

Representations of female in Novels from the Queen Victorian era until today and It's critical response

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Abstract

The dualities that are often associated with female characters have taken many forms throughout the centuries. In the Victorian era, female characters were often presented as dual natured; oftentimes this division was represented through the use of a madwoman and a heroine. In the early 20th century, however, this motif was picked up by female poets, who used duality in order to express the disconnect women often feel from their family, their friends, and, especially, their bodies. In today's literature, these feelings of duality and separation are expressed through a literal separation, not between good and evil, but of body and soul. In all forms throughout history, this motif has been used as a representation of the freedom of spirit that all women possess, but that is often stifled by society.

Key Words : Gaze, female, bodily, duality

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, women have found themselves virtually imprisoned by society's ever-present and constantly shifting rules and limitations. Female authors have often utilized writing as a means of escape, creating characters who resist the restrictions imposed upon them by a patriarchal society. One of the ways in which these female authors have sought to illustrate the difficulty in reconciling their public and private self is through the creation of characters who are able to exist both within and without a single body. This split between the public and private self has taken many forms, but oftentimes it is representations of the female body that have been crucial in representing the dualities and splits that have been necessitated as a result of patriarchal cultures. Whether it is through a ghostly familiar or an insane double, women writers have created characters who are not limited in the use of their own bodies. During the

Victorian period, these dualities were often associated with madness and the division of good and evil, while early 20th century poetry utilized it to represent the need for escape from the oppressions of daily life. More recent literature, however, has drawn on this tradition in more celebratory ways, embracing duality and crafting characters whose souls often leave their bodies behind to exist in another plane. It is important to note, however, that this ability is tied in with the freedom from the male gaze that one experiences in adolescence but is lost as one reaches puberty.

Representations of Female in Novels From the Queen Victorian Era Until Today and it's critical response.

No rack can torture me,

My soul's at liberty.

...Two bodies therefore be; Bind one, and one will flee.

-Emily Dickinson

In order to begin this study, one must first establish what was written and discussed by female authors in the Victorian era. Therefore, it is necessary to look at literary pieces that deal with the ideas regarding women and the body. In this chapter, critical writings by Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Thomas Fick, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Laura Mulvey, and Ruth Salvaggio will be discussed and outlined in order to provide a basis for the argument of this thesis. Each of these critical writings discusses the ways in which female authors create secret selves and dual-natured characters in order to resist the patriarchal restrictions imposed upon them by society and the male gaze.

Mary Wollstonecraft, mother to the author of *Frankenstein*, wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, a book describing her opinions on the rights that should be accorded to the female gender. For Mary Wollstonecraft, society's restrictions caused women to hide their true selves and "assume an artificial character" (Wollstonecraft 279). This artificial character, according to Wollstonecraft, forces women to act as mindless slaves, and, as such, they are forced to "fly from themselves to noisy pleasure and artificial passions," which is, of course, damaging to women and, furthermore, to society (Wollstonecraft 284). It is the idea that women must fly from themselves, however, that is the most intriguing. Here, Wollstonecraft has given metaphorical structure to the argument presented in this thesis - that women must escape.

Themselves and, by extension, their bodies, in order to truly act according to their own will and not the will of others that has been imposed upon them.

If a woman is not free, then her mind will atrophy and she is made to “assume an artificial characters before [her] faculties have acquired any strength” (Wollstonecraft 279). This atrophy creates women who are consumed only by pursuit of physical beauty and who strive to become only an image, neglecting their minds and their souls until they are as slaves. Wollstonecraft writes, “Yet the fanciful female character, so prettily drawn by poets and novelists, [demands] the sacrifice of truth and sincerity, [thus] virtue becomes a relative idea, having no other foundation than utility, and of that utility men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience” (283-84). Here, she argues that men, as the dominant figures who influence society’s beliefs and actions, both create and reinforce this image of womanhood, forcing women into molds into which they do not fit. It is this restrictive mold that women like Mary Wollstonecraft and her daughter, Mary Shelley, were arguing against in their work. It is this mold that caused women authors to begin to write of themselves as two separate beings: the public and the private, the seen and the unseen, the real and the perceived. This argument was soon picked up by other women and has been dealt with in many different fictional formats throughout the following two centuries.

In her article, “Myths: Of Women in Five Authors,” Simone De Beauvoir picks up on some of the arguments outlined by Mary Wollstonecraft and takes them a step further. She too argues against the mold forced upon women by showing the ways in which male authors construct women as the other. That is, the woman in literature is not presented as an autonomous human being, capable of feelings, thoughts, and actions similar to those of the male characters; rather she is constructed as something that is not human at all but rather a type of Creature, changing to befit her position, as well as the needs of men, at any given moment. She can be an earth goddess, a siren, an angel, or an ogress. Whatever the case, “she appears as the *privileged Other*, through whom the subject fulfills himself: one of the measures of man, his counterbalance, his salvation, his adventure, his happiness” (Beauvoir 676). Here, the male author creates an opposite and often untrustworthy creature out of women. However, female authors seized upon this same motif of otherness and used it to their advantage to create characters who embodied their own hidden desires. This is nowhere more apparent than in the novels written in the Victorian era. In “Authentic Ghosts and Real Bodies: Negotiating Power in Nineteenth-Century Women's Ghost Stories,” Thomas Fick argues that 19th century ghost stories gave female writers the ability to acknowledge their belief that women, as the Other, were of a higher spiritual nature than men. These authors created ghostly figures to depict a

