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## Identity and performative (DE-) constructions in Gore Vidal's Myra Breckinridge: Bodies as discursive sites

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### Abstract

This article explores the concept of performativity and identity construction in Gore Vidal's Myra Breckinridge. The novel foregrounds the body as a central site of discourse where gender norms are both enforced and subverted. Using Judith Butler's theory of performativity as a critical framework, this article argues that Myra Breckinridge challenges the fixed nature of identity by showcasing how bodies are inscribed with societal expectations and how those inscriptions can be reconfigured through performance. The paper examines Myra's bodily transformations, the performative aspects of her identity, and the broader cultural implications of her actions.

**Keywords:** Performativity, identity construction, gender norms, bodily transformations, cultural implications

### Introduction

In Myra Breckinridge (1968), Gore Vidal presents a provocative narrative that questions traditional gender roles and the stable notion of identity. The protagonist, Myra, is an unspecified person who undergoes gender reassignment surgery, positioning the body as a site where issues of identity, gender, and power intersect. This article examines Vidal's novel through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which emphasizes that identity is not a pre-existing essence but is constructed through repeated acts. Butler's theory, first articulated in Gender Trouble (1990) <sup>[1]</sup>, provides a critical framework for understanding how Myra's body becomes a site for both the performance and disruption of normative gender identities. Vidal uses Myra's body as a battle/back-ground for cultural discourses on gender and identity, illustrating the performative nature of gender as a socially constructed phenomenon. Myra's transformation and the performative acts associated with their identity challenge the binary understanding of gender and reveal the fluidity and instability of identity construction.

### Theoretical Framework: Performativity and Identity Construction

Judith Butler's theory of performativity is crucial to understanding how gender identity is constructed in Myra Breckinridge. Butler posits that gender is not an innate quality but is performed through a series of repetitive acts that conform to societal norms. These acts create the illusion of a stable gender identity, but in reality, identity is always in flux, constantly being reconstituted through performance. According to Butler, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 25). This idea is crucial to understanding Gore Vidal's portrayal of Myra, whose gender identity is deliberately crafted through her radical bodily transformation. Myra does not simply "possess" a gender identity; rather, she actively performs it, emphasizing the constructed nature of gender. Her surgical transformation from male to female is not a final step toward achieving a stable identity but rather a point of departure for further performances. Through Myra, Vidal explores the fluidity of identity and the ways in which it is shaped, challenged, and redefined by bodily and cultural performances.

Butler's theory complicates traditional understandings of gender by detaching identity from biological determinism and framing it as the outcome of discursive practices.

Myra's shifting gender identity, then, can be seen as an ongoing performance that resists categorization within binary gender norms. Vidal uses Myra's body as a site of negotiation, where identity is both constructed and contested. In line with Butler's theory, Myra's identity is never fixed but remains in a constant state of becoming, shaped by the performances she enacts and the societal expectations she navigates. This performative aspect of Myra's identity allows Vidal to critique the rigid gender norms of his time, presenting a character whose existence destabilizes conventional notions of gender and selfhood.

### **Myra Breckinridge: A Case Study in Performativity**

In Myra Breckinridge, the body is not merely a biological entity but a text upon which cultural and social discourses are inscribed. Myra's decision to undergo gender reassignment surgery is a radical act of identity construction, one that defies the traditional binary understanding of gender. This bodily transformation can be seen as a performative act that disrupts the normative expectations of gender, aligning with Butler's theory that gender is a performance that constructs the identity it purports to express. Through this act, Myra transgresses the boundaries set by the biological determinism of gender, revealing the performative nature of gender roles. The surgery is not merely a medical procedure but a symbolic act of rewriting her identity, one that forces society to confront its rigid and often oppressive definitions of male and female. In this sense, Vidal critiques the societal pressure to conform to binary gender norms, using Myra's body as a canvas on which these cultural tensions play out.

Myra's body serves as a site where multiple discourses intersect: gender, sexuality, power, and identity. Vidal's portrayal of Myra's transformation highlights the performative nature of gender, suggesting that identity is not something one is born with but something that is continuously enacted and renegotiated. As Butler argues, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance" (Butler 45). Myra's bodily transformation and her subsequent actions demonstrate how gender is performed and how those performances can challenge societal norms. In Myra Breckinridge, Vidal also interrogates the ways in which power dynamics are embedded in the process of gender identity construction. Myra's body is a site of both resistance and compliance, as she navigates the societal expectations placed upon her while simultaneously challenging them. Her transformation can be seen as a form of resistance to the rigid gender norms imposed by society, but it also places her within a new set of constraints as she grapples with the expectations associated with her new gender identity. This duality reflects Butler's idea that while performative acts can subvert dominant norms, they are also constrained by the very systems of power they seek to disrupt. Moreover, Myra's bodily transformation can be interpreted as an act of self-empowerment, reclaiming agency over her identity in a society that often dictates who individuals should be based on their physical appearance. Through her transformation, Myra challenges the traditional power structures that define gender and sexuality, asserting her right to define herself on her own terms. However, Vidal complicates this narrative by showing that Myra's empowerment is not absolute; she remains entangled in the

societal discourses that shape and limit her identity, suggesting that true liberation may be more elusive than it initially appears.

