

BURY YOUR BLONDES: THE LIFE, DEATH, AND ONGOING OBSESSION WITH
MARILYN MONROE AND ANNA NICOLE SMITH

By

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DEDICATION

For Norma Jeane and Vickie Lynn

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores why the media and the public were – and continue to be – so obsessed with Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith. Qualitative textual analysis is utilized to analyze coverage of both women within the *New York Times* both during their lives and after their deaths. The dialogue used to discuss Monroe and Smith within these articles is examined to show the *Times* articles perpetuating common themes such as a preoccupation with their personal lives, a dismissal of their professional abilities, and an obsession with reporting every detail of their health struggles. In perpetuating these themes, the *Times* helped construct and firmly establish the “tragic blonde” archetype that is so strongly associated with Monroe and Smith.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Marilyn Monroe	2
Anna Nicole Smith	7
CHAPTER 2: FRAMEWORK	11
CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW	15
What is ‘Celebrity’?	15
Women in Hegemonic Media	16
The Death of a Star	19
Cultural Commodification of the Dead	22
Tragic Traditional Narratives	24
CHAPTER 4: METHOD	25
Research Questions	27

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS	28
Monroe	
Not a Real Actress	29
Always a Health Crisis	30
Deviant Women	32
Smith	
Not a Real Actress	36
Always a Health Crisis	37
Deviant Women	38
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION	41
The <i>Times</i> Depiction of Monroe and Smith in Life	41
The <i>Times</i> Depiction of Monroe and Smith in Death	43
The Construction and Perpetuation of Monroe and Smith’s Narratives	44
The Marilyn Mystic	45
Limitations and Future Research	47
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION	49
REFERENCES	51

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Norma Jeane Mortenson and Vickie Lynn Hogan.

Upon first glance these names may seem unremarkable. Perhaps they sound like the names of a person you know or perhaps they sound as unfamiliar as the name of any person walking down the street. However, these are the names of two of the most famous blonde bombshells in history. Marilyn Monroe was born Norma Jeane Mortenson, and Vickie Lynn Hogan is better known as Anna Nicole Smith. Both of these women have carved out a place in pop culture history, and both have had a lasting impact. However, the similarities do not end there. Monroe and Smith both came from dysfunctional backgrounds, had meteoric rises to fame, tumultuous relationships, and ultimately tragically early deaths. The media and the public intensely scrutinized these women during their lives, but in death, both have been given a different narrative.

Like many queer men, I have had an interest in female celebrities from a young age. For so much of my life I relied on women like Monroe and Smith - I clung to them. Queer men are often stereotyped as having obsessions with female celebrities – specifically those that endured traumatic lives. Starlets such as Monroe and Smith are seen as gay icons - for their suffering just as much as their talent. This is largely due to the lack of queer representation in media. I was often not able to identify with the male characters in media – I did not possess the same feelings, aspirations, and thoughts. It was female celebrities who I felt represented me. However, it is not their suffering that makes

them so influential to me – it is their strength. Women like Monroe and Smith were deeply misunderstood. Despite this, they persevered and rose up from poverty to achieve their aspirations. Those stories of triumphing over adversity against all the odds gave me a sense of hope.

This thesis explores why the media and the public were – and continue to be – so obsessed with Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith. A qualitative textual analysis of the media coverage of each woman both during life and in death is conducted. This is then compared and contrasted to see how the dialogue surrounding female celebrities has and has not changed in the past six decades. This thesis sought to answer how the media depicted Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith during their lifetimes and how those depictions changed in death. Additionally, this thesis identifies ways in which the media helped construct and perpetuate the narratives surrounding Monroe and Smith.

Background

Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn Monroe was born Norma Jeane Mortenson in Los Angeles, California, on June 1, 1926. Monroe spent her early childhood with foster parents Albert and Ida Bolender, and for the most part the years were pleasant. Gladys Baker, Monroe's mother, would visit the young Monroe on weekends (Spoto, 2001). When Monroe was 7, she and her mother moved into a home Baker purchased in Hollywood. In 1934, Baker suffered a mental breakdown, later being diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Baker was committed to Metropolitan State Hospital, leaving Monroe to become a ward of the state (Churchwell, 2004).

During this time, Monroe was moved from home to home. Often described as shy, Monroe also developed a stutter during this time. In 1935, Monroe was placed in the Los Angeles Orphans Home (Churchwell, 2004). In 1937, Monroe was removed from the orphanage and moved in with a friend of her mother's, Grace Goddard, and her husband, Doc. However, the arrangement would not last. Monroe was sexually assaulted by Doc and subsequently removed from the home (Banner, 2012). What would follow is another period of instability, with Monroe being shifted from home to home once more. From 1938 to 1941, Monroe lived with Ana Lower, the aunt of Grace Goddard (Spoto, 2001). While this arrangement was more permanent, it too would not last. In 1941, Monroe moved back in with Goddard's. In 1942, the company that employed Doc Goddard relocated him to West Virginia. Due to California state law, the Goddard's could remove Monroe from the state (Banner, 2012). Faced with the possibility of returning to the orphanage, a 16-year-old Marilyn dropped out of high school and married her 21-year-old neighbor James Dougherty. The couple would remain married until 1946 (Spoto, 2001).

In 1944, while Dougherty was stationed in the Pacific, Monroe took a job working in a factory that made airplane parts. David Conover, a photographer, was sent to the factory Monroe worked at to take pictures of the female workers. Monroe would become close to Conover and would quit her job at the factory in early 1945 to model for Conover and his associates (Churchwell, 2004). This would lead to Monroe signing with Blue Book Modeling Agency in August of 1945 (Banner, 2012). During this time the Marilyn the world would know began to take shape. In a bid to make herself more employable, Monroe lightened her hair to blonde. Monroe officially adopted her stage

name in August of 1946, shortly after signing a contract with 20th Century-Fox Studios (Spoto, 2001).

Monroe's first year at 20th Century-Fox was, by most accounts, unremarkable. She spent a great deal of time studying acting, dancing, and singing. Monroe had a few bit roles during this time but failed to make an impact. In August of 1947, the studio declined to renew her contract (Banner, 2012). Marilyn was not deterred by this and continued to pursue a career in film. In 1948, Monroe was signed by Columbia Pictures, where she would have her first lead role in the musical *Ladies of the Chorus* (1948). The film proved unsuccessful, and Columbia declined to renew Monroe's contract after six months (Banner, 2012). Though her first two studio contracts were unsuccessful, Monroe would continue to get work in films through her relationship with Johnny Hyde, who was vice president of the William Morris talent agency. Monroe's acting parts during this period would include small roles in *All About Eve* (1950) and *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). While these were merely bit parts, this would be the beginning of Monroe's commercial success. In 1950, Monroe would again be signed to 20th Century Fox, this time with a 7-year contract.

However, this time was not without scandal. In 1952, Monroe publicly revealed that she had posed for a nude calendar in 1949. In 1953, the first issue of *Playboy* magazine would use these photographs of Monroe (without her consent or knowledge) as the first centerfold. This would begin a lifelong narrative and cultural construction of Monroe as a "sex symbol." The scandal increased the public's interest in Monroe, leading to her films garnering more success at the box office. Monroe's films during this period

typecasted her, often presenting her as a “dumb, childish blonde, innocently unaware of the havoc her sexiness causes around her” (Churchwell, 2004). The media and public were enthralled with this narrative, and Monroe was named the “it girl” of 1952 by gossip columnist Florabel Muir (Spoto, 2001).

Monroe’s success would continue into 1953, with the release of films like *Niagara*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, and *How to Marry a Millionaire*. These films relied heavily on Monroe’s sex appeal as well as the stereotype of Monroe as a “dumb blonde” (Churchwell, 2004). It was also during this period that there was increased attention given to Monroe’s personal life. Monroe married baseball star Joe DiMaggio in January of 1954. The same month, Monroe was suspended by 20th Century Fox for refusing to star in a musical comedy the studio selected her for (Summers, 1985). Monroe’s whirlwind romance with a famous athlete, as well as her reputation for being difficult for the studio to deal with, served as fodder for the press and public. Monroe eventually settled the dispute with the studio, going on to film what is perhaps her most iconic film – *The Seven Year Itch* (1955).

