and sexual violence. In her dissertation, Catherine Rock offers the following observation:

During the course of *Jesus Saves* we see Ginger in two intimate sex scenes. In the first, she ‘helped herself along...by thinking of the girl she’d seen in a porno magazine with a shaved pussy and then of certain parts of the Manson book.’ In the second sexual episode, Ginger’s boyfriend Ted performs oral sex on her as she watches ‘how he moved his head like a dog drinks.’ The reference in the first scene to Charles Manson, probably the most notorious sexual sadist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, underscores how the sadistic ideal of cruelty and unlimited enjoyment has been internalized by Ginger, and has influenced her sexuality. In the first sex scene, Ginger enjoys the thought of her own degradation; in the second, when she thinks of her boyfriend as a dog, she pleasures in the thought of his humiliation as well. Although different in terms of the power relations envisioned, both of Ginger’s fantasies reveal an inner violence, they relate sex to suffering and debasement. (Rock, 113)

As Rock mentions, Ginger associates sex with death and violence; her interaction with Ted, her Other, is associated with humiliation and debasement. However, as previously mentioned, the sexual act is also a means of cleansing for Ginger, as she feels most alive and most in tune with herself when she is having sex. Her sexualization of violence, thus, is not negative – she experiences fulfillment by disentangling herself from reality and making use of sadomasochistic scenes, by stripping herself down to her bare bones during sex and making herself vulnerable. One crucial point, however, is that her sexual expression, however tinged with violent themes, is voluntary. Conversely, Sandy Patrick, the other main female character in the novel, is a preteen girl abducted from her summer camp by an unnamed pedophile, the “lonely troll in fairy tales.” While the other female characters in Steinke’s novels are agents in their own self-creation and

self-destruction, Sandy is at the mercy of a violent, sadistic male figure. She represents, as Rock writes, the “brutalized feminine”:

As Steinke shows throughout the abduction story, the kidnapper establishes his own self at the cost of the other, sadistically at the girl’s ultimate expense...Not only is she bound, she is also drugged, beaten, gagged, silenced, and also infantilized by being made to wear diapers as a sign of her regression as a human being. She is degraded verbally, called ‘a stupid bitch,’ ‘a little monkey girl,’ and ‘Little Miss Nobody.’ (Rock, 115-16)

Ginger and Sandy are both subject to suffering and debasement in very different ways – Ginger sexualizes violence, while Sandy is the victim of sexual violence. Though the main theme is the same here, the difference is choice: Ginger’s experience is willful, while Sandy’s is forced. The term “brutalized feminine,” then, can arguably take on different meanings: on the one hand, it can reflect empowerment through degradation, or the sexualization of violence; on the other, it represents harm and personal trauma caused by sexual violence.

During the forced sexual acts, Sandy learns to dissociate. However, unlike the other women in Steinke’s novels, her dissociation is a form of escape, of rising up and out of her body to free herself from the cruelty being done to her. In Chapter 4, during one of the first times that the troll rapes her, she leaves her body behind and almost literally ascends to a field of flowers:

She heard the tiny teeth of his zipper disconnecting one after another and then a sound like when skin hits water in a belly flop, and her elbows skidded forward, burned on the polyester mattress. Her forehead bumped the wall hard. Lilacs were beautiful, so beautiful, and she went right down into the center of that tiny flower,

to the stamen, to the pistil, to where the yellow pollen brushed off on your eyelashes and the smell made you drunk with love. (*Jesus Saves*, 56)

Here, unlike the other women in Steinke's novels, Sandy uses dissociation as a form of self-protection, rising up out of herself to separate herself from the horror of the reality, to stop acknowledging it completely, to disentangle herself from the agenda of the Other. Like Jesse in *Suicide Blonde*, who rushes to preserve a small part of herself after performing a degrading sex act, Sandy dissociates from the situation she is in to close off and preserve a part of herself as well. Through the use of her female characters, Steinke shows that sexual contact with another can be used as a form of self-expression, and therefore self-empowerment, but only if it is done willfully. In a postfeminist context, therefore, sexual expression is freeing only if it is self-directed. In uncontrollable sexual situations, Steinke's women dissociate from themselves to preserve themselves, in contrast with the situations they control, from which they dissociate to free themselves.

### **Conclusion**

In her literature, Darcey Steinke presents images of strong women who use their bodies and sexualities to express themselves in various ways. She describes the postfeminist ideals of the aesthetically "proper" female body, as well as how maintaining it is crucial to maintaining one's femininity in a postfeminist world. However, Steinke also suggests that the loss of femininity that results from failing to maintain the standard of beauty is contingent upon the male perspective – though women do internalize that perspective and police themselves, so to speak, they are less focused on their physical decay and more focused, instead, on their development when the male perspective is removed. For instance, in *Milk*, Mary is intensely

focused on the aesthetics of her post-pregnancy body in the presence of her husband; however, the emphasis is removed from it once she leaves him. Similarly, Jesse is busy checking her own body for signs of decay at the beginning of *Suicide Blonde*, meticulously arranging herself around the apartment to be a pleasing object for Bell, until she takes a break from him to pursue her own self re-creation, during which she begins to truly *use* her body, rather than merely monitor and inspect it.

Though she does not expressly classify herself as a postfeminist writer, Steinke supports the postfeminist idea of women using their bodies and sexuality for self-expression, self-definition, and personal gain; however, she also shows that this usage does not always bring happiness; in fact, it can be maladaptive just as much as it can be empowering. In her work, Steinke portrays the body as a vehicle for change, and sexuality as an instrument through which changes are brought about. Steinke's women use their bodies and sexuality as means of escape, to escape situations and even to escape themselves, as well as to remedy loneliness, to seek revenge, and to get down to the root of themselves, among other aims. In *Up Through the Water*, Emily uses her body and sexuality to free her mind and assert her autonomy; to keep her life fluid and her experiences varied, to hold onto her youth. However, though technically free, she never becomes completely fulfilled as a person; instead, she is forever searching, constantly on the lookout for the next best thing. In *Suicide Blonde*, Jesse uses her sexuality to reinvent herself completely, to strip herself of pretenses and transform the "floundering female" into a harder woman with a thicker skin. However, this comes at a price: she leaves Bell for a short period of time to recreate herself, so to speak, and successfully loses her pretenses, but with them she also loses her optimism, innocence, and ironically, Bell – she comes home at the end of the novel to find he had committed suicide in the tub. Meanwhile, in *Jesus Saves* and *Milk*, Ginger and Mary

uses their sexuality to center themselves, since they see sex as cleansing and cathartic, albeit vulgar and oftentimes violent; at the same time, Sandy Patrick dissociates from her horrid physical reality by pushing her mind out through the sex act she is forced into.

The female body and female sexuality, therefore, are means of bringing about change in Darcey Steinke's body of work. Whether it be for personal change, such as using one's body to free one's mind, as Emily does in *Up Through the Water*, or change that affects others, such as using it as a murder weapon, as Madison does in *Suicide Blonde*, Steinke's women use their bodies and sexuality to vocalize their thoughts and attain their desires in various ways. The body itself, therefore, not only acts, but speaks. The things it says, however, are not always properly heard.

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