

THE FEMALE VOICE: HOW GIRLS BECAME WOMEN IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY FICTION

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Abstract

Historically, the concept of *woman* has varied and changed in keeping with the ruling ideology of the time, and this has caused a number of challenges for women. This thesis is a study of how the narrative of the (female) self is expressed in writing and how women attempt to discover their own identity, in concord or in conflict with the dominant ideology in their contemporary society. Incorporating texts from three different centuries, it seeks to investigate whether the dominant ideology manifests itself in writing and if it is evident also in writings by women in our contemporary society. The textual framework is Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra* (1929), followed by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1928) and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Finally, to compare these texts to our contemporary environment, the thesis will conduct an investigation of Caitlin Moran's *How To Be a Woman* (2011). Throughout the 150 years that comprise the time span between the main texts to be studied this thesis, the concept of woman has changed immensely. In the nineteenth century, the feminine ideal centred on the family, motherhood and respectability. Consequently, the ideal woman limited or non-existent responsibilities in relation to society

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as a whole had little or no connection to a functional or responsible role in society. Around the turn of the century, the early women rights movement had achieved important results and women were less restricted by the ideology of femininity found in the Victorian Period. However, the newfound freedom of women became a threat to men and there were still challenges to overcome. During the Second World War, women participated to a great extent within the workforce, however, when the soldiers returned from war, they wanted their jobs back. Thus, in the 1950s the emancipation of women stagnated and most women returned to the domestic sphere and resumed the role of wife and mother that resembled the Victorian ideal. Through the second wave of feminism, this ideal was challenged and in contemporary society the stereotypical role reserved for women is gradually dissolving and women are liberated and free to do what they want. Yet, while women are gaining ground within education, politics and the work force, there are still images of woman that cause concern. Most evident is the sexualized image that is vividly projected through the mass-media. This thesis investigates how Nightingale, Woolf, Friedan and Moran challenge the ideology in their respective societies and attempt to reformulate what it means to be a woman.

This is why their texts provide an understanding of how ideology both affects women and is challenged by women's writing.

Caitlin Moran

In the paper we have seen how ideology has affected women from the nineteenth century up until the middle of the twentieth century. Although the three texts dealt with so far have obvious differences both in form and content, they all show how women tried not only to find, but also to create, their own identity in a society that had strong beliefs about womanhood. Nightingale struggled in the Victorian Period with the "separate spheres" ideology and the image of woman as an idle "angel in the house", while Woolf described how gender identity is socially constructed and tried to challenge this view. Finally, Friedan defined "the problem that has no name", namely the strong, yet unexpressed, feeling of frustration among suburban housewives in the 1950's.

As we have seen, Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) sparked the beginning of the second-wave of feminism. In the years that followed, women fought for rights in all areas, however, there was a specific focus on the "experience" of women. The social observer, Alvin Toffler, described the change in this period as "future shock", which refers to the psychological state of both individuals and entire societies that results from "too much change

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in too short a period of time” (Toffler, 1984:10). The rapid change in attitudes towards most traditional categories caused a sort of social paralysis, as most conventional concepts, including gender, were questioned or annihilated (Toffler, 1984). What Toffler does is to explain what happened in society in the period following the Second World War. Everything was changing at such a speed that woman, along with the rest of society found it hard to keep track.

The Sexualised Woman

Despite the focus on women's rights and experience, many male writers produced biologized and sexualised images of women in the 1970s. In many ways, the traditional images of angel and monster, virgin and whore, lady and madwoman were relentlessly eroticised. While woman in the nineteenth century had been idolized into a being of purity and lack of passion, the second half of the twentieth century saw a strong focus on women as sexual beings. This also affected how women were represented in literature by men. Yet again, the thread from prominent male writers that we saw in chapter 3 was taken up and the male literary tradition seems to disregard the feminist waves that have been taking place.

