

## **How I Learned to Love Myself Through Eyeliner**

**By Ann Harb**

I was always interested in drama. I loved looking at makeup and seeing the transformation people underwent by wearing it, becoming an exaggerated version of themselves with the brush of an eyeliner pen. This obsession with transformation began when I watched *The Princess Diaries* for the first time. I remember watching the scene when Anne Hathaway's Character, Mia Thermopolis, transforms from an awkward, quirky teenager into the gorgeous princess of Genovia. Ever since, I've felt the urge to make things over. I drew on all my Barbies and ruined my American Girl dolls, giving them bangs or mullets or bobs, putting red pen on their lips and sharpies around their eyes. Because I felt plain in my everyday life, I always made my dolls look extreme. Though a far cry from the princess Mia Thermopolis, I fell in love with David Bowie's bold and bright eyeliner looks. I knew I wanted to be like him, but his fierceness felt out of reach to my young self. So, I transformed my dolls because I could not transform myself. I put an image of who I wanted to be on the poor lookalike doll of me, who could not wipe off the raccoon-like eyeliner application around her eyes.

The origins of eyeliner date back to the ancient Egyptian empire, where eyeliner was used by all kinds of people. It was considered a gender-neutral item, used to show status, protect one's eyes, and bring Egyptians closer to the goddess Hathor and the god Horus (Eldridge 64-72). Kohl was the most used form of eyeliner. The pigment, still available for purchase today, is made of "crushed antimony.. burnt almonds, lead, oxidized copper, ochre, ash, malachite...and chrysocolla." It was known as "the Egyptian makeup" (Eldridge 64-69). Kohl was said to connect ancient Egyptians to the god Horus, whose eye was considered a "symbol of protection" (Eldridge 72). There were two forms of Kohl eyeliner used in Egypt, udju and mesdemet (Eldridge 69-70). Udju was specifically used to connect the Egyptians to a deity, the goddess Hathor. Hathor was

“the ancient goddess of beauty, joy, love, and women,” and honoring her with eyeliner “was to share in something of the essence of Hathor herself” (Eldridge 70-72). The color black has come to represent “power, secrecy, mystery, and drama,” and its appearance on the face makes a bold statement (Eldridge 63). Because of its empowering history and iconic look, it’s no surprise why the trend of kohled eyes continued to the silent movie, beatnik, and grunge eras of the modern United States (Eldridge 63). Naturally, I was drawn to it from a young age.

The first time I dared to try eyeliner, I was ten years old. My older sister was getting ready to go to her first school dance and my mom was helping her put on lipstick in the bathroom. I was fascinated. Once my sister was ready to go to the dance, I ran straight for the bathroom and locked the door. My mom never let me touch her makeup. She had always taught me that makeup was supposed to be applied minimally and that I was too young to wear it.

“Makeup is supposed to enhance your natural beauty,” she would tell me, “Not hide it. You don’t want to look different with makeup than you look without it.”

As I looked down at her makeup bag, filled with a million products I didn’t know how to use, those words rang through my head. I could have opted for some light blush, mascara, and highlighter. I knew how to do natural makeup because of the beauty guru youtubers I watched, and I knew that style of makeup would make me “pretty.” Already, at age ten, the struggle between what I wanted to be and what was “beautiful” had left me feeling out of place in my own body. I yearned to create an image of myself that represented what I felt on the inside. Plus, to a child who drew style inspiration from Bowie and Prince, “pretty” was never going to cut it. I thought that I would never have the opportunity to do my makeup again, so it was time to bring the drama. I was drawn to the black Lancôme eyeshadow as if it called to me. As I smudged the black pigment around my eyes, I began to feel a sense of catharsis. I had never, ever seen myself

in this way before. I was no longer the awkward child who didn't quite fit into her clothes or her school or her household. I was someone different, I had become something fierce. This girl was mysterious, powerful, and she never got less than she deserved. So, when I unlocked the bathroom door, I felt like a phoenix emerging from the flames. I saw myself finally as who I wanted to be, a vision of the potential I had.

“Where’s my daughter?” I heard. It was my mom’s voice. “It seems like she’s been replaced by a 30 year old woman.”

I felt ashamed. I was heartbroken because I saw an authentic version of myself for the first time, but that did not translate to those around me. I did not want to look more mature than I was. I just wanted to look like me.

As a young girl, the process of self-discovery is fraught with outside input. Societal gender norms tell young women that there is an ideal way to present as female. These gender norms are enforced not through set rules or laws, but subliminally. One’s “appearance,” or self-presentation, is “a constructed identity” that requires a “performance” to translate to the rest of the world (Butler 520). In the creation of a woman’s self-identity, she is taught that the way she physically expresses herself comes above all else. She is taught to perform the “stylized repetition of acts” that are legible as feminine in her culture (Butler 520). As a Catholic school student, I was conditioned to think the ideal woman was quiet, natural, and pure; three qualities I never felt I possessed nor wanted to prioritize. However, my appearance, speech, and behavior had to conform to those ideals, or otherwise my character would be construed negatively by my peers and institutional leaders. Those who deviate from the societal perception of the ideal woman are painted as the “other,” which they must accept unless they are willing to alter their self-presentation (Rivkin et al. 360). As a child, I was not ready to accept that I may be part of

the “other,” even though I wanted to stand out. I could barely accept that someone might not like me, much less that they could view me as less because I was different—because I wanted to be different.

Growing up, children are often taught that they can become anything they wish to be. This concept of infinity, or infinite selves, can be daunting to the child who is struggling to find their identity and stick with it (Rivkin et al. 355). Makeup, when used as a form of physical self-expression, gives one the freedom to try on various selves and see how they physically manifest before forming an identity—or in tandem with identity formation. The made-up face can be understood as a canvas, a “presentation of self by self” (Rivkin et al. 354). However, children are similarly pressured to always be and know themselves, which in turn increases pressure to be truthful in one’s self-presentation. Many take another’s physical appearance as law, signifying key information about who that person is and what they are like, but that perspective ignores the art that goes into expression.

Through the development of a self-identity, “the artist,” in this case, a child, “becomes a work of art” (Rivkin et al. 354). This takes on quite a literal meaning in the sense of makeup, where one can physically paint on their face. The desire for authenticity in my sense of self created an unsolvable problem: I cannot be who I am authentically without knowing myself. But to create a “flawless identity,” I had to lie (Rivkin et al. 354). Children mold their self-identity as they grow, but during that process they must alter it to fit the societal standards of their environment. In my experience, the policing of one’s physical appearance, often in schools, to privilege a perceived authenticity often has the opposite effect; kids learn how to disguise themselves to not be placed in the “other” before learning to develop their own sense of self (Rivkin et al. 360). The art is removed from one’s appearance, and children learn that their

identity isn't a costume to be tried on and removed but a medium through which their peers perceive them. Self-expression is a concept that exists "between" two or more people (Rivkin et al. 360). There will always be a consumer to one's self-expression, and sometimes one's self-expression must be tailored to the schema of one's audience.

This realization of perception plagued my formative years. Once I was old enough to realize that others could form opinions about me, I became obsessed with a desire to control those perceptions.

I remember the first time I wore eyeliner to school in seventh grade. My class size had just jumped from 14 people in elementary to 23 in middle school, which is a big adjustment comparatively. For the first time ever, I had a new set of peers who could perceive me. And by my second year of middle school, I was ready to try out what I thought was an authentic version of myself on my new peers. I wanted to present myself as bold, a rule breaker, a cool girl. At this point in my life, I had shifted my style icons from the more classic David Bowie to the more brash emo bands of the early 2000s, like My Chemical Romance and Fall Out Boy. I loved how the band members dressed, and what angst-filled pre-teen wouldn't want to emulate Gerard Way? I saw their boldness and raw emotion as a good thing, something I wanted to experience myself. I had just stolen my first makeup items of my own from CVS: A liquid liner, mascara, and an eyebrow pencil. To my young self, this meant that I was ready to try to be myself again. I hid these in my pocket on the way to school one day. In the bathroom on my way to homeroom, I scribbled on some thick, black eyeliner, and entered class feeling whole.

But that feeling didn't last long. The second I entered the classroom, my teacher called me up in front of the class and dress-coded me. My teacher, Ms. Carroll, was a very strict disciplinarian from New England who believed strongly in the traditional Catholic values pushed

by my school. She openly opposed young girls wearing makeup and spoke in class about how it could be unnatural and promiscuous.

“That makeup is sexually suggestive,” she told me, “You need to take it off.” Then she gave me a makeup wipe and sent me to the bathroom.

I walked back into the classroom humiliated. I felt the eyes of 23 seventh graders burning holes into my back. Because I was the first in the class to start experimenting with makeup, there was an example made of me at that moment. This embarrassment created a tension between the version of myself I was finally getting confident enough to be and the version of myself that was allowed to exist in my environment. Something as seemingly small as eyeliner had a huge effect on my younger self. When I wore it, I felt like I was something bigger than myself. Being told that this thing that had brought me so much confidence was “sexually suggestive” damaged the little confidence I had worked so hard to gain, and my self-esteem began to dwindle.

As a kid, I never understood why the term “sexually suggestive” hurt so bad. As I grew up, I began to realize that the basis of my oppression as a woman is in the implication that anything I might find myself doing can be interpreted as sexually suggestive. After that day in seventh grade, I became more obsessed with controlling how other people saw me. I had always struggled with feeling different. I knew that for some reason, I didn’t see myself in the picture of womanhood that had been painted for me. I figured I could, at the very least, make my peers see me as this image. This standard of what femininity was supposed to be was represented to me in my schooling and media consumption. I knew who the perfect woman was: She was effortless and natural and functioned with a “divine composure” that radiated on those around her (Cixous 941). My whole life, I have been advertised products that could make me more like this perfect

woman, who supposedly exists somewhere. Whether or not it was true, I have always struggled with the feeling that those around me were constantly comparing me to this ideal woman.

Images of beauty in the media often appeal to the male gaze. Thus, makeup is marketed towards women in a way that enforces this social standard. These images are everywhere: On social media, in movies, and in advertisements. Michele Foucault writes that “it is not necessary to use force to constrain” women to their assigned gender roles, because the male gaze alone is enough to ensure that we carry them out (7). To fit into society, the woman often “inscribes [her]self in the power relation,” becoming the enforcer of gender roles along with the victim as “the principle of [her] own subjection” (Foucault 7). This is to say that women, knowing that we could, at any point, be subjected to a level of visibility, conform to the prescribed standard of behavior and appearance. Makeup has often been used as a tool to further this oppression, teaching women that their worth is in their beauty above all else. Many girls I know have told me they wear makeup for fear of being judged without it, and “the constant pressure acts before” they give themselves the chance to decide whether or not they even like makeup (Foucault 10). This often results in a compulsive application of product for fear that, without it, they will be “differentiate[d]” from the rest of their gender or labeled as less of a woman (Foucault 4).

Personally, I struggled with this at the start of high school. After learning in seventh grade what the role model’s expectations were of me as a woman, I taught myself to perfect that act. I used makeup to be seen as pretty and effortless, and it worked. But it wasn’t me.

However, when used in a more creative sense, makeup can be a tool to fight oppression rather than an oppressive tool. Though it seems simple now, I struggled to comprehend the idea that I was allowed to be whoever I wanted to be, even if those around me disapproved. With the freedom of expression that makeup provides comes the “freedom to lie,” a freedom which is

often taken for granted (Rivkin et al. 362). This freedom means that you are allowed to mold your physical form, for no reason except for the fun of it. I realized my calling towards makeup was never a calling towards pretty. In fact, it was quite the opposite. My inclination towards makeup was a way I found I could defeat the “false woman” that I had tried for so long to be perceived as (Cixous 944.) Makeup was a tool that allowed me to break free of the physical censorship I had grown up experiencing. The power of feeling comfort in one’s physical self is often taken for granted, because if you “censor the body,” “you censor breath and speech at the same time” (Cixous 943). When I began to express my creativity through my physical appearance, I found it had a snowball effect. The more I was able to experiment with my look, the more comfortable I felt breaking free from other gender norms. The breaking of physical gender norms allowed me to release myself, once I allowed myself to function outside of “the discourse of man,” I began to function within my own set of standards (Cixous 948).

My journey with makeup started as a playful experiment in my mom’s bathroom when I was 10. It has since transformed into a medium of self-expression that has been crucial to the development of my sense of self. In my journey to create an identity, I have used makeup to create a physical version of myself that I could view as art. In my early life I created the perfect false woman. She was kind and outgoing and never said anything out of line. She wore light makeup and pinched her cheeks as blush so she could remain natural and pure. She didn’t concern herself with politics or big sociological concepts because that is the job of the “great men,” the philosophers she learned about in Social Studies class (Cixous 941).

I have learned through my love for eyeliner to accept myself radically, it has taught me that I am allowed to love things even if that love doesn’t necessarily translate to everyone around me. Moreso, I have learned that I am allowed to love myself no matter what I look like. I often



think back to the false version of a woman I used to be, and I wish she could see me now. Because now, she can paint her face freely and scream and be angry about the world like she always wanted to. She can wear dark eyeliner if she so pleases, but she can also show up to school with a bare face. She can be drunk, she can be messy, and she can break hearts without apology. And at the same time, she can be eloquent, smart, and creative, and her opinions will be heard because every time someone doesn't listen, she shouts louder. The woman I am today has not changed much from the one I used to be, except now she has the audacity to love her imperfect self. And I will spend the rest of my life fighting to keep that audacity, because in it lies my freedom.

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