### **The Body as a Site of Discourse**

In Myra Breckinridge, the body functions as a site of discourse where societal norms and individual agency intersect. The novel challenges the notion that the body is a stable, natural entity by portraying it as a site of cultural inscription. Myra's body, in particular, becomes a battleground for competing discourses on gender and identity. Vidal uses Myra's transformation to question the stability of identity and to suggest that the body is a fluid, malleable entity that can be shaped and reshaped through performative acts.

The body, as depicted in Myra Breckinridge, is a site where power is exercised and resisted. Foucault's concept of biopower is useful here, as it highlights how bodies are regulated by societal norms and how those norms are enforced through institutions such as medicine and law. Myra's transformation can be seen as a form of resistance to these regulatory norms, a performative act that challenges the binary understanding of gender and disrupts the power structures that uphold it. As Foucault argues, "The body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault 25). In this context, Myra's transformation can be interpreted as a form of resistance to the regulatory norms imposed by biopower. Her decision to undergo surgery and reshape her body is a performative act that disrupts the binary understanding of gender—an understanding that is central to the operation of biopower. By refusing to conform to the rigid, binary categories of male and female, Myra challenges the power structures that enforce these norms. Her transformation, then, is not merely a personal choice but a political act that subverts the dominant discourse on gender and identity.

Foucault's idea that power operates directly on the body is vividly illustrated in Myra's narrative. Her body becomes the site where power relations are contested, and her transformation symbolizes a rejection of the normative constraints placed on her. Vidal's portrayal of Myra underscores the ways in which bodies can be sites of resistance, challenging the disciplinary forces that seek to regulate and normalize them. Myra's body, marked by her surgery and her subsequent performances of femininity, defies the regulatory mechanisms that seek to categorize and control it. Moreover, Myra's transformation highlights the limits of institutional power. While medical and legal institutions attempt to impose a fixed identity upon her, Myra subverts this process by continually reconstituting her identity through performance. Her body, therefore, becomes a site of ongoing resistance, constantly challenging the power structures that seek to define and contain it. In this way, Vidal uses Myra's body to explore the fluidity of identity and the potential for bodies to resist and destabilize the power dynamics that govern them.

### **The Cultural Implications of Myra's Transformation**

Vidal's portrayal of Myra's transformation raises important questions about the cultural construction of gender and the ways in which bodies are regulated by societal norms. Myra's decision to undergo gender reassignment surgery

can be seen as a form of resistance to the binary understanding of gender, a performative act that challenges the cultural norms that seek to define and regulate bodies.

Myra's transformation also highlights the ways in which gender is culturally constructed through discourse. As Butler argues, "The performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself" (Butler 15). Myra's transformation is a performative act that challenges the idea of a fixed, stable identity, suggesting that gender is a cultural construct that can be reshaped through performance.

The novel also raises questions about the ways in which bodies are regulated by societal norms. Myra's transformation can be seen as a form of resistance to these norms, a performative act that challenges the binary understanding of gender and disrupts the power structures that uphold it. Her transformation is not just a personal act of self-expression but a political act that challenges the dominant discourse on gender and identity.

### Conclusion

Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge* offers a provocative exploration of gender identity and performativity, using the body as a site of discourse where societal norms are both enforced and subverted. By examining Myra's transformation through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, we can see how Vidal challenges the binary understanding of gender and reveals the fluidity and instability of identity construction. Myra's body serves as a site where cultural and social discourses intersect, illustrating the performative nature of identity and the potential for resistance to normative gender expectations. In conclusion, *Myra Breckinridge* offers a compelling examination of the ways in which bodies are inscribed with societal norms and how those inscriptions can be challenged, reconfigured, and resisted through performative acts. Vidal's novel destabilizes traditional notions of identity by portraying it not as an innate or fixed essence, but as something that is continuously constructed and reconstructed through performance. This aligns with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which suggests that identity is not something we possess, but something we do—a series of repetitive acts that conform to societal expectations while simultaneously shaping our sense of self. By depicting Myra's transformation and her refusal to conform to binary gender norms, Vidal underscores the fluidity of identity and the body's capacity for change.

The body in *Myra Breckinridge* is not a passive entity to be inscribed with meaning; rather, it is an active site of negotiation where power relations are contested and where identity is continually reconstituted. Myra's body becomes a canvas upon which she performs her gender, challenging the regulatory norms that seek to constrain her. Moreover, the novel highlights the political implications of these performative acts. Myra's transformation is not merely an act of self-expression, but a subversive gesture that disrupts the dominant discourse on gender and identity. In this sense, Vidal's work echoes Michel Foucault's ideas about the relationship between power and the body, illustrating how bodies are regulated by societal norms, yet also how those norms can be resisted and redefined through acts of performance. Ultimately, *Myra Breckinridge* invites readers to question the stability of identity and to reconsider the

body as a site of ongoing transformation rather than a fixed entity. Vidal challenges the reader to see identity not as something given, but as something performed, fluid, and open to change. Through Myra's journey, the novel reveals the potential for bodies to resist, reconfigure, and transform the inscriptions of power, offering a vision of identity that is dynamic, performative, and perpetually in flux.

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