The tradition that goes back to writers such as Henry Miller and his theology of the “cunt” and D.H Lawrence’s self-scarifying heroine of *The Woman Who Rode Away* (1926) was continued in the portrayal of women in later twentieth century literature. One example comes from the work of the British poet Roger McGough, where the speaker in his poem “The Newly Pressed Suit” (1971) positions himself as the hero and places the heroine “gently upon the bed/ like a newly pressed suit.” Then, the hero turn into a villain and “step[s] into the poem [...]with a cruel laugh/Rape the heroine” (McGough, 1971:34) to bash the hero out of the heroine and the rape continues through a number of stanzas. Although McGough apparently intended to be ironic, his depiction represents an unambiguous resemblance to what we saw in male literature in the first quarter of the twentieth century and specifically to Nathaniel West’s words “[t]hey ganged her proper” (West, 1962:82). The resentment towards the autonomous woman seems prevalent in contemporary male literature and could be viewed as a reaction against women’s increasing rights and opportunities in society.

The sexualisation and dehumanising of women in the second half of the twentieth century also included male thought about women writers. Woolf's efforts to help women be literary artists in their own right seem to have failed to fully materialize in this period. In 1966, the work of Jane Austen that Woolf treasured was described by Anthony Burgess as a failure. In his opinion Austen’s writing “lacks a strong male thrust” (Heilbrun, 1992:32). Not

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only does his description have a sexual connotation, but it also contradicts the very characteristics of Austen's writing, that Woolf considered as a literature free of bitterness and anger, and therefore a proper piece of literary art. Likewise, the novelist and literary critic William Gass claimed that women writers "lack that blood congested genital drive which energizes every great style" (Heilbrun, 1992:32).

A more recent account of women writers was given by the Nobel Prize-winning British author V.S Naipaul. He was asked in an interview in 2011 if he considered any female author his match. He responded negatively and added that "I read a piece of writing and within a paragraph or two I know whether it is by a woman or not. I think [it is] unequal to me" (Fallon, 2011:10). He continues to explain his criticism of women's writing stems from their "sentimentality, the narrow view of the world". Jane Austen's writing is scrutinized, too, and he professes he "couldn't possibly share her sentimental ambitions, her sentimental sense of the world" (Fallon, 2011:10). The arrogance in his comments is clear, but, more thought-provoking is the fact that he implicitly considers women as "the other". The sentiments that Naipaul does not "share" and understand in women's writing automatically becomes a flaw, in his view. This is exactly what de Beauvoir described in *The Second Sex* (1949), where she shows that woman is what man is not, namely "the other", and implicitly inferior to man. The views on women presented here, indicates that the modern woman still face challenges when it comes to contemporary ideology of womanhood. Also, the comments made by these writers render woman as either a singularly sexual object or a being who is fully governed by her feelings. This in turn, also renders her different from the male, who is the sexual subject and therefore rational. Man, then, is perceived active while woman is passive, in.

Mainstream media image of woman

In the period that has followed the Second Wave of feminism, the mass media has become a very important source of influence to the contemporary image of woman. Although media, such as newspapers, magazines and television, played a role in the periods we have already discussed, it does not compare to the contemporary media environment. The Internet has, in the last three decades, opened up a new world to society and come played a significant role in contemporary ideology.

The common stereotypical image of woman in the media was recently described by UNESCO. According to their study, the media often "portray[s] women as objects of male attention – the glamorous sex kitten, the sainted mother, the devious witch, the hard-faced corporate and political climber" (White, 2009:4). The study also found that popular

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magazines, aimed at both men and women, portrayed women with bodies that the average woman is unable to attain whereas a majority of the featured stories associated a woman's success and happiness to either catching or satisfying a man (White, 2009). These images of woman bear a strong resemblance to the Victorian concept of woman as either angel or whore that Woolf was ardent to destroy. It is also similar to what Friedan found in magazines from the 1950's and the perception of women who stepped out of the sphere of domesticity.

Likewise, it is identical to the binary system that was put forward by Cixous.

Contemporary life writing (what, how and why do women write?)