As with previous films, Monroe was heavily sexualized and typecasted. Undoubtedly, the most memorable scene in the film occurs when Monroe stands over a subway grate, which causes her dress to billow up. 20th Century Fox, wanting to generate publicity for the film before its release, staged the filming of the scene on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan, New York (Spoto, 2001). The stunt was a success, and the film marked another box office smash for Monroe. While The film was a success, the stunt greatly angered DiMaggio (Banner, 2012). Monroe filed for divorce in October of 1954.

The pair had frequent issues, often stemming from DiMaggio's jealousy and abusive behavior (Churchwell, 2004). In 1954, Monroe, along with photographer Milton Green, launched a production company called Marilyn Monroe Productions (MMP) (Spoto, 2001). Monroe's issues with 20th Century Fox had reignited, and she saw this as an opportunity to garner more creative control over projects she was involved in. However, the media and the public largely mocked Monroe for this move, questioning if a "dumb blonde" was capable of running a production company. However, Monroe's move incentivized 20th Century Fox to once again renegotiate her contract, granting her a larger salary and more creative control (Spoto, 2001).

In 1956, Monroe married playwright Arthur Miller. Media coverage of the couple often focused on how different the two were, portraying Miller as an intellectual and Monroe as nothing more than a vapid starlet. 1956, would also mark a downturn in Monroe's health as her dependence on prescription drugs and alcohol worsened. In the following two years, Monroe would experience an ectopic pregnancy and a miscarriage (Spoto, 2001). This would negatively impact Monroe and Miller's marriage, which was already strained. These personal struggles would coincide with career struggles for Monroe, who was reported as being increasingly difficult to handle on film sets. Monroe's film work waned in the last years of her life, with her final completed film being *The Misfits* (1961). Written by Miller, the film was intended to showcase Monroe's capacity for dramatic roles. However, the film faced constant issues, and Monroe was not pleased with her character (Churchwell, 2001). By the time the film premiered in 1961, Monroe and Miller had separated, and the film was panned by critics and audiences alike.

On May 19, 1962, Monroe sang 'Happy Birthday' at a gala for then-president John F. Kennedy. This would be one of her last public appearances before her death. In the early morning hours of August 5, 1962, Monroe's housekeeper, Eunice Murray, was alarmed when she could not get a response from Monroe, who was locked in her bedroom. Murray called a friend of Monroe's, Ralph Greenon, who arrived and broke into the bedroom through a window. Monroe had died hours before, on the eve of August 4th. Monroe's last confirmed contact was with Peter Lawford, who called Monroe around 8 pm. Monroe's death was determined to be a probable suicide due to a barbiturate overdose. Jean Cocteau said of Monroe's death, "Marilyn Monroe's tragic death should serve as a terrible lesson to all those, whose chief occupation consists of spying on and tormenting film stars." (*The New York Times*, 1962)

Anna Nicole Smith

History remembers her as the illustrious Anna Nicole, but she was born Vickie Lynn Hogan in Houston, Texas, on November 28, 1967. Smith was raised by her single mother, Virgie Arthur, in the small community of Mexia, Texas. Smith experienced a turbulent upbringing, often having to spend periods living with her aunt or other family members. In 1985, at the age of 17, Anna married Billy Smith. The couple met while they were both employed at a restaurant in Mexia. Anna would later describe Billy as jealous and controlling, saying the period she spent married to Billy was "very lonely." (Macfarlane, 2023) Anna would give birth to the couple's only child, Daniel, in 1986. Anna and Billy separated in 1987, legally divorcing in 1993 (Kever & Feldman, 2007).

Once separated from Billy, Anna relocated herself and her son to Houston, Texas. In 1986, Smith began working in a Houston gentlemen's club to support herself and her son. Smith worked at the club for several years before meeting billionaire oil tycoon J. Howard Marshall there upon a visit he made to the club in 1991 (Marshall v. Marshall 275, 2002). Anna and Marshall began a relationship shortly after meeting; she was 23, and he was 86.

The early 1990s would prove to not only be an active time for Smith's personal life, but her professional life as well. At this time Smith made a concerted effort to try to break into the world of modeling. In May of 1992, Smith was featured as the centerfold in *Playboy* magazine. This would begin a monumental rise to stardom for Smith, with her modeling opportunities soon expanding beyond the magazine. In November of 1992, Guess Jeans named Smith as their spokesmodel. This was Smith's first modeling work outside of *Playboy*, and her role as "Guess Girl" would propel her to national notoriety. Additionally, this would be when Smith would adopt her now-famous moniker (Schindehette & Hutchings, 2007).

1993 would see a continuation of commercial success for Smith. Following her success as a spokesmodel for Guess, H&M tapped Smith to model for the brand. In addition, Smith was featured on the cover of *GQ* magazine that same year. Smith was named "Playmate of the Year" by *Playboy* magazine in 1993. In 1994, Smith desired to shift her career in a different direction. This year would see Smith's attempt to break into film, with roles in *The Hudsucker Proxy* (1994) and *Naked Gun 33+1/3: The Final Insult* (1994). As with previous years, 1994 was not only a big year for Smith's professional life

– but her personal life as well. On June 27th, 1994, Smith married Marshall (Taylor, 2018). The marriage would last until Marshall's death on August 4, 1995, at the age of 90. After Marshall's death, Smith would begin a lengthy court battle with Marshall's son, E. Pierce Marshall, over the senior Marshall's vast estate and an inheritance Smith claimed was promised to her by her late husband (Grossberg, 2001). This court battle would garner national attention and is perhaps one of the most well-covered aspects of Smith's life. Both Smith and E. Pierce Marshall would die before a verdict was reached in the case on June 23, 2011.

Despite her personal and legal struggles following the death of Marshall, Smith's career would continue to grow throughout the 1990s. Smith had roles in *To the Limit* (1995) and *Skyscraper* (1996). However, much like her previous attempts at breaking into film, her performances often received negative reviews, and the films did poorly at the box office. Though Smith's film career never took off, she continued to have success with modeling. It was during this time that Smith's dependence on prescription drugs worsened (Kim, 2010). Smith had begun taking prescription medication after surgery in the late 1980s and developed a growing dependence on the medication. (Macfarlane, 2023).

Despite her monumental rise to fame and ongoing success during the early and middle 1990s, Smith would see her career begin to wane in the late 1990s to the early 2000s. Smith's appearances during this time mainly consisted of bit parts on television programs such as *Ally McBeal* and *N.Y.U.K.* Her work as a model, which was once abundant, also began to dry up.

In one of the titular points of Smith's career, 2002 would see Smith being given a reality show titled *The Anna Nicole Show*. The series followed Smith, as well as her son, her attorney Howard K. Stern, and her assistant Kim Walther. Smith's reality show was unlike anything that was on television at the time, and this drew viewers in. Initially extremely popular, the show often depicted Smith as a "human trainwreck." (Tucker, 2002) Smith was often shown slurring her words and acting dazed. The program was touted for the off-the-wall antics of Smith and her posse, enticing viewers with the promise that they never know what Anna would do next. The E! Network, which produced the show, marketed the program with the statement, "it's not supposed to be funny – it just is" (Tucker, 2002).

Smith's reality show would only run for two seasons before its 2004 cancellation. The years following the show's cancellation would see Smith suffer further career decline and spend much of her time in court regarding her late husband's estate. One bright spot would come for Smith in 2006 when she gave birth to her second child, daughter Dannielyn.

However, this would soon be followed by the tragic death of Smith's 20-year-old son, Daniel, while he was visiting Smith in the hospital following the birth of Dannielyn (AP, 2006). Less than five months after the death of her son, Smith would be found unresponsive in her hotel room at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel in Hollywood, Florida. According to toxicology reports following her death, Smith had succumbed to combined drug intoxication, and her death was ultimately ruled an accidental overdose (Sedensky, 2007).

Chapter II

Theoretical Framework

This thesis will employ Stuart Hall's theoretical work on stereotyping, specifically his work regarding the importance of 'difference,' the intersection of being disavowed and fetishized, and stereotyping. In his widely influential work, *The Spectacle of the 'Other'* Hall (1997) discusses how society represents those who are different from the dominant group. Central to Hall's work is the seemingly simple yet quite complex question of why does difference matter? In relation to this question, Hall examines four theories that aim to answer this question. Most important to this thesis is the anthropological theory. Hall states that the argument here is that culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions with a classificatory system. The marking of 'difference' is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture (Hall, 1997).

The central idea here is that society must establish a clear delineation between things in order to classify them. Once appointed to their specific place, these things must stay within that place to maintain the order of society. When discussing Monroe and Smith, both women were clearly and strictly placed within roles society defined for them. Both women were strictly defined as "blonde bombshells," objects of sexual significance and nothing more. Any attempted deviation from this preconceived social role was not only discouraged but harshly punished.

However, the anthropological theory of the importance of difference is not the only significant theory in relation to this discussion. The fourth and final theory Hall

discusses when examining the importance of difference is psychoanalytic. Hall describes the argument behind this theory by saying the ‘other’ is fundamental to the constitution of the self, to us as subjects, and to sexual identity (Hall, 1997). Here Hall discusses the influential – and ever-controversial – work of Sigmund Freud. Freud’s work centers on the idea that sexual difference forms at a very young age – with male children first developing an attraction to their mother and seeing their father as a ‘rival,’ then later seeing his mother as a victim of ‘punishment’ the child will start to identify with his father to not face the same punishment. Female children first identify with the father, but she cannot ‘be’ him – she can only ‘win’ him by being unconsciously willing to bear a man’s child (Hall, 1997).

The importance of this psychoanalytic theory lies in the idea that women are inherently “punished”. When viewing difference through Freud’s perspective, men have an unconscious, pervasive idea that women have done something that requires punishment. When discussing how media, which is male dominated, portrays women this subconscious idea of women’s inherent sin and subsequent need for punishment is evident. Monroe and Smith’s media portrayals are defined by this idea, as they are simultaneously objects of sexual attraction and objects that the media deems necessary to punish.

Halls discussion of why difference matters ultimately builds to his discussion of stereotyping as a signifying practice. Hall defines stereotyping as the reduction of people to a few simple, essential characteristics (Hall, 1997). Hall ensures that there is a clear line between the idea of typing and stereotyping. Referencing the work of Dyer (1977),

Hall notes that typing is essential to making sense of the world. We understand the world by referring to individual objects, people, or events in our heads to the general classificatory schemes into which – according to our culture – they fit (Hall, 1997). However, this can morph into stereotyping when we reduce everything about a person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity (Hall, 1997). This argument is central to the idea behind this thesis, as Monroe and Smith have effectively been “fixed into eternity” based on the stereotypes applied to them.

Hall’s work goes on to explore this intersection between fetishism and disavowal in greater detail with the case of Saartje Baartman, a South African woman who was exhibited in the early 1800s. Hall (1997) notes several elements of Baartman’s story – such as the obsession with marking Baartman’s ‘difference’ due to her height and buttocks, her reduction to nature, and the extreme reductionism she faced (Hall 1997, 254). All of this culminates in Baartman’s identity as an object of fetishism. Baartman simultaneously existed as an outsider and an object of sexual obsession – society could at once disavow Baartman and be obsessed with her body. This perspective is crucial when examining the media portrayal of Monroe and Smith. Like Baartman, Monroe and Smith were openly mocked and “exhibited” to a public that frothed at the mouth to ogle them. Simultaneously, they were upheld as objects of ultimate sexual attraction – reduced to their physical nature.

However, to fully explore this topic, it is crucial to incorporate the work of feminist theorists. In addition to utilizing the framework set forth by Stuart Hall and

Sigmund Freud, work from feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir will be incorporated. Beauvoir's work explores feminism from a psychoanalytical view. In her 1949 work *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir posits the idea that male-dominated society assigns women an 'essence' or determinate identity. This, in turn, positions women as the 'other' to a subject rather than a subject herself, thereby denying her existential freedom (Beauvoir, 1949).

Beauvoir argues that in fundamentally defining women as the 'other', they are viewed as the direct opposition of men and are thereby oppressed by a male-dominated society (Beauvoir, 1949). This idea is amplified when discussing how female celebrities are viewed. In essence, society treats celebrity for women as a tradeoff. Should a woman achieve any level of celebrity, she is no longer beholden to herself. The public and media demand control of her body and mind, in life and death forevermore. She is forced to operate in a male-dominated sphere in whatever her assigned role may be. As Beauvoir suggests, these women are transformed into the 'other' and stripped of any existential freedom they possess.

Chapter 3

Literature Review

What is ‘Celebrity’?

Perhaps the best place to start is simply trying to more clearly understand - *what is a celebrity?* Much debate can – and has – been given to this question. Arguably the most effective definition is the most straightforward. Boorstin, quite plainly, defined a celebrity as a “person who is known for his well-knownness” (Boorstin, 1962). Boorstin’s definition, while quite clear cut, does provide a clear starting point for how celebrity is defined. Boorstin would go on to describe celebrities as “human pseudo-events” (Boorstin, 1962). This suggests an element of artifice and manufacturing that leads to celebrity without any real element of talent or greatness.

However, while Boorstin’s definition of celebrity is useful to some degree – one could argue that it is disingenuous to say that all celebrity is artificial, manufactured, or without greatness. Neal Gabler of the Norman Lear Center argues that many of those we call celebrities have accomplished something. Gabler does agree with Boorstin’s assertion that celebrity is a function of “well-knownness” but argues against his idea that it is without substance (Gabler, 2010). Gabler argues that Boorstin’s work, which was a product of a time in which the idea of celebrity was relatively new, was unconsciously exercising traditional bias (Gabler, 2010). Gabler goes on to state that the idea of celebrity is not a result of cultural degradation as some theorists such as Boorstin might suggest. Gabler argues that celebrity is - in itself - an art form that refracts our culture back on to us exactly as traditional art does (Gabler, 2010).

Women in Hegemonic Media

When discussing how women – or any minority – are portrayed by the media and treated by the public, it is important to discuss hegemony. Author James Lull describes hegemony as the power or dominance that one social group holds over others (Lull, 2021). When discussing hegemony in relation to media, media is male dominated so therefore males hold hegemonic power over the media. However, hegemony is not merely having power – it is also a method for gaining and maintaining power (Lull, 2021).

Those who currently possess hegemonic power will work to reinforce and increase their power. This is done through a variety of channels all working together. Lull states, “messages supportive of the status quo emanating from schools, businesses, political organizations, trade unions, religious groups, the military, and the mass media all dovetail together ideologically” (p. 42, 2021). While women like Monroe and Smith were allowed to exist in a male-dominated society, they were confined to the hegemonic constraints placed upon them.

Research suggests that Monroe and Smith were both commodified, stereotyped, constructed, and consumed in life and in death by media and mediated audiences according to a patriarchal male gaze that situated each within an ideologically constrained view of women. Brian Donovan and Elyse Neumann’s (2020) article explores how Anna Nicole Smith was portrayed and stereotyped by the media during her life. The way in which media constructed particular narratives of each celebrity also impacted how audiences perceived and later immortalized the women. Donovan and Neuman critique

the dominant media narrative of Smith as a “gold digger” and “white trash.” (Donovan & Neuman, 2020)

While Smith had legitimately worked as a model and actress for quite some time, much of the media attention she received during her life focused on these two narrow narratives. The article explores Smith’s media portrayal as “famous for being famous” and how celebrity status is manufactured. While Smith worked extensively to formulate her image, incessant gender and class stereotypes perpetuated by the media served to undermine Smith’s legitimate work (Donovan & Neuman, 2020). Additionally, Donovan and Neuman examine Smith’s attempt to forge a link between herself and Marilyn Monroe – positioning herself as a sort of ‘cultural heir’ of Monroe (Donovan & Neuman, 2020).

However, the media’s penchant to confine one to a specific narrative does not just apply to Monroe and Smith. Author Julia Wood explores how the media plays a role in influencing views on gender. Wood discovered that media is perhaps the most pervasive and most powerful tool in our lives that influences the construction of gendered norms (Wood, 1994). Wood asserts media paints women as dependent and men as independent. Essentially, this, in turn, means that women in media will always be defined by their relationship with men.

However, Wood goes on to discuss a more compelling idea. Wood found that, put simply, to the media there are two types of women: good women and bad women. Good women fulfill homebody roles. However, when a woman goes against the established norm as “the witch, bitch, whore, or nonwoman” (p. 33, 1994). An essential element is

that these two types of women are open juxtaposed or poised against each other to illustrate the stark differences in their characters.

Author Helen Benedict further elaborates on this idea by referring to it as the “virgin-whore dichotomy.” Benedict explains this dichotomy by stating, “the women at home are the “virgin types,” the alluring sirens of the ads are the whores” (p. 22, 1992). Virgin types are characterized as being pure and submissive, while “whore types” are often cruel and insensitive. Benedict notes that the media presents women as being rewarded for possessing traits associated with the “virgin type.” However, women who possess traits associated with the “whore type” are often punished.

The work of Sady Doyle (2016) further explores this idea and goes on to identify four “crimes” committed by female celebrities such as Monroe and Smith that result in their permanent designation as tragic icons and “trainwrecks.” Doyle identifies those four crimes as the female celebrities’ sexuality, her neediness, her madness, and ultimately her untimely death (Doyle, 2016). Doyle states that these women have in effect had their personal narratives stolen and reduced to a few simple characteristics that are both easy to spot and easy to mock. Doyle notes that the female celebrity is only granted some degree of release from this ongoing mockery in death. Doyle states, “the one happy ending we will gladly accept is the moment where it all falls on her.” However, in death the ongoing exploitation of the female celebrity does not simply cease – but rather it shifts forms.

The Death of a Star

The work of Jessica Gall Myrick and Jessica Fitts Willoughby (2019) examines how news coverage of celebrity deaths perpetuates a sense of nostalgia among audiences. In the wake of celebrity death audiences are bombarded with constant homages to the deceased, all of which influence the audience to recall memories of the celebrity and mourn as though they have lost someone close to them (Myrick & Willoughby, 2019). To examine this idea the researchers conducted a survey with 466 participants in the wake of the death of television star Mary Tyler Moore. Myrick and Willoughby discuss several factors that influence nostalgia in the wake of a celebrity death— such as identification, audience age, audience gender, consumption of media about the celebrity death, and previous viewing of celebrity-related media. Myrick and Willoughby propose that, due to the feeling of nostalgia experienced, audiences are inspired to act. Specifically, the work of Myrick and Willoughby examine two outcomes- prosocial behaviors (such as donating to organizations associated with the celebrity) and social sharing of information with others (Myrick & Willoughby, 2019).

In addition to these prosocial and social sharing behaviors, the idea of parasocial relationships plays a role in the ongoing obsession with Monroe and Smith. Author Douglas Davies (1998) wrote “in terms of human identity there are people whose lives not only include the significant figures of spouse, children, family and friends, but also embrace media personalities” (p.174). Monroe and Smith have received such pervasive coverage that the public has felt as though they have come to know them. This connection fuels the consumption of media stories about Monroe and Smith during their

lifetimes and contributed to the mass outpour of grief at the news of their respective deaths.

This idea was expanded upon by author Carolyn Kitch, who wrote about the importance of the nation mourning John F. Kennedy Jr, after his 1999 plane crash. Kitch (2002) argued that Kennedy Jr. played a pivotal role in the “American family.” Because the nation had witnessed Kennedy Jr. grow up, as well as witness his family deal with multiple tragedies, Kennedy Jr. had endeared himself to the American public. Kitch described how news coverage of Kennedy Jr’s death mainly revolved around three aspects: “the unfinished agenda of the 1960s, the doomed family whose sacrifices represent American failures yet also the renewal of hope after tragedy, and the youthful promise of America itself.” While these themes cannot exactly be applied to Monroe and Smith, parts of them are applicable. Monroe and Smith, like Kennedy Jr. died very young and are therefore fixed into eternity with their full potential unknown.

Margaret Gibson (2007) further elaborated on this with an idea she referred to as “communities of mourning.” Gibson explains this idea by stating that significant deaths create communities that quickly surface in the wake of tragedy. These communities will often express their grief by leaving flowers or other items at significant sites related to the departed individual. For example, even today fans will visit Monroe’s grave and leave flowers and kiss marks in red lipstick to emulate the starlets iconic red lips.

However, Gibson noted that these “communities of mourning” would not be possible without the constant contribution of the media. The media helps foster a parasocial relationship between the public figure and the public. Gibson notes that the

media reports on death everyday – often violent deaths from crimes, disasters, wars, or civil unrest (Gibson, 2007). Even so, the death of a celebrity feels more jarring and more visceral to the public – because of this parasocial relationship that has been fostered.

Lena Wehn’s work examines the link between the male gaze and conspiracy theories in relation to the death of Marilyn Monroe. Wehn suggests that conspiracy theories stem from a fixation with and desire to rationalize the unknown (Wehn, 2023). Wehn explores several theories surrounding Monroe’s death and how those conspiracies have been perpetuated by men in the media. Wehn states that Monroe was not only at the mercy of conspiracy, but she was infamously, inescapably defined by men throughout her life and into her death (Wehn, 2023). Wehn’s study utilizes news reports, all of which were written by men, from the day Monroe was found dead to investigate the extent to which Monroe’s life was impacted by being hypersexualized. Wehn’s work concludes that conspiracy theories are subject to the male perspective creating, dominating, and directing the narrative.

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner’s work (1999) builds on ideas originally presented by Guy Debord by presenting what they refer to as “new stage of the spectacle” (Best & Kellner, 1999). A new stage which requires new technologies and new forms of oppositional practice. Key to Best and Kellner’s work is the idea of the “cybersituation,” which is the production of an interactive realm that allows individuals to not only articulate their own interests, but also connect with people who share similar interests (Best & Kellner, 1999). Of course, this can promote creativity and activity in individuals, which was previously not possible with the passivity brought by traditional media such as

television and film. However, this can also obscure individuals' view of the world and everyday life.

Additionally, Kylo-Patrick R. Hart (2014) examines the challenges associated with celebrity status and how those challenges affected the lives of Marilyn Monroe and Jim Morrison. Hart asserts that Both Monroe and Morrison's careers were both constructed on very specific narratives perpetuated by the media. These narratives made Monroe and Morrison's attempts to take their careers in different directions next to impossible. Hart proposes that this substantially increased frustration that heavily affected both stars substance abuse issues, ultimately resulting in their early deaths (Hart, 2014). Specifically, in regard to Monroe, Hart discusses how her carefully crafted "blonde bombshell" persona made it next to impossible for Monroe to be taken seriously as an actress, despite her many attempts to legitimize her status as a serious actress.

Cultural Commodification of the Dead

Brady Simenson' (2019) explores the cultural commodification of the dead celebrity, specifically in relation to Marilyn Monroe. Simenson proposes that this is not a mere issue of using the image or works of a celebrity after their death, but it is an issue of technology resurrecting and controlling the personas of dead celebrities (Simenson, 2019). However, Simenson notes that this is not a new concept. The public has wanted to control these celebrities since they have existed, modern technology has simply provided that control in a way that was previously unavailable. Simenson proposes that Oscar Wilde's work *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is the pioneering work in the history of discussing the celebrity persona after death (Simenson, 2019). Simenson's central

argument surrounds the idea that Marilyn Monroe is the most important example of this eternal control of the dead celebrity persona.

Monroe's legacy and persona after death is of particular interest due to the fact that Monroe is one of the most impersonated celebrities. Author Amanda Konkle states of Monroe impersonators popularity "one might expect these impersonators to perform only at bachelor parties for men's clubs, but, surprisingly, the larger market for Marilyn Monroe impersonators includes such family events as bar mitzvah, birthday parties, business functions, and stage shows" (p. 100, 2008). Konkle goes on to explain that by donning archival representation of Monroe – that is, iconic costume for which Monroe is often associated – the impersonators in essence become a living Marilyn.

That leaves the question – what does the audience gain from the impersonation? Konkle states "by hiring a Marilyn Monroe impersonator for their events, people are bringing the past back to life, so they can talk to it, dance with it, and tell it goodbye at the end of the evening" (p. 110, 2008). This is especially noteworthy for someone like Monroe who had a sudden, tragic death. If the public feels as though there was no closure, no "happy ending" per say, perhaps impersonators are one avenue to cope with that loss.

The importance of this idea is perhaps heightened with the rise of social media and artificial intelligence that allows celebrities like Monroe and Smith to live on in a way never before possible. Researcher Phoenix Andrews studied this impact in relation to Princess Diana. Andrews (2022) combined analysis of Diana, studies of digital fandoms, dolls, and the creation of AI animations to explore Diana's lasting cultural impact.

Andrews argued that with the passage of time and the advent of new technology, admirers of Diana have been given the freedom to own and play with her image and persona (Andrews, 2022). As a result, Andrews suggests, this has helped Diana's legacy live on.

