

Stephen king's
"misery" and fay
weldon's "the life and
loves of a she devil"
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The two novels, Stephen King's "Misery" and Fay Weldon's "The Life and Loves of a She Devil", belong to the genres of horror and romance. The distinct style in which the novels are written are recognised by the reader by identifying the several familiar conventions of each of the genres. There are different classifications of genre that are written in a particular format or structure in order to fulfil certain expectations for the reader.

For example, a typical novel would follow the reader's expectations of a 'typical' romance narrative, where the plot revolves around a romantic theme or a boy meets girl love story. The reader might expect there to be a tough, handsome heroic male alongside the typically passive, beautiful female character. The reader would expect the final closure of the story to be of a positive romantic climax. The reader would be satisfied by this typical closure, as most novels tend to have these 'happy endings' where the two lovers live 'happily ever after'.

Batsleer suggests that the conventions of a romantic novel ... "identify women with sexuality (a forbidden pleasure) and constantly defer the sexual consummation of hero and heroine... (1) It is through these expected conventions of a genre in a novel that representations of gender are constructed. An inequality of class between the hero and the heroine appears to be crucial to the plot of modern romantic fiction. For example, women are often portrayed in roles of lesser importance, that of a weak and fragile housewife. The portrayal of men however is often of the brave hero and the handsome lover.

This is not surprising if we look to the fact that men in our society generally hold the economic power, and that a woman's status is identified with that of her husbands : finding an appropriate husband is the problem and the most effective way to ensure financial and social stability. Indeed Anne Cranny - Francis writes in ~Feminist Fiction~ that " Inequality of class is as much a mechanism of the romance as the gender relationships. (2)

This notion appears to be reaffirmed by the narrative of the popular romance where the heroine transcends her own class and economic circumstances by being virtuous enough to be desired as a wife by a member of class above her. " The Life and Loves of a She Devil" and " Misery" examine different constructions of gender. It is through these novels, the reader can comprehend and observe the various gender portrayals, which are illustrated and reflected through the particular conventions of the horror and romance genres.

In this essay, I will attempt to examine this closely, looking firstly at how far the novels in question can be said to be reaffirming the traditional roles between the sexes then going on to examine the possible challenges they offer. Fay Weldon's " The Life and Loves of a She Devil" is a romantic satire which focuses on the life of Ruth Patchett whose life takes a drastic turning point when her husband leaves her for another woman, named Mary Fisher. Her character is of utmost femininity and sophistication and she acquires all that Ruth is not and what Ruth desperately desires to be.

Mary Fisher is ... " small and pretty and delicately formed, prone to fainting and weeping... she is a writer of romantic fiction... "(3) Ruth Patchett is the

main character, thus, novel being of the romantic genre, the expectations of the main female character would be one of a typical dependent and passive nature according to the reader. In terms of her physical appearance she would typically be thin and beautiful.

However, Ruth opposes this image on her own accord, she is ... " six foot two inches tall, which is fine for a man but not for a woman... a hooked nose... y shoulders are broad and bony and my hips broad and fleshy ... I was unlucky, you might think, in the great lucky dip that is woman's life... " (4) Ruth is illustrated as having qualities of almost a masculine nature. This represents a clear contrast to the stereotypical female the reader might come to expect from a typical romance or horror novel. Ruth defines Mary Fisher as her enemy to whom her husband has betrayed her with and whom has lost him to. Mary Fisher, unlike Ruth, possesses feminine qualities that all men desire, she poses no threat to him either sexually, intellectually or physically.

The fact that she is writer of romantic fiction is significant in enhancing this feminine charm and sophistication. Through her, the romantic conventions are reinforced. This allows the reader to associate women with qualities of virtue, which is clearly illustrated through the close bond between Mary Fisher and romance. However, although Mary Fisher fulfils all that is expected of the heroine in terms of her appearance in the romance genre, she then rises as the illainous character due to her actions.