In the 1970's women's literature came to exist as a separate category and gained increased scholarly interest. Alongside this growing interest, attention was also given to other authors and genres that had been historically marginalised. This re-evaluation of what was considered literature was prompted by the Second Wave feminism (Spender & Todd, 1989). According to Anderson, the internet has played a significant role in shaping new autobiographical forms (Anderson, 2001:123) . Through social media, such as Facebook and personal blogs, people have discovered a new way of communication (Rettberg, 2008). Through blogs, the author's life is presented in a diary style. However, there is a distinction between the personal blog and the diary. In a private diary all parts of life might be documented, whereas in a personal blog the posts represent selected slices of the blogger's life and are intended to be read by others (Rettberg, 2008). In this, there is an interesting link between traditional autobiographical essays and personal blogs, which can both be seen as narratives of self, or more specifically as online self-expression. Through stories and narratives the reader is given an insight into the author's life.

Autobiographies and blogs can both be viewed as texts that have different layers. On the one hand they present readers with a certain kind of identity, presenting the writer as someone with certain defined characteristics. On the other hand, they could also be seen as texts through which the writer explores and defines her own self, thus trying to find herself in and through writing. Another interesting aspect that is related to life writing in the media is the fact that through the internet and the social media, this genre is open for everyone. One no longer needs to struggle to become published, as the internet is easily accessible. What this means is that more women than ever before have a chance to have their voices heard. One of those voices is Caitlin Moran, who, not only has published books, but is a frequent user of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and her own blog, caitlinmoran.co.uk.

*Research Paper***Motherhood as a social construct**

Toril Moi argues that “motherhood is a socially constructed institution regularly used to legitimize women’s oppression” (Moi, 1999:41). In her view this represents a biological determinism that is one of the most repressive obstacles in the struggle to understanding what a woman is. In her essay, *What is a Woman* (1999) she argues that a woman who does not have children is a failure in contemporary social ideology. Another influential observation of how motherhood functions as means of oppression comes from Carol Gilligan. Through her studies she found that women often have recourse to the strategy of excluding themselves for the sake of others, so as to live up to the idolizing but self-serving patriarchal image of femininity – or womanlihood – as sheer nurturance and selflessness (Gilligan, 1991:9)

What this image of femininity does then, is to claim that woman has a choice of either conforming to the ideal of motherhood or be rendered selfish. This echoes the ideals from the past that Nightingale, Woolf and Friedan struggled with. What Moran does, as we shall see is to actually to say things that contemporary women feel and think on some level, but which have not been said publicly before. This is why she belongs to the same tradition as Nightingale, Woolf and Friedan.

How To Be a Woman

Caitlin Moran is a British modern-day feminist in her thirties, with a journalistic background within the music industry, who is known for her columns in *The Times* and more recently for her polemic books *How To Be a Woman* (2011) and *Moranthology* (2012). While Moran’s writing is academic and intellectual, she also employs humour and this technique of mixing humour, private and honest stories, angry outbursts with intelligent and serious matters, has placed Caitlin Moran at the centre of contemporary feminist writers. The book has been given a number of awards, amongst them, the Galaxy book of the year award in 2011. Moreover, *How To Be a Woman* also received great reviews, and famous feminist author Germaine Greer, whose *The Female Eunuch* (1970) is one of the key texts of the second wave of feminism, describes Moran as a “genuinely original talent” (Greer, 2011). Similarly to Nightingale, Woolf and Friedan, Moran uses writing as a way of expressing her thoughts and finding herself. Through *How To Be a Woman* (2011) we are introduced to her extensive diary writing and she analyses them in retrospect as a method of understanding herself as a woman. She has been writing from a very early age, and won her first prize as a writer at the age of 13 and has since received many awards. For most of her career she has been a columnist, so it is obvious that writing has been an important part of her life.

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Caitlin Moran's book *How To Be a Woman* (2011), deals with issues that concerns every modern woman. Her text is partly a memoir with extracts from her diary and personal anecdotes from her life, stretching from her childhood till adulthood, yet also it is also an academic and historical exploration of what a woman is. It includes important aspects of the history of women, statistics and continuous reference to prominent people both in history and contemporary society. Most of all, it is a conscious-raising text that emphasises the continued importance of feminism within our own culture and society. In her mission to "reclaim the word 'feminism'" (Moran, 2011:80) she explains how a survey found that only 29 percent of American women and only 42 per cent of British women would consider themselves feminists. In her view, all women are feminists. She questions her fellow women: "Do you have a vagina?" and "Do you want to be in charge of it?" If you said yes to both, Congratulations! You're a feminist." (Moran, 2011:79). In response to the survey she goes back to basics and addresses the respondents:

What do you think feminism IS, ladies? What part of "liberation for women" is not for you? Is it freedom to vote? The right not to be owned by the man you marry? The campaign for equal pay? "Vogue," by Madonna? Jeans? Did all that good shit GET ON YOUR NERVES? Or were you just DRUNK AT THE TIME OF SURVEY? (Moran, 2011:80)

Clearly, Moran is convinced that deep down all women are feminists and in her humoristic and conversational style she tries to make the readers agree. Moran's view corresponds with Moi's definition of what a feminist is, namely someone who supports the new women's movement from the second part of the twentieth century. Moreover, Moi has come to the conclusion that although most men and women share parts of the feminist view, few actually call themselves feminists. Thus, Moi also advocates for women to participate in the still needed struggle for women's equality and claims that the task as feminists "is to prevent the patriarchs from getting away with their habitual trick of silencing the opposition. It is up to us to make the struggle [...] an explicit and inevitable item on the cultural agenda" (Belsey, 1997:132).

Hidden sexism

While these assumption of what a woman is are still prevalent in our society, Moran claims, they are difficult to detect. "These days" she says "sexism is a like Meryl Streep, in a new film: sometimes you don't recognise it straightaway" (Moran, 2011:128). She describes the blunt sexism that women experienced before the second-wave feminism in the early 1960's

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where it was direct and “all, 'know your limit's women,' 'make us a cup of tea, love' and 'Look at the rack on THAT” (Moran, 2011:129). “These days” she continues “a plethora of shitty attitudes to women have become diffuse, indistinct or almost entirely concealed” (Moran, 2011:130). She exemplifies this by describing how women today must laugh along when encountering sexism, because the men are only “having a laugh”. This in turn, she compares with what has happened to racism, anti-Semitism and homophobia in society; “modern sexism has become cunning. Sly. Codified.” (Moran, 2011:130). In this respect, it is harder for women to object to sexism than what was the case fifty years ago. However, Moran, presents her own solution to such defence. She suggests that women ask themselves if what they encounter is polite, and if not, rather than calling it sexism, they should call it manners. In that way, the modern, codified misogyny can be solved (Moran, 2011:131).

The problems that Moran here points to would also be difficult for Nightingale, Woolf and Friedan to say, state and enunciate. Although the attitudes towards women in their time were less subtle, it was not acceptable for women to object. Also, it is not a coincidence that Friedan refers to her own project as “the Problem that Has No Name”. Interestingly, according to Deborah Rhode, this problem has now become “the ‘no problem’ problem”, implying that the reluctance to speak up on behalf of women from Friedan’s time has reoccurred. (B. W. Taylor, Rush, & Munro, 1999:121). Nevertheless, all these women were pioneers in that they said things that had not been named before, just as Moran is doing today.

Current status of women

Similarly to Woolf, Moran also explores “the given” or what de Beauvoir named, “woman as the other” although she has a different view of what caused it. To her, the low status of women stems from the fact that we throughout history have fallen short on major achievements compared to men. This is why men born at the end of the Victorian period pre-feminism see women as unequal and second-class citizens. They are raised to regard woman as “the other”. In our society, these men are powerful figures in both business and government positions, and in Moran’s view, “[t]he entrenched bias against the working, liberated female will only die out when they do” (Moran, 2011:134). Her vision on this matter corresponds with Woolf’s idea that women could not write as well as men in the beginning of the twentieth century, due to a lack of a powerful female literary tradition. Woolf reinforces her argument by inventing Judith Shakespeare and given the circumstances of the treatment of women of her time, she claims there is no way even talented women could match men in literary achievements. Similarly to Woolf, Moran urges women to contest the constructed

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ideas of womanhood and primarily this can be achieved by reclaiming feminism.