Tragic Traditional Narratives

From Marilyn Monroe to Anna Nicole, society seems to have a perpetual fascination with beautiful blonde women who experience turbulent lives and tragically early deaths – but why is this narrative so persistent and pervasive? Author JoAnn Conrad (1999) argues that the appeal of these repeating narratives is just that – they are repeating. Narratives that are well known and predictable provide comfort and familiarity. Additionally, the media are aware that this narrative works. For these reasons, time and time again, women like Monroe and Smith are fixed into the role of “tragic blonde icon.”

Author Glenn Smith (2009) further elaborated on this idea, discussing the irreverent nature of a rags-to-riches story. This is yet another repeating narrative that is both successful for the media and enjoyable for the public to consume. Both Monroe and Smith came from very impoverished backgrounds, and they rose up to be quite literally the epitome of glamorous stars. The public has a fascination with seeing someone who comes from nothing achieve it all – it's the American dream.

Chapter 4

Method

Building on the prior literature explored above, this thesis aims to explore how Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith were portrayed by the media during their lifetimes and contrast that with how they have been portrayed by the media after their deaths. This thesis will ask how the early, tragic death of a female star changes the way media depicts her – and how the public perceives her. To begin this study, press coverage of Monroe and Smith during their lifetimes will be reviewed and analyzed using textual analysis. Textual analysis allows for the systematic study of pieces of media - in this case film and television. Authors Alan Bryman and Emma Bell note that such analysis allows for the examination of patterns in communication (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The publication chosen for the textual analysis is the *New York Times*. This publication was selected as it is widely considered to be the keeper of historical record.

40 stories published about Monroe in the *New York Times* between 1952 to 1962 were examined and contrasted to explore common shared narratives and depictions of Monroe. Articles were selected based on a keyword search of the *Times* database using Monroe's name that returned 119 articles published between 1952 to 1962. From these results, the results were narrowed down based on how prominently Monroe was discussed in the article. Articles that only briefly mentioned Monroe in relation to other stories were not selected.

The date range was selected as 1952 marks Monroe's first mention in the publication, and 1962 is the year of Monroe's passing. Examining the evolution of

Monroe's media portrayal throughout these articles will be essential in understanding the development of Monroe's persona as well as the public's fascination with her. The common themes of these articles were discussed, with the goal of exploring the cultivation of the stereotypes often applied to Monroe.

Similarly, 40 stories published by the *New York Times* between 1994 to 2007 covering Anna Nicole were examined. Articles were selected based on a keyword search of the *Times* database using Smith's name, that returned 288 articles published between 1994 to 2007. From these results, the articles were narrowed down on how prominently Smith was discussed in the article. Articles that only briefly mentioned Smith in relation to other stories were not selected.

These dates were selected as 1994 marks Smith's first mention in the publication, and 2007 is the year of her passing. This examination of press coverage during Smith's life explores common themes that arise revolving around her sexual appeal, personal life, and struggles. Press coverage of notable events in Smith's life, such as her 1991 marriage and the subsequent legal battle over her late husband's estate were the primary focus. This is then utilized to explore how the stereotypes surrounding Smiths were fortified.

In utilizing textual analysis of the media coverage during their lifetimes compared with what followed in the aftermath of their deaths, this thesis will then go about comparing and contrasting the differences between the depictions of Monroe and Smith. This thesis will explore how the passage of time can affect the depiction and perception of a female celebrity, as Monroe's death has seen much more time pass than Smith's.

RQ1: How did the media depict Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith during their lifetimes?

RQ2: How did the media depiction of Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith change after their deaths?

RQ3: How did the media help construct and perpetuate specific narratives for both Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith?

Chapter 5

Findings

In exploring the coverage of Monroe and Smith certain themes commonly arose. Specifically, three themes of note arose most often. Perhaps the notable to mention first is the *Times* cultivation of the theme that both Monroe and Smith did not have any legitimate experience or work in their respective fields. While Monroe had quite an extensive filmography and Smith had legitimately worked as a model coverage in the *Times* often failed to actually discuss their work in favor of discussing more sensationalized aspects of their lives. Both Monroe and Smith had their work delegitimized by the publication on numerous occasions.

For Monroe this is easily observed in the few reviews her films received in the *Times* – such as Bosley Crowther’s September 1952 review of *Monkey Business*. In the review Crowther remarks “a smart chimpanzee is probably the most accomplished performer in the show” (Crowther, 1952). Smith on the other hand often had her work as a model dismissed – such as when critic Caryn James refers to Smith by calling her stating “this former Playmate of the Year who is now what is euphemistically called a plus-size model” (James, 2002).

Additionally, The *Times* displayed a preoccupation with reporting on Monroe and Smith’s supposed health struggles. Both Monroe and Smith frequently had articles published in the *Times* regarding hospital stays, minor procedures, and any illnesses they supposedly were suffering at the time.

Finally, The *Times* would frequently report on Monroe and Smith's personal lives – especially in regard to legal issues and marriage troubles both women faced. This is especially evident in regard to Smith, with a majority of the articles published about her at least mentioning the legal battle for her late husband's estate in some form.

Monroe

Not a Real Actress

Monroe was covered extensively in the *New York Times* – with the first mention of the starlet dating back to 1950. However, a July 1952 article by Bosley Crowther paints an early portrait of how Monroe's media arch would take shape. Crowther (1952) states that "Marilyn Monroe is being groomed by Twentieth Century-Fox for razzle-dazzle stardom on the assumption, we are told, that she is the hottest number to hit Hollywood in years." Crowther would go on to dismiss Monroe's ability to act, stating "if they [the studio] expect Monroe to act, they're going to have to give her a lot of lessons under an able and patient coach." Crowther would continue questioning Monroe's abilities as an actress in a review of *Monkey Business* published two months later. In the review Crowther remarks "a smart chimpanzee is probably the most accomplished performer in the show" (Crowther, 1952). In January of the following year a review of *Niagara* by a columnist only identified as A.W. states "miss Monroe is less than spectacular" and "miss Monroe is not the perfect actress at this point" (A.W., 1953). While all these reviews, albeit harsh and dismissive of Monroe's capability as an actress, do focus on her profession work. However, subsequent years would see *Times* coverage of Monroe boom, and a fascination with her personal life would begin to permeate the

media. *Times* coverage of Monroe during her life would tend to focus on three key aspects of her life – her health, her legal and studio troubles, and her turbulent personal life.

Always A Health Crisis

From 1954 to 1962 the *New York Times* published 18 stories regarding Monroe's health and hospital stays – covering everything from minor treatments to a miscarriage suffered by the actress. The first article to mention Monroe's health was published on November 6, 1954, titled "Marilyn Monroe Faces Surgery," and detailed an upcoming surgery the starlet was scheduled to undergo. Only three days later the *Times* published yet another article about this surgery, this time with the title "Marilyn Monroe Has Operation." Even still, the *Times* continues their immense coverage of this minor operation with an article published on November 13, 1954, titled "Miss Monroe Leaves Hospital." It is at this point in Monroe's media coverage that we can observe a complete abandonment of legitimate coverage of her career in the form of reviews, and a shift toward focusing on her personal life.

The *Times* not only reported on the minor health concerns of Monroe, but even more intensely personal matters. On August 3, 1957, an article titled "ACTRESS LOSES BABY; Marilyn Monroe is Recovering in Hospital After Operation." It is important to note that at this time Monroe had not even publicly disclosed her pregnancy. However, during the late 1950's to the early 1960's Monroe's physical and mental well-being was a point of great interest for the media and public.

Coverage of Monroe's health would continue into 1958 with a March 26th article titled "Marilyn Monroe Injured" that detailed an injury Monroe sustained in a fall. A June 1954 article covered yet another surgery the actress had to undergo, blasting the titled "MISS MONROE'S SURGERY; Actress in 'Excellent' Condition at Lenox Hill Hospital." From 1960 until Monroe's death there was a noticeable uptick in the number of articles published by the *Times* that detailed Monroe's health issues. From February to June 1961 every article published by the *Times* was regarding Monroe's health and hospital stints.