Ruth's quest for revenge is justified as the reader can now understand and sympathise with Ruth's situation and her desire for revenge. The author of " The Life and Loves of a She Devil" is a woman and the novel is aimed at a

female audience. It is clear that Weldon is aiming to draw more attention to the significance of women by using a female central character to reverse the withholding of power from the male domination to the female. Batsleer suggests " In romance, women's desire is a powerful dynamic that structures the plot, even though masochistic, passive dependent, jealous... 5)

The most important theme in the romantic novel is the love story and the final completion of a resolved relationship is also of significance to the role of the female character in a romantic novel. However, in contrast to the tough male character, the conventionally constructed female character is created to devote herself to the male character. They must trade what he can give her materially and socially for what she can give him emotionally. The emotional arena is the only one in which the heroine is allowed to be superior to the hero.

However, " The Life and Loves of a She Devil, challenges this idea, as Ruth displays powerful female strength continuously through her transformation from a conventionally passive housewife into a dominant she devil. The various ways in which women are expected to reflect and fulfil the roles of the housekeeper, mother and wife are also explored by Weldon. ... " I recite the Litany of the good wife... I must be grateful ... I must be grateful... and spend my days showing it by cleaning and cooking... Those who earn most outside the home deserve most inside the home... (6) Weldon examines this cultural viewpoint that women should be the homemakers whilst the men should be the ' breadwinners' through the character Ruth. ... " But the Litany doesn't work. It doesn't soothe: it incenses. " (7) It is through Ruth's

character that Weldon challenges these traditional notions of the female in <https://assignbuster.com/stephen-kings-misery-and-fay-weldons-the-life-and-loves-of-a-she-devil-essay/>

conventional romance and horror genres. Ruth rebels against these ideas by transforming herself into a she -devil and reinforces the feminist viewpoint by doing so. Ruth appears to confirm the conventions of the passive wife in the first six chapters of the novel.

However, Ruth's transformation occurs after a horrible evening with her husband and her in-laws. Her transformation is made visible when her husband says ... " a bad mother, a worse wife and a dreadful cook... a she devil... "(8) However, Ruth's unhappiness develops into a determination of vengeance and revenge upon those who have betrayed her and upon the restrictions of the traditional female role. " The Life and Loves of a She devil" follows the conventions of the horror novels where one would expect a dramatic transformation into a monstrous figure or an evil presence.

Ruth's character transforms to this demonic, monstrous status due to her unhappy, unsatisfactory background, the feeling of insignificance and unattractiveness. However, betrayal by her husband who leaves her for another woman is the ultimate cause for this transformation. ... " I am a she devil... I want revenge. I want power. I want money. I want to be loved and not love return. " (9) However, it could also be argued that it is the restraints of norms and values of society, that are true evil presence in the novel.

Therefore, Ruth not only battles for revenge against her husband and his mistress, but she is also rebelling against these socially enforced norms and values of the traditional housewife role. Weldon's " The Life and Loves of a She Devil" challenges these social constructions of gender roles that are promoted by the horror and romance genres, in that the most dominant and

' devilish' character is female. The novel is aimed at a female readership, as both the author and main character are female. The reader will empathise with Ruth, the main character, as we can see it from her point of view.

Therefore, we are engaged totally with Ruth's villainous actions and her transformation. She makes the reader follow her adventure, which deliberately influences the reader to have empathy for her. This challenging of gender stereotypes is illustrated further when Weldon deliberately places Bobbo and other male characters in lower inferior positions to Ruth.

Women's revenge upon male authority is symbolised when Weldon purposely uses Ruth's vengeful forgery of Bobbo's accountancy records, which results in prison for him. Batsleer supports this view of women not repressing their desires and expressing them ... Compelled in actuality to service the needs of others, women may find in romance a recognition, quite centrally represented, of their own needs and desires.... " (10) The quote above highlights that romantic fiction according to several women, satisfies their ideal fantasy of an everlasting love story. It is a form of escapism from their everyday dull routine of domesticity. Weldon further challenges the stereotypical constructions and reinforces the idea that women can be powerful by now showing Ruth to be an independent business woman, employing women and giving them an opportunity to further themselves.

Weldon elaborates upon this reversal of the roles of men and women in society, as she focuses on and describes Ruth's sexual experiences with men such as Carver and Geoffrey, having no emotