



How are the roles of men and women portrayed in the novels?

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Abstract:

Gynocriticism offers a novel perspective on the literary history of women and explores their unique contributions in contrast to the predominantly male-dominated literary canon. Elaine Showalter is a prominent advocate of this critical approach, which prioritises the examination of the development of women's writing in relation to the female experience, as well as novel perspectives on gender roles within literature. The present article centres on the portrayal of gender in literature during the 1990s. This particular decade, as per Showalter, is significant not only in terms of women's endeavours to gain recognition in the literary sphere, but also as a period of flourishing post-feminism. Contemporary female writers, namely Sarah Waters, Ann Beattie, and Gloria Cigman, have been noted for their literary works that bear resemblance to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. This insightful narrative portrays the theme of female confinement, which took several years to gain recognition but has since become a distinctive metaphor of the evolving women's literary tradition.

Key words: gender, women are writing, post feminism, media.

Virginia Woolf initially contemplated the significance of the terms 'women' and 'fiction' while exploring the subject of women's literature. "They may have meant only a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontës and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow; a few witticisms about Miss Mitford; a respectful allusion to George Eliot; and a reference to Mrs. Gaskell would have sufficed." (Lee 1984:3).

The literary work entitled "*A Room of One's Own*" highlights the significance of financial autonomy and a conducive environment for female writers. Woolf posits the notion of a creative sisterhood whose transcendental impact empowers women of ordinary status to engage in writing and advocate for their independence. Subsequently, the chronicles of feminist activism have persisted in revisiting the concept of sisterhood, either by accentuating its potency during the 1960s or by elucidating that it necessitated a reevaluation during the post-feminist epoch that commenced in the 1990s.



Elaine Showalter's 2009 publication, "*A Jury of Her Peers*," provides an analysis of the persistent themes and styles found in American women's writing, situated within relevant social and historical contexts. This scholarly endeavour offers a comprehensive overview of women's literary production spanning over three hundred and fifty years of American literary history. Its aim is to demonstrate the significant transformations in the representation of gender and literature in contemporary times. Showalter's objective is to reform the American literary legacy by bringing to light the previously unnoticed cultural aspects and highlighting the works of disregarded female American writers. Showalter meticulously employs a chronological framework, while bearing in mind Virginia Woolf's dominant metaphor of *A Room Of One's Own* as a crucial precondition for women's creative expression following their emancipation from the mundane responsibilities of domestic life.

In order to validate her thesis regarding the liberation of American women writers from the constraints of domesticity and societal expectations, the researcher administered a survey that "take on any subject they want, in any form they choose" (Showalter, 2009, p. xvii). The author recalls the various stages of women's writing, which she previously identified and categorised as "feminine," "feminist," and "female." In addition, the author introduces a new stage, termed "free," which suggests that contemporary American women writers have the liberty to explore any topic and utilise any literary form, following their attainment of a distinct identity and aesthetic philosophy.

A potential avenue for exploration is the examination of alternative historical accounts of female networking, which may serve as a symbolic parallel to the experience of isolation and liberation depicted in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's highly regarded short story, *The Yellow Wallpaper*. The work holds great importance in the American literary tradition as it serves as a powerful allegory for interpreting a range of women's concerns related to personal achievement and creativity.

According to Showalter, Gilman "used her writing to fight back against confinement" (Showalter 2009: 224) and it created "an impossible narrative" about a narrator who is angry with both men and medicine while also trying to redefine motherhood and express her own textual power. The aforementioned narrative, which spanned several decades before achieving a significant breakthrough, has persisted as a distinctive allegory of the evolution of women's literary tradition. It delves into the societal battle against male hegemony by recounting the tale of a female patient who is held captive by her physician spouse. The narrative takes place in a colonial abode, which the anonymous protagonist perceives as a regal edifice.