According to Moran, “the main place where our perception of women is currently being formed” (Moran, 2011:247) is through various female icons. To exemplify this, she presents Katie Price as an icon who “has come to embody a whole nexus of female issues” (Moran, 2011:248) and thus an important part of the celebrity culture. Price was initially convincingly portrayed as a feminist icon by the media, due to her celebrity and economic status. However, what Moran found when she interviewed her, was a successful, yet self-absorbed, woman who had absolutely no interest in current issues. Although Price’s public image plummeted within a few years, she nevertheless represents a phenomenon in society. The concept of woman is represented by celebrities such as footballer’s wives and sexualized female pop-icons. Moran’s greatest concern with this is the way these female icons are written about in the media, which is in a hugely reductionist and damaging way. In a disproportionate manner, the focus is on the appearance of female celebrities compared to their male counterparts. Through emphasising their looks, weight, clothes, in addition to their physical and mental health, the focus is steered away from their achievements and they are yet again reduced to merely a body.

Moran on anger

Similarly to Woolf, Moran also brings up how women are not expected to show anger. To illustrate this, she discusses how female politicians along with most women are judged on their looks and how they are “not allowed to say that this makes you grumpy, or angry” (Moran, 2011:210). Moreover, in relation to her own quest to becoming a proper woman, she lists the things that would blow her “pretending to be a proper woman cover” and getting angry is one of them. Clearly, the contemporary ideal of woman still does not include women showing her anger. Moran contradicts this view, and suggests that women should reclaim the concept of strident feminists and that they should proudly acknowledge this out loud. If they cannot do this they are “basically bending over, saying, ‘Kick my arse and take my vote, please, the patriarchy’” (Moran, 2011:72). In Moran’s vision the only way to move beyond the current fixed notions on womanhood is to reject to conform to them and to speak openly about them. Consequently, a woman not being allowed to show anger is only one of the notions that need challenging in our society. What we see here then is that Moran takes a different standpoint to anger than Woolf, who recommended that women disguise their anger. Woolf’s view is described by Shoshana Felman as an inadvertent fear of falling short of feminine ‘propriety’, pointing to the impossibility of appearing angry and remaining

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‘feminine’ (Felman, 1993:128-129). Felman argues that Woolf was constantly conscious of being overheard by men, and therefore not able to break free from the constrictions upon women writers. Moran, on the other hand, openly challenges these constrictions and makes way for women to be and say whatever they want.

With this, Moran is expanding the concept of women, saying that there is no conflict between being a woman and being angry. Throughout her book, Moran challenges the restrictions that ideology continues to place on us, implicitly stating that it is unfeminine to have body hair, choose not to have children, and being angry. Thus, she shows us that while we think of ourselves as liberated and free, the narrow definition of femininity that Woolf encountered is still largely present in our own contemporary society.

Mission completed?

Moran set out to figure out how to be a woman. In the postscript of her book she discusses whether or not she has succeeded. Firstly, she finds that there are parts of being a woman that she has yet to figure out. She mentions teenage children, menopause and family bereavement as things she still has not experienced and ironing, driving and maths as things she is not good at. However, she stops herself from finding more things she is unable to do, as she is against the female habit of finding shortcomings with themselves and not allowing themselves to be content. What is especially interesting here is that she is talking about attitudes among women and not men. Implicitly, she is saying that women need to take responsibility for their own well-being in society and allow themselves to be comfortable in their own skin. Moran then asks herself if her project has succeeded and that she knows how to be a woman. Her answer is confirmative and the most important revelation she has come to through writing her book is

to just...not really give a shit about all that stuff. To not care about all those supposed ‘problems’ of being a woman [...] Yes – when I had my massive feminist awakening, the action it provoked in me was a ...big shrug. (Moran, 2011:298)

Through acknowledging and pronouncing her feminist self, she feels that she has found her true self. Her project now, then, seems to be to help other women become truly liberated. She also admits that the title of her book is misleading, as she does not advocate the notion that it is woman’s primary concern to fit any socially constructed category. Her take on this is that all people, men and women, should be considered ‘the guys’, in the sense that everyone is in society *together*. In her concluding remarks, she gives her honest and final thoughts:

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what I really want to be, all told, is a human. Just a productive, honest, courteously treated human. One of ‘The Guys’(Moran, 2011:309)

Moran’s project of finding out how to be a woman, and finally realising that she does not want this after all, connects well with what Judith Butlers famously uttered, “all gender is a performance” (Butler, 1999:23). Femininity for her is something that is always performed and completely a social matter with identity manifested in performativity. Understandably then, Moran choses to move away from the performance of being a woman and rather considers herself as “one of the guys” or just human. Hence, the result of her writing is the same as what Nightingale, Woolf and Friedan found, namely that basically they feel like and want to be human beings.

Conclusion

This thesis has been a study of the narrative of the (female) self as expressed in writing, and how women attempt to discover their own identity, both in concord and in conflict with the dominant ideology of their contemporary societies. The aims have furthermore been to explore how ideology has tended to affect women *as* women and how this is manifested in writing. I have tried to get a further understanding of these issues through close readings and comparative analyses of Florence Nightingale’s *Cassandra* (1928), Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Caitlin Moran’s *How To Be a Woman* (2011). By examining these texts and relating them to feminist and literary theories I have found that the restrictions on women in these different periods were all manifested in their writings. Although the image and ideal of womanhood varied in all periods, it is strikingly clear that the one thing that these ideals had in common was that they created relatively great limitations for women, both in allowing them to forge a human identity and in enabling them to become active social and cultural subjects.

All four texts from each of these periods try to approach the problem of woman from different perspectives, yet all with a point of departure in their own selves and from an autobiographical perspective. Nightingale wrote *Cassandra* at a time of despair in her life, as she detested the forced idleness that was being presented to her as a recipe for middle-class women's lives. This then, resulted in her angry outburst *Cassandra* where she debates and challenges all the restrictions on women that she herself suffers under. She also challenged the limitations of women related to their intellect and found that women needed to make full use of their brains to lead full lives. While her text is a third-person essay, the manuscript had

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been altered three times, from a dialogue that was closely related to her own life into an autobiographical novel, before it was finally published in 1928. Although not a clear autobiographical text, it is evidently linked to the author's own life and through writing it Nightingale moved away from the condition of woman and found a vocation for herself. This then, signals that she did, in fact, find herself through the process of writing, and thus was able to free herself from the restrictions imposed on her by her family and society as a whole. As we all know, she is now mostly known as the woman who created the profession of nursing.

Woolf, on the other hand, wrote from both a literary, social and personal perspective and her modernist view that everything was up for debate and change manifested itself in her writings. Woolf challenged the traditional masculine narrative, by experimenting with narrative and language to construct a different subject. She rejected the concept of an essential male human identity and favored the androgynous mind in writers, thus developing further Mary Wollstonecraft's appeal to see females not only as women, but as human beings. Woolf suggested that instead of seeing women as one homogeneous group, one should focus on heterogeneity and the personal and held that this would provide less limitation for women in society as well as in writing.

Through the first two chapters it becomes clear that both Woolf and Nightingale shared a belief in the importance of freeing women's intellect from the ideological constraints to which it was subjected, yet a changing ideology of womanhood allowed Woolf to take her challenges to social and economic obstacles to female ambitions further than Nightingale.

Woolf also went further in advocating a new definition of womanhood and femininity.

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