A September 1960 article simply stated, "Miss Monroe Leaves Hospital." In 1961 the *Times* published seven articles regarding Monroe's hospital stays, with the first coming in February and titled Marilyn Monroe In Hospital." Just two days later an article titled "Miss Monroe Leaves Hospital". However, Monroe would again be admitted to the hospital shortly after and would not be discharged until March 6, 1961 - at which time an article titled "MISS MONROE IS HOME; Leaves Hospital After 23-Day Check -- Feels 'Wonderful'" was published. In May of the same year the *Times* would publish an article titled "Marilyn Monroe in Hospital," which detailed a minor operation. It should be noted that this headline was often recycled by the publication, as just a month later another article titled "Marilyn Monroe in Hospital" was published. Just a day later on June 30 the *Times* would publish an article titled "MARILYN MONROE UNDERGOES SURGERY." Despite the seemingly looming nature of this capitalized title, the operation was merely a minor gall bladder surgery. The next day an article titled "Marilyn Monroe Resting Well" would be published. This would be the last article regarding the star's health that would be published by the *Times* before her 1962 death.

Deviant Women

However, Monroe's health was not the only focal point of *Times* articles. From 1954 to 1962 the newspaper published 12 stories regarding Monroe's legal issues and studio disputes. In January 1954 *The New York Times* published three stories about Monroe – two regarding Fox studios suspending Monroe for refusing to film the musical *Pink Tights*. Monroe often sparred with studio executives, and these disputes were highly publicized by the *Times*. The first article regarding this dispute was entitled “MARILYN MONROE SUSPENDED BY FOX; Studio Announces Move After Star Fails to Report for Musical 'Pink Tights'.” The times would follow this up with a In article that detailed Fox Studios decision to suspend Monroe's salary, with an article exclaiming “MARILYN MONROE FAILS TO REPORT; Fox Again Puts Star Under Salary Suspension for Missing 'Pink Tights' Call.” The final article regarding this specific dispute would come on January 26, 1954, with the all too similar headline MARILYN “MONROE FAILS TO REPORT; Fox Again Puts Star Under Salary Suspension for Missing 'Pink Tights' Call.” While this was the final article regarding this specific dispute between Monroe and her studio, this was just the very beginning of the *Times* coverage of Monroe's legal issues and studio disputes.

In October of 1954 the *Times* would publish an article with the headline “Marilyn Monroe's Hearing Set.” The hearing in question was in regard to a minor traffic violation. While this headline may at first glance appear misleading, it is no comparison to an article that would be published in April of 1955. This article proclaimed, “Warrant for

Marilyn Monroe.” The article detailed a warrant for arrest issued for Monroe in Beverly Hills in relation to the earlier mentioned traffic violation.

While several of the articles regarding legal and studio disputes faced by the Star sensationalized the negative aspects, a January 1956 article did cover a win for the actress. The article, titled MARILYN MONROE WINS PACT FIGHT; Star, Fox Agree to 7-Year Non-Exclusive Contract for Total of 4 Pictures,” detailed Monroe’s revised contract with Fox studios. Subsequent articles would focus on a legal dispute between Monroe and Milton Greene, an associate and business partner of Monroe’s. In April of 1957 the *Times* published a story titled “STAR SCORES ASSOCIATE; Marilyn Monroe Says Greene Mismanaged Her Company.” The article covers Monroe’s assertion that Greene, who helped run Monroe’s production company, had mismanaged the company. The publication would go on to cover Monroe’s firing of Greene, with the April 16th report entitled “MISS MONROE OUTSTTS BUSINESS ASSOCIATE.” However, Greene was not the only point of contention in regard to Monroe’s production company. On July 12, 1957, the times published the article “MARILYN MONROE SUED; Ex-Lawyer for the Actress' Company Seeks \$22,100.”

The *Times* coverage of Monroe’s legal issues and studio disputes would wane in the latter half of the 1950s and early 1960s, before making a reemergence shortly before her death. In July 1962 an article titled “Fox, Irked Over Film Delays, May Sue Marilyn Monroe” was published. The article detailed Fox Studios’ frustration at Monroe regarding her inability to appear for scheduled filming for *Something’s Got To Give*. Just two days later on June 9, 1962, the *Times* would report “Fox Dismisses Marilyn Monroe

And Files a Suit for \$500,000” with a third article titled “Film Starring Marilyn Monroe And Dean Martin Shelved by Fox” coming just three days later. The film would remain unfinished, and Monroe would die less than two months later.

In addition to the fascination with her health and studio disputes, Monroe’s personal life was extensively covered in the *Times*. Between 1952 and 1962 the newspaper published 11 stories about Monroe’s relationships with Joe DiMaggio and Arthur Miller. Many of these stories focused on the turbulent nature of the relationships, with much focus given to her subsequent divorces. The *Times* first reported on Monroe’s personal life with a January 1954 article about her marriage to baseball star Joe DiMaggio. Just months later the *Times* would break the story of Monroe and DiMaggio’s divorce, and an article titled “Marilyn Monroe to Divorce DiMaggio; She Cites ‘Conflicting Career Demands’” would hit newsstands. Following this report, the publication printed an article regarding Monroe’s divorce trial, headlined “Marilyn Monroe's Hearing Set.” An October 1954 article would go on to declare “DIMAGGIO IS DIVORCED; Does Not Contest Coast Suit by Marilyn Monroe.”

Perhaps even more sensational for the publication was Monroe’s marriage to playwright Arthur Miller. In 1956 Miller faced an investigation from the House on Un-American Activities committee, this coupled with his marriage to Monroe served as fodder for the publication. A June 1956 article states, “Arthur Miller Admits Helping Communist-Front Groups in '40's; But Playwright Denies Being Under 'Discipline'--To Wed Marilyn Monroe Soon MILLER ADMITS RED-FRONT AID Youth Festival Mentioned.” Shortly after the *Times* again wrote about the pair’s marriage, with an article

simple titled “Marilyn Monroe, Arthur Miller Married in White Plains Court.” Monroe and Miller would go on to have a second wedding days later, about which the *Times* would write “MILLERS REMARRIED; Marilyn Monroe and Author Are Wed in Jewish Faith.” Much of Monroe’s coverage in the paper at this time revolved around her marriage and association with Miller, as an October 1956 article headlined “Definition of the True Egghead; Is he liberal? Radical? Conservative? A social critic? Someone who refers to Marilyn Monroe as Mrs. Miller? Here is an effort to find the answer” illustrates. This theme would continue when the *Times* reported on Millers conviction and appeal to the House on Un-American Activities committee. In February 1958 the *Times* published an article headlined “MILLER FILES APPEAL; Links Conviction to Romance With Marilyn Monroe” in which the paper discusses Millers attempt to appeal his contempt conviction on the ground that the committee used his romance with Monroe as a way to gain publicity. As with every aspect of Monroe’s relationships, the *Times* was there to report on the demise of her marriage to Miller with a November 1960 article declaring “Marilyn Monroe To Divorce Miller; MARILYN MONROE SEEKING DIVORCE.” This was followed shortly after by an article that stated, “MARILYN MONROE SUES; Files for a Divorce in Juarez, Mexico, From Arthur Miller” and another article that reads “MISS MONROE DIVORCED; Actress Gets Mexican Writ -- Miller Signs Waiver.”

Smith

Much like Monroe, coverage of Anna Nicole Smith in the *New York Times* can be broken up into three main categories: Her health, legal issues, and her reality show. The similarities between the two starlets do not end there, however. Much like Monroe's first mention in the publication, Smith's first mention in the *Times* would provide an early glimpse into how the media would portray Smith going forward. In an April 1994 review for *Naked Gun 33 1/3* (in which Smith had a minor role) author Janet Maslin states "with Anna Nicole Smith squeezed into a nurse's uniform, ogling is unavoidable."

Not a Real Actress

Unlike Monroe, Smith did not have an extensive film career – so much of her media presence resulted from her reality television show *The Anna Nicole Show*. The *Times* mentioned Smith's show frequently – eight times in total. The first mention of Smith's reality show in the *Times* came in a 2002 article titled "America's Favorite Television Fare? The Normals vs. the Stigmatized." Author Adam Cohen writes about Smith "it will record the life and times of Ms. Smith, the ex-Playboy Playmate best known for marrying an 89-year-old Texas oil billionaire at age 26, and later fighting his son for an inheritance." (Cohen, 2002) This description of Smith and her show is quite mild compared to the cutting way the *Times* would go on to write about Smith. In an August 2002 article titled "Reality Shows As Sideshow" critic Caryn James (2002) brands Smith's reality show as a "cruel joke of a reality series" before taking a swipe at Smith's appearance by stating "this former Playmate of the Year who is now what is euphemistically called a plus-size model" (James, 2002). This would not be the only time

James would discuss Smith's reality show. In the September 2002 article "TV Searches for Distinction as Sept. 11 Programs Begin" James (2002) writes "Anna Nicole Smith's crass but successful reality show."