female consciousness that was somehow separate from their bodies and allowed them to seek justice or enact revenge on those who caused them harm. Fick convincingly argues that these ghost stories allowed the readers to give vent to their desire to act on the wrongs imposed upon them by a society that rendered them powerless. He concludes by stating that “the „authentic ghost story“ is not metaphysical fluff or spine-tingling amusement but offers a scheme for using nineteenth-century assumptions about women's spiritual nature to argue for women's action in the physical world” (95). In this thesis, I will be utilizing this argument as it relates to *Jane Eyre* and *Lady Audley's Secret*. In both of these novels, the villains, although not actual ghosts, have become spectres and demons who haunt the actions of the heroine while giving vent to hidden anger and frustration. Another essay, “Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship,” addresses some of these same issues. In this essay, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar deal with female authors’ desire to represent themselves, in their true form, on paper. “In the nineteenth century, woman authors were hiding something in their writing” (1534). As Gilbert and Gubar suggest, these woman authors were reacting to a restrictive society and attempted, secretly, to argue back against the ideals imposed upon them: “such women have created submerged meanings, meanings hidden within or behind the more accessible, „public“ content of their works so that their literature could be read and appreciated even when its vital concern with the female dispossession and disease was ignored” (Gilbert and Gubar 1533). This secret, hidden self that is created by such authors is not that different from the ghosts discussed by Fick; indeed, they are two sides of the same coin. Gilbert and Gubar are, like Fick, noting the reasons why women authors of the Victorian era needed to create characters who could enact the true, hidden feelings of most women.

Gilbert and Gubar go on to argue that Victorian woman authors created works that appeared to be one thing on the outside while, below the surface, a second meaning bubbled and churned, subconsciously voicing the anger and desires of the female author. In order to accomplish this goal, the authors created characters who appeared simple but in reality were operating in more than one capacity. In this way, the madwoman or murderess is not simply a villain but is instead “the author’s double, an image of her own anxiety and rage” (Gilbert and Gubar 1536). The use of hidden meaning in writing was a tool for women authors to use against the patriarchal society in which women were subject to the male gaze. In her vital and groundbreaking essay, titled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey popularizes this idea of the male gaze as it relates to cinema.

In her article, "Theory and Space, Space and Woman," Ruth Salvaggio attempts to do as Laura Mulvey urges, addressing the topic of woman writers and their approach to theory. This article is relevant to the argument presented here because Salvaggio discusses the ways in which women authors have renegotiated the long-held ideas of space and body: It is not that women have not written theory. It is rather that the spatial

Configurations fundamental to the production of theory are not at all the kinds of spaces occupied and described by women. As women now conspicuously enter the scene of theory, they are variously transforming its spatial contours. They are...blurring and liquefying the boundaries. (261)

The boundaries that are being liquefied are boundaries of both time and space. For the purposes of this thesis, we can look at the space that is being liquefied as the female body. "When women write about space...they envision themselves outside metaphysical traditions that feed the production of theory" (Salvaggio 261). As this thesis will argue, one of the metaphysical traditions that these female authors see themselves outside of is the body itself. Salvaggio's essay represents just how far this motif has traveled, relating it to the ways that female authors write theory and as well as literature.

Each of these critical writings summarized above deals with the ways in which women respond to the restrictions imposed upon their physical body. Women, it would seem, at times have felt a lack of ownership regarding their physical form or a resistance to being perceived as a physical form only. As a reaction, they have used the motif of bodily separation to express their true selves in different manners, working with the tools they have been given and making them their own. These authors create characters that suggest that women must exist in a divided state- at times divided into good and evil and at other times, into body and soul. This divided state has led to modern representations of bodily separation, the motif within which women express the hidden part of themselves and within which they can begin to feel free. As will be illustrated throughout this thesis, this motif has been utilized in order begin the process of learning to both own and express oneself truthfully. Beginning with hidden selves, murderesses and madwoman, and transitioning into the separation of soul and body as a resistance to entrapment, modern feminist writers have now begun to celebrate the separation and duality that were once considered to be a sign of insanity. In each instance that will be examined, women authors use splitting as a form of resistance to the othering of women and

the power of the male gaze, although the contours of the splitting take very different forms at different historical periods.

Conclusion

The literature discussed here has done the same. What has emerged through the centuries of writing is a picture of women as they really are - their fears, their frustrations, their hopes, and their dreams - as they attempt to cope with society's pressure. Through these writings, we have a photograph that tells of the disconnect that is often felt between the body and soul, but we also have a picture of the need women feel to express that hidden and unidentifiable part of themselves that can only be expressed in the terms of the invisible and the untouchable. These authors are expressing something that is immortal, and it is this immortality that allows these women, both authors and characters, to continue to share the story of their greatest hopes and fears with women today.

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