The user's statement reflects the common reaction to the setting in a conventional gothic novel, where conflicting emotions of amazement and fascination are often experienced. The room in question can be characterised as a distressing interpretation of "*a room of one's own*," given its resemblance to a correctional facility and psychiatric ward, complete with barred windows and an iron bed. It is noteworthy that this space does not serve the purpose of convalescence or rehabilitation, but rather functions as a desolate environment that fosters illness, instability, and insanity. The novels of Sarah Waters feature themes of confinement and liberation that are reminiscent of Gilman's works. These themes are portrayed through bleak prisons and haunted Victorian mansions. However, the female protagonists in these novels are focused on attaining sexual freedom and reevaluating the notion of emotional attachment.

According to other feminist critics, Gilman's story deals with the most crucial themes of women's literature. It not only expresses resistance against a male-dominated society but also tackles the complex topics of motherhood and female artistic expression, which have been a source of conflict in the literary canon of women. The central character's preoccupation with the yellow wallpaper may be interpreted as a form of resistance against patriarchal societal norms and the dominance of male-authored literature. The narrative employs a dramatic approach to illustrate the notion of feminine captivity, whereby the domicile and its chambers function as symbolic representations of a woman's physical form and her yearning to break free from confinement. The protagonist's status as an invalid and a prisoner, which symbolises the societal perception of women, necessitates her initial pursuit of freedom.

The depiction of gender roles in literature has been a subject of discourse for numerous years. During the 19th century, there was a notable transformation in societal, financial, and governmental spheres, which resulted in a departure from established gender norms. Here we seek to analyze the portrayal of men and women in two 19th-century novels, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*. The objective of this paper is to underscore the manners in which literature constructed and strengthened gender roles by scrutinising the characters, plot, and themes of these novels. The present investigation utilised a qualitative methodology to examine the depiction of gender roles in the literary works of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations*. The selection of the novels was based on their popularity and temporal congruity. The study employed content analysis as a method of analysis, wherein the identification of themes and patterns in the portrayal of male and female characters was undertaken. The findings of the analysis indicate that there are notable disparities in the representation of gender roles between *Pride and Prejudice* and *Great Expectations*. The novel *Pride and Prejudice* portrays the female characters as possessing intellect and independence, while the male characters are depicted as exhibiting pride



and arrogance. The literary work presented a challenge to conventional gender norms by emphasising the significance of a female's education and her capacity to exercise autonomy in decision-making. In contrast, the novel *Great Expectations* upheld conventional gender norms by depicting women as docile and acquiescent. The male personas were illustrated as exhibiting aggressive and dominant traits, whereas the female personas were depicted as being feeble and vulnerable. The findings of this research emphasise the manners in which literary works can simultaneously contest and uphold conventional gender norms. *Pride and Prejudice* presented a challenge to conventional gender roles by portraying women as intelligent and independent, whereas *Great Expectations* reinforced these roles by depicting women as passive and submissive. The aforementioned depictions are indicative of the prevailing societal standards during that era and demonstrate the capacity of literature to mirror and influence cultural beliefs.

In emulation of Gilman, female writers have employed the prose genre to chart a distinct, feminine historical terrain and to revise the conventional, male-centric historical account by co-opting storylines and personages and infusing them with novel significances and viewpoints, as exemplified by the works of Jean Rhys and Gloria Cigman, who respectively reimagined the plot of *Jane Eyre* and *The Wife of Bath*. As per Elaine Showalter's analysis, the 1990s marked the culmination of the struggle for equitable acknowledgment within the traditional male-dominated literary canon.

Showalter's book illustrates the change in critical theory and media representations of women's literature. The concept of post-feminism has been a subject of extensive discourse in various literary works and scholarly articles. It is used to refer to the rise of individualism and the gradual erosion of the sense of solidarity among women, which was a fundamental aspect of the second-wave feminist movement. Rosalind Clair Gill (2007: 249) has identified three approaches to understanding post-feminism, namely as an epistemological shift, a historical transformation, and a reaction against feminism. The notion can alternatively be perceived as a privately held sentiment.

Post feminism represents a division in the epistemology of feminism within the context of contemporary neo liberalism, and its transition towards postmodern, poststructuralist, and postcolonial theory. Post-feminism is characterised by a departure from feminist ideology and a focus on issues and concerns that differ markedly from those emphasised by feminism.

Despite the evolution of theoretical concepts, literary texts have persisted in exploring the consequences of women's initiative and free choice, indicating that certain concerns of women's writing have remained unchanged. Throughout literary history, female characters such as Medea and Desdemona have been subjected to severe punishment for their attempts to establish order in



their lives. This trend suggests that the literary tradition has a tendency to create obstacles for independent women. The character of Isabel Archer in Henry James's novel, *The Portrait of a Lady*, serves as an illustration of the recurring theme in literature wherein protagonists are faced with choices that are influenced by societal constraints, resulting in their selection of either an unsuitable path or an unsuitable partner. The research on gender representations has required a significant amount of time to challenge the belief that submissive and passive qualities are inherently linked to femininity, while dominant and assertive qualities are linked to masculinity. The emergence of gender studies has resulted in a notable transformation in the depiction of male and female characters, leading to a closer correlation between the portrayal of literary characters and the evolving priorities of literature in a dynamic global context.

Post-feminist women's literature not only reconsiders women's issues and interests in contemporary times, but also engages in a formal exploration by utilising playful narrative techniques such as plot appropriation, also known as "playgiarism," a concept introduced by the renowned feminist metafiction writer, Kathy Acker. Acker's 1983 publication, titled *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*, presents a fictitious account of the Italian director's life, wherein she appropriates his tragic demise to serve her artistic objectives. The literary work entitled "The Mystery of Pasolacker" utilises Pasolini's artistic persona to recount a tale of marginalisation and courage. The book employs a reverse chronological order, commencing with the resolution of Pasolini's homicide and subsequently presenting a retrospective account of his life. In contrast to Acker's approach, the act of appropriation involves a continuous process of revising and reimagining a text, which serves to revive and bring attention to elements that have been overlooked or marginalised. Showalter (2009: 502) posits that during the 1990s, female writers developed a keen interest in reinterpreting traditional American literature from a feminine standpoint. The author refrains from discussing Acker's accomplishment in *The Jury of Her Peers* for reasons that are not explained, as there is no reference to Acker in the entire book. Instead, Showalter cites the lesser-known example of Susan Sontag's *Alice in Bed* (1993), a play that portrays a surreal tea party bringing together Henry James's sister Alice and Emily Dickinson, depicting Alice James as a thwarted female genius. Showalter references Sena Jeter Naslund's 1999 novel *Ahab's Wife* as an instance of a companion to *Moby-Dick*. Naslund's work is a manifestation of her aspiration to revise a prominent example of the great American novel by incorporating noteworthy female characters.

Showalter examines the literary output of female minimalist writers and Raymond Carver's concise, restrained, and unpretentious writing style, which emphasises the concept of "less is more," in order to depict the female American dream experience. Minimalism in art and literature is commonly characterised as an aesthetic inclination towards reduction. It emphasises meticulous



observation, and Ann Beattie is a notable American female author who extensively engages with the experiences of her characters. Through the utilisation of minimalism's principles, Beattie portrays the anxieties of single women. The women in Beattie's work exhibit a premonition of the post-feminist ideology of the 1990s through their employment of double standards. This is demonstrated by their simultaneous resistance to being single while acknowledging the advantages of such a lifestyle. This necessitates a narrative approach devoid of any embellishments that conventional realism might allow. The author's writing technique reflects the lack of emotion displayed by her characters, who have progressed from their youthful idealism during the 1960s and apathetic attitudes during the 1970s to facing challenges during middle age in the early 2000s. Beattie has made significant efforts in recent times to shift from her previous style of elliptical narratives that lacked authorial commentary but were replete with contingent details and vivid fragments of dialogue, to a more introspective and carefully crafted approach. The protagonists depicted in her literary works authored in the decades of 1980s and 1990s exhibit a marked deficiency in their ability to effectively communicate, owing to their inherent fragility and lack of articulacy, which renders them vulnerable to the pressures and strains they encounter. In the past, the conclusions of narratives were characterised by a greater degree of uncertainty and risk, resulting in a level of perplexity. In contrast to Beattie's novels, which did not employ the reductive elements of minimalism that proved to be highly efficacious in short narrative formats, Beattie's stories garnered critical acclaim despite their sparsity and reductionism. Beattie's literary preoccupations have exhibited a remarkable degree of continuity over time, with her narratives frequently featuring protagonists who are either divorced or in the process of divorcing, grappling with existential uncertainty or self-doubt, possessing a heightened sensitivity, and lacking self-sufficiency. Beattie's literary works have consistently focused on the significance of relationships, with a particular emphasis on the commonplace struggles of individuals belonging to the middle-class.

In contrast to the literary works of Raymond Carver, which often depict the struggles of working-class individuals residing in a fictional town called "Hopelessville," Beattie's writing focuses on the experiences of affluent white individuals residing in the upper middle class of New York and the East Coast. These characters are portrayed as being unable to attain a state of contentment and balance in their lives. The characters in Beattie's works are distinguished by their incapacity to harmonise their earlier idealistic beliefs with their present situations, which leads to feelings of disillusionment and apathy. The episode from the novel *Falling in Place* serves as the most exemplary illustration of the ambiguity inherent in the signals conveyed by Beattie's fiction to the world. Whilst perusing an artist's portfolio, John, an art director employed by a marketing firm, was intrigued by the presence of a solitary, elongated black hair that spanned across two sample layouts



on the plastic material. John solicits a long blonde hair from his secretary and subsequently replaces the hair of the spurned artist with it, with the expectation that the artist will detect the substitution and construe it as a demonstration of the completion of editorial responsibilities. The impact of Ann Beattie's literary underpinnings on subtle modifications holds great importance. The extent to which the reader perceives the subtle alterations is variable and may result in either a full understanding or a lack thereof.

The canon of British literature showcases exemplary narrative techniques that effectively unveil the previously unexplored narratives of women. *A Wife There Was* (2007), the debut novel of Gloria Cigman, a mediaeval scholar, is a noteworthy instance of appropriation, as it draws inspiration from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Alison is a female child who was raised as a male and experiences a range of challenges, including rebellious behaviour, disobedience, fragility, and spiritual conflicts. The biographical information pertaining to the protagonist exhibits a level of complexity that could not have been accommodated within the paratactic framework of *The Canterbury Tales*. In her work, Gloria Cigman provides a detailed analysis of how the Wife of Bath strategically employs the institutions of church, pilgrimage, and marriage to express her passionate disposition. The Wife of Bath's ideology of marriage, which centres on female dominance, is portrayed in the text as a response not only to the conventional perspective on marriage enforced by ecclesiastical authorities and customary law, but also as a means of managing her emotions.

Alison, as portrayed by Cigman, exhibits comparatively less radical marital strategies than the protagonist of Chaucer's work. The protagonist challenges established patriarchal norms and undertakes multiple journeys, utilising her religious beliefs as a strategic rationale. However, in comparison to the female lead in Chaucer's work, she exhibits a lesser degree of radicalism. Cigman advocates for a wider spectrum of emotional experiences, encompassing desires such as lust and sorrow, as well as actions that involve both self-sacrifice and self-gratification. In contrast, Chaucer's Prologue solely depicts Alison's ability to bring her spouses under her control and command. In Chaucer's work, the prologue of the Wife of Bath is primarily dedicated to her analysis of Holy Scripture, indicating her extensive knowledge on the subject. The author adeptly employs a discerning approach in choosing specific quotations and anecdotes to bolster her stance. Furthermore, her skillful utilisation of biblical references during a lighthearted discourse on the topic of matrimony serves as a testament to her erudition. The contrast between the Wife of Bath and the Prioress is further accentuated by their differing views on religious matters. The Wife of Bath is characterised by her reliance on empirical knowledge and factual evidence, while the Prioress is depicted as embodying blind religious faith. This entity exhibits characteristics of a humanoid.