The show – and Smith – often served as a spectacle to mock. Smith and her show were often referenced in articles that otherwise had nothing to do with her. The goal, it seems, was to use Smith and her show as a personification of degrading American values. Author Clyde Haberman does exactly this in a 2002 article called "NYC; Dirty Photos? Call Them Artifacts." The article sees Haberman discussing the newly opened Museum of Sex in New York City. Despite Smith having no relevance to the topic, the article quips "A society that has no problem putting Anna Nicole Smith on television seems unlikely to lose much sleep over a sex museum." (Haberman, 2002)

Always a Health Crisis

Smith's health and cosmetic procedures were also discussed by the *Times*. The publication discussed Smith's health and addiction struggles in eight articles published between 1994 and 2007. The first article regarding Smith's health was published in November 1995 and detailed Smith's hospitalization following an adverse reaction to a prescription medication. The publication would also report on Smith's pregnancy and the birth of her second child. In a December 2006 article titled "Repulsed, Yet Watching All the Same" author William Hamilton (2006) writes "Anna Nicole Smith wouldn't go away. On Nov. 6, "Entertainment Tonight" aired the Cesarean section delivery of her baby."

The last article published about Smith before her death detailed the birth of her second child, but even in death the paper would continue to publish stories regarding Smith's medical history. In 2007 shortly after Smith's death the *Times* published a story regarding a video of Smith undergoing breast augmentation.

Deviant Women

However, by far the biggest source of fodder for the publication was Smith's legal disputes. Much of the early coverage of Smith focused on precisely this. After the 1994 death of her husband J. Howard Marshall, Smith was embroiled in a legal battle with Marshall's son E. Pierce Marshall. The battle for the late oil tycoon's estate would extend well past the death of both Smith and E. Pierce Marshall, and the *Times* covered this extensively.

The first mention of Smith's legal issues came, quite abruptly, right in J. Howard Marshall's death announcement in an August 8, 1995, edition of the *Times*. The article states "A battle between his wife [Smith] and his son Pierce has been brewing over Mr. Marshall's estate." (J. H. Marshall, 90, An Oil Executive, 1995) This would be the first of many mentions of the estate battle. A week later the *Times* published an article titled "Fight for Oil Baron's Fortune Pits Wife, 27, Against Her Stepson, 54." The article not only discusses the battle for Marshall's fortune - but his remains as well. Sam Verhovek writes "How to lay the body properly to rest? That was settled by cremation, with half the ashes to go to the widow and half to the son" (Verhovek, 1995).

In October of 1999 the *Times* published a story with the headline "She May Have The Last Laugh, And a Fortune." The article details Smith's ongoing legal battle but

doesn't miss an opportunity to take a swipe at Smith by stating "Ms. Smith, the 5-foot-11-inch Marilyn Monroe wannabe, is back down to her vamping weight of 155" (Cropper, 1999).

Coverage of the estate battle would continue into the 2000s with a February 2001 article titled "Honky-Tonk Love Gets Its Day in Probate Court." In March of the same year the *Times* covered Smith's loss of the court case, although she would go on to appeal the ruling. Smith's trials over the estate would continue to be publicized in the paper with a May 2001 article "Payment of Fees Is Ordered In Probate Dispute." Smith would have some legal victories, as covered in a March 2002 article titled "Ex-Playmate Awarded Millions." Unsurprisingly the headline of this article identified Anna first and foremost as an "ex-Playmate" rather than identifying her by name in the headline.

However, this was not the only legal dispute concerning Smith that the *Times* reported on. After her death the *Times* published several stories regarding the battle for control over Smith's remains as well as the paternity of Smith's infant daughter. Specifically, there was quite a lengthy battle concerning where Smith would be buried. In an article published shortly after Smith's death titled "Former Model Asked for California Burial, Mother Testifies" the publication details how the mother of Smith was attempting to have Smith buried in California. The same day the *Times* published the article "Smith to Be Buried in Bahamas Near Her Son" which covered the ruling for where Smith would be laid to rest. The next day the *Times* would publish yet another story regarding this issue - "Guardian Chooses Bahamas Burial for Model." The decision would be appealed by Smith's mother, as detailed in the February 26, 2007, article "Court Ruling Delays

Burial of Model.” The appeal would be denied, and Smith would go on to be buried in the Bahamas next to her son Daniel, who died less than five months before Smith. In all 22 stories regarding Smith’s legal issues were published between 1994 and 2007 – making it by far the most reported on topic regarding Smith.

Chapter 6

Discussion

Monroe and Smith's coverage in the *New York Times* shows a clear and all too familiar arch often placed on women. At the beginning of their time within the public eye each woman was treated as though she were a shiny new novelty – an object of sexual interest and intrigue. Through publicizing their health, legal disputes, and love life the *Times* allowed readers to develop a sense of kinship with Monroe and Smith. The public felt they knew Monroe and Smith, personally and deeply. Of course, this would only fuel the desire to consume stories about her.

Each woman experienced a dramatic shift in how the *Times* covered them. Towards the end of their lives gone were the stories that painted Monroe and Smith as bright-eyed bombshells with the world in their hands. Their narrative transformed into one focused on the more sensational aspects of their lives. The kinship the public developed with Monroe and Smith made readers voracious to know every detail about each woman's life. The *Times* aimed to deliver – with headlines that focused on blasting intimate details of Monroe and Smith's struggles.

The Times Depiction of Monroe and Smith in Life

When observing the *Times* coverage of Monroe and Smith it is crucial to incorporate Hall's theories. Hall argues that society must establish a clear delineation between things in order to classify them. In exploring the coverage given to Monroe and Smith we can see that each woman was given a clearly defined position – and that is

evident with how each woman was first covered in the *Times*. For Monroe, her first mention in the paper stated she would be “the hottest number to hit Hollywood in years” but went on to disregard her talent as an actress. Similarly for Smith, her first mention in the paper proclaimed, “with Anna Nicole Smith squeezed into a nurse’s uniform, ogling is unavoidable” (Maslin, 1994). From the start of their careers both Monroe and Smith were propped up as figures to fixate on, to ogle. Hall suggests that once given an assigned role, the individual is fixed into role in perpetuity. Even as years passed, coverage in the *Times* for both Monroe and Smith focused on a few clearly defined elements of their lives – and largely ignored any of their attempts to diverge from those roles.

Furthermore, Monroe and Smith’s careers existed at the intersection of being disavowed and fetishized within the media – and the public in general – these women were simultaneously seen as morally dubious and the ultimate sexual fantasy. Pervasive coverage detailing their turbulent personal lives allowed for a voyeuristic peek behind the curtain of glamour, a chance for the public to say, “*she is such a mess!*” However, coverage could also focus on their beauty and sexuality, perpetuating how desirable and unattainable Monroe and Smith were. One day a story in the *Times* could declare “Should ephemeral Celebrities like Anna Nicole Smith or Bob Crane be given more exposure than a truly talented individual?” and the next write “With Anna Nicole Smith squeezed into a nurse’s uniform, ogling is unavoidable” (Maslin, 1994).

Also important to the discussion of the intersection of being disavowed and fetishized is the work of Sigmund Freud. Hall discusses Freud influence on this idea, particularly with Freuds idea that women are inherently “punished”. Freud argued that

men have an inherent belief that women are sinful and should be punished. When applying this idea to a patriarchal society one can observe how female celebrities will be held to a different standard than their male counterparts. A man is allowed to exist as a sexual object, a complex individual. He is allowed to have his personal struggles separated from his work – but this is not the case for women. The *Times* perpetuated this idea of “inherent punishment” in their coverage of Monroe and Smith. The starlets were not allowed to have their personal struggles separated from their professional lives. Their personal struggles and subsequent punishment were intrinsically linked to how they were portrayed and perceived.

The Times Depiction of Monroe and Smith in Death

Perhaps the most important part of Hall’s theory – at least in relation to understanding Monroe and Smith’s media portrayal in death – is his ideas surrounding stereotyping. Through stereotyping the media helped construct and perpetuate the narratives that would follow Monroe and Smith not only throughout life, but into death. Hall defines stereotyping as the reduction of people to a few simple, essential characteristics (Hall, 1997). Monroe and Smith were reduced to their physical appearance and personal struggles. In their lifetimes both women were seen as the quintessential “dumb blonde” – an airheaded, ditsy woman who had no discernable talent other than her ability to lure men in.