An individual with cognitive limitations who is inclined to accept and retell a narrative concerning a ghastly act of child homicide purportedly perpetrated by individuals of Jewish descent. Despite the seemingly severe nature of her narrative, it is essentially an act of veneration, and the non-religious Wife of Bath lacks the ability to exhibit such religious commitment and devoutness.

In contrast to Cigman's novel, *Canterbury Tales* does not provide a comprehensive storyline for its characters to perform within. Instead, the characters recount their individual tales, thereby creating a fresh fictional realm for their audience. Due to the fact that the characters in Chaucer's work are limited to verbal expressions, any potential evolution or transformation in their disposition is imperceptible. This is partly attributed to the infrequency of the notion of a progressive character during the era in which Chaucer wrote. The portraits of the pilgrims are revealing despite the absence of any progressive or temporal alteration in their characteristics. Notwithstanding the limitations of the portrait in conveying alterations in mood or thought progression, it remains a source of intricate details and vivid imagery that can serve as a catalyst for the creation of fresh literary pieces centred around the depicted characters.

Postmodernists exhibit a distinct inclination towards embracing unconventional and peripheral viewpoints on occurrences, thereby shifting the focus away from established historical accounts, owing to the belief that all historical narratives are essentially fictitious. The act of producing historical fiction literature by women is a component of the broader initiative, which was initiated by second-wave feminism and has been sustained by post-feminism, aimed at reevaluating history through a feminine lens and restoring the stories of women who were either excluded or marginalised (King 2005: 3-4). Sarah Waters' literary works present an innovative perspective on historical events and the societal position of women. Waters' initial three literary works, informally classified as historical fiction, delve into the portrayal of lesbian protagonists within what is commonly referred to as the "Victorian era trilogy". According to King (2005: 4), historical fiction holds a particular appeal for lesbian individuals, with Sarah Waters's literary works, including *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, and *Finger Smith*, providing a means to envision the lives of lesbians in the absence of concrete historical documentation. The three novels are linked by their shared focus on the underrepresented aspects of Late Victorian England's history, specifically the last three decades of the 19th century, as well as their setting in this time period.

Sarah Waters' recreation of a bygone era has been made possible by the inclusion of lesbians in the history of urban life and its diverse subcultures. The portrayal of lesbian characters in the novels of the author in question has been linked to the concept of the "New Woman", a term used to describe women who are confined, transgressive, violent, rebellious, or mentally unstable. This association is due to the tendency to depict lesbian characters as engaging in criminal activities across various



literary genres, as noted by Millbank (2004: 156). *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity*, and *Finger Smith* are literary works that explore various social issues prevalent in Victorian London. *Tipping the Velvet* delves into the themes of theatre, prostitution, and the Suffragette movement, while *Affinity* portrays the life of a female convict who is a medium and a fraud. *Finger Smith* offers insights into the impoverished areas of London, including the infant factories and slums. The characters in the narrative are engaged in lesbian relationships that encompass not only physical intimacy but also psychological growth, as they are characterised by an ongoing pursuit of meaning and direction. Waters' literary works portray homosexuality as a phenomenon that is present across diverse character structures and dispositions, as well as social classes. Through her writing, she highlights how homosexuality can serve as a means of personal growth or as a tool for emotional manipulation.

Waters's debut novel, titled "*Tipping the Velvet*," utilises a veiled expression for bodily intimacy to illustrate the existence of clandestine moral codes, covert motives, and imperceptible trends and customs that are unique to each historical period. Nancy Astley, a female individual during the late 1880s, experiences a fervent infatuation towards another young woman. As a result of the twilight demimonde of late 19th-century London, Nancy Astley constructs her own lesbian identity. The city of London plays a significant role in this hybrid narrative of complicity and critique of Victorian society.

During the early 19th century, London and its surrounding metropolitan area were frequently perceived as a theatrical setting and a visual spectacle.

During the 1820s, the urban centre was perceived by society as a platform to showcase and exhibit its own refinement, magnificence, and enthusiasm. The significance of the theatre's portrayal in early 19th-century urban representation lies in its ability to convey not only amusement and spectacle, but also a sense of detachment and reluctance between the viewers and the events transpiring on stage. During this era, the urban observer, whether in the role of writer or imagined subject, regarded the sights and individuals of the streets as either transient spectacles or enduring monuments to be observed fleetingly or from afar. The act of maintaining a certain distance aided in the concealment and regulation of all observed phenomena, irrespective of its captivating or unsettling nature. Additionally, it served to guarantee that any unsettling occurrences would not be construed as indicative of a broader social upheaval (Epstein Nord 1995:20).

Nancy formulates her personal belief system subsequent to her interactions with the artists, deviants, individuals with non-heteronormative sexual orientations, and proponents of socialist ideology in the London of the late 1800s. At the outset, it is imperative for her to assert her



dominion. Towards the conclusion of the 19th century, the thoroughfares of London became open to women in their role as philanthropic workers, affording them a level of autonomy that had hitherto been reserved solely for mendicants. The protagonist, Nancy, embarks on a journey of self-discovery and fulfilment that mirrors her physical and metaphorical "journey against the current" as she travels from Whitstable to London and navigates the diverse neighbourhoods of the city, ranging from the opulent West End theatres to the impoverished East End slums. During her quest for self-exploration, Nancy engages with diverse social strata and explores contrasting ways of life, utilising the urban environment as her platform, obliterating gender boundaries and reconciling her genuine and performative personas.

The examination of literary works of fiction across diverse historical periods and literary frameworks demonstrates that female writers not only hold comparable principles and convictions, but their fictional personages also exhibit similar traits. The female characters in the literary works that have been analysed, regardless of whether they belong to the Victorian, post-modern, conventional, or experimental genre, establish an authentic paradigm of traits. This paradigm showcases their readiness to take independent initiative, make choices, and take action.

Contemporary historical fiction is distinguished by its heightened involvement with historical processes, as well as its amalgamation of historical documentation and events with fictionalised narratives and characters. The aforementioned attribute establishes a link between present-day historical fiction and postmodern inclinations in the field of historiography. Postmodernists argue that historians depend on the oral or written testimony of others, and therefore, history can only be considered as interpretations of past events that have undergone rigorous scrutiny. Hypothetical conceptualizations of being may possess a valid assertion of veracity.

This study has concluded that the representation of gender roles in literature is subject to significant variation, contingent upon the author's perspective and the prevailing societal norms of the era. Through a thorough analysis of the depiction of male and female characters in 19th-century literary works, this research has illuminated the manners in which literature can simultaneously contest and uphold conventional gender norms. The examination of gender roles in literature is a crucial endeavour for scholars and readers alike, as it enables a more profound comprehension of the construction and perpetuation of these roles within society.

According to Waters (1999: 7), it was Papa's belief that any historical event could be transformed into a narrative by selecting a starting and concluding point for the story. The aforementioned statement extracted from the literary work *Affinity* effectively aligns with Elaine Showalter's objective of charting the domains of women's writing, as well as the aspirations of Sarah Waters,



Gloria Cigman, and Ann Beattie to introduce innovative approaches to interpreting women's literature and to assimilate women's literary works into the Anglophone literary corpus.

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