The key to understanding Monroe and Smith’s stereotyping is not just the reduction of their personas to these key elements, however. To fully discuss the way Monroe and Smith were stereotyped it is also important to discuss the exaggeration of

these elements. In his work Hall states that one of the key elements to developing a stereotype is the exaggeration of a few elements. By focusing their coverage specifically on key elements of their lives, the *Times* helped cultivate the stereotypes that would be fixed to Monroe and Smith throughout eternity.

The Construction and Perpetuation of Monroe and Smith's Narratives

To fully understand how the *Times* helped construct and perpetuate Monroe and Smith's respective narratives, it is imperative to discuss the male gaze. Theorist Laura Mulvey (1975) argued that media - film specifically - viewed women from the male point of view. This "male gaze" subjected women to sexualization and relegated them to the role of an object rather than a complex individual with personal autonomy. This idea can be applied to the coverage both Monroe and Smith received in the *Times*. A majority of the writers covering Monroe and Smith were men. Of the few female writers that covered Monroe and Smith, their articles still viewed Monroe and Smith through the lens of the male gaze and used similar language as the male writers. This is a result of the *Times* coverage being rooted in patriarchal values which encouraged female writers to view Monroe and Smith as subversive.

In addition to being subjected to the male gaze, Monroe and Smith were also assigned a definitive 'essence' that helped cultivate their roles within society. Feminist theorist Beauvoir argued that patriarchal society assigns women an 'essence', and that idea is clearly visible in how the *Times* constructed and perpetuated the narratives of Monroe and Smith. While the idea of an 'essence' might seem abstract, it is intrinsically linked to how the *Times* reported on Monroe and Smith – and consequentially how the

public viewed the women. Monroe and Smith were assigned an essence that focused on their sexuality and commodified it. Early on in reports in the Times Monroe was noted for her beauty and sexuality, as was Smith. Their value and position within the world were linked to this.

In addition, Beauvoir argued that male-dominated society relegates women to the position of the “other”. While this is an idea that can be applied to all women, it is especially true for women who reach a level of celebrity like Monroe and Smith. When society relegates an individual to the position of the “other” it becomes easier to consume them. Constantly reporting on and reading about Monroe and Smith is no big deal – they are not “one of us”. With achieving their celebrity status, Monroe and Smith were stripped of agency over their bodies and minds. While all women are forced to operate in a patriarchal society, female celebrities like Monroe and Smith are forced to do so while simultaneously performing on a world stage.

The Marilyn Mystic

While the coverage of Monroe and Smith is notably similar, the same cannot be said for how Monroe and Smith’s legacies are culturally viewed. In the decades since her passing Monroe has been given something of a “redemption arc”. Despite the negative press and public scrutiny Monroe received in life (in particular in the last years of her life) she is generally viewed quite favorably in the modern zeitgeist. Monroe has been afforded coverage that lauds her as a trailblazer, a cultural icon gone too soon. Smith, on the other hand, has not seen this same level of redemption within the public eye. While Monroe is viewed favorably in modern times, Smith is often still relegated to the role of

“gold digger” in reference to her marriage to J. Howard Marshall. Smith is, even in death, still subjected to the same punch lines she endured in life.

There are likely many reasons as to why Smith has not yet been given the same redemption arc as Monroe - but perhaps the most obvious reason is the difference in time since each woman’s passing. There is a certain mystic that can only be obtained by the passage of time. As decades pass, cultural and societal values shift, different forms of media arise, and things fall in and out of fashion. With over six decades since her sudden death, a “Marilyn Mystic” has been cultivated. Unique to Monroe, this phenomenon positions the starlet as an unattainable astral feminine body above any criticism. Monroe was dealt such heavy scrutiny in life; this is society’s attempt to rectify that mistreatment.

Smith has not seen the benefit of enough time passing for society to deem her worthy of ascending to this unattainable realm. However, in the last five years there has been an ever so slightly more sympathetic shift in how Smith is covered in media and perceived in the public eye. Much of this shift is due in part to Smith’s daughter, Dannielynn, who was just an infant when her mother died. Culturally women are positioned as, above all else, destined for motherhood. Society has set forth a contract for women in which they are expected to have children and nurture them into adulthood. Smith’s sudden death while her child was still an infant juxtaposed the societal expectation. Smith was unable to fulfill this social contract. In this sense Smith is allowed a small amount of sympathy, but only when she is viewed through the culturally expected and accepted role of a mother.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all work, this piece undoubtedly has its limitations. Perhaps the biggest limitation when writing about anything involving actual people is if the people involved are not alive to speak for themselves. It is with great caution that accurate and well researched sources have been selected. However, particularly in Monroe's case, the passage of time has left some details unavailable or unclear. With both Monroe and Smith, there are simply elements of their lives that we will never be able to comprehend as we did not experience them firsthand.

Monroe and Smith have become mythologized within our society, and therefore it can be hard to recognize them as flesh and blood, not unlike ourselves. It is important to remember when discussing the lives of real people, though the time and place may seem far removed from our own lives, that these were actual people – not merely stories or muses for research.

It is important to note that the scope of this study is relatively narrow, as it focuses on Monroe and Smith's mentions in only one publication – The New York Times. Further research should broaden the scope of publications examined. In doing so this will provide more material for examinations. Additionally, this would allow for research into how different publications portrayed Monroe and Smith differently.

Additionally, future research should extend the timeline of coverage that is analyzed. For both Monroe and Smith stories selected for this study were based on their first mention in the Times, up to and including the year of their death. Further research could extend this timeline to analyze how coverage of these women shifts as more times

passes. Future research could look into coverage five to 10 years after Monroe and Smith's passing, and then compare that to coverage each woman received while they were still alive.

Future research should build upon this work by examining other celebrities and looking at what factors lead to their respective portrayals by the media and reception by the public. Celebrities like Whitney Houston are also commonly seen as "tragic icons" in a similar vein to Monroe and Smith, however examination of Houston would have to look at how race played a role in how the media depicted her struggles and how the public perceived her.

Finally, celebrities who are less well known in the mainstream but have developed a sort of "cult following" as tragic icons should also be examined. While it is beneficial to examine the lives of Monroe and Smith as there is much published information, it is important to also recognize the significance of other cultural figures. Transgender actress and Andy Warhol superstar Candy Darling displays all the hallmarks of a "tragic icon" as discussed in this thesis – a glamorous persona, a turbulent life, and an early, tragic death. However, examination of Darling's sparse media portrayal during her life and media portrayal in the decades following her death would have to also explore how Darling's life as a transgender woman has impacted how the media has depicted her and how she is remembered in the public eye.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Musician Lady Gaga once remarked “that’s what everyone wants to know, right? What’s she going to look like when she dies, what’s she going to look like when she overdoses on whatever they think I’m overdosing on. Everybody wants to see the decay of the superstar...isn’t that the age that we live in? We want to see people that have it all, lose it all.” (Lady Gaga 60 Minutes with Anderson Cooper Gaga Media Archives, 2021)

Our obsession with and worship of celebrities extends far beyond their life span – we want every detail. This is seemingly amplified in regard to the “beautiful and tragic blonde” archetype. The *New York Times* and countless other media outlets helped transform Monroe and Smith. No longer were they flesh and blood – they were mere news fodder. A larger-than-life persona was crafted, and a narrative was formed. Once this successful narrative was discovered, their fates were sealed.

Even so, why have Monroe and Smith in particular left such an indelible mark on popular culture? In the grand pantheon of female celebrity suffering the stories of Monroe and Smith are not all together unique. Many women before, in between, and after the rise and fall of Monroe and Smith have been delt similar crushing blows. Many notable women have risen to celebrity status, simultaneously adored and abhorred for their beauty, sexuality and charm. What is perhaps most unique about Monroe and Smith is just how much akin to folklore their stories have become. Through the vast media coverage during their lifetimes, and the explosion of coverage after their early deaths Monroe and Smith are – in essence – *the ultimate tragic blondes*.

Women like Marilyn Monroe and Anna Nicole Smith have achieved a level of fame and media coverage few will ever know. So, in a sense their deaths are just another performance for the public. The media and public cannot let go of these women in death, they insist on dragging them behind us as time marches on. The ongoing obsession with Marilyn, Anna, and women with similar stories is a cornerstone of our culture. We want to make a spectacle of female suffering – and we do so time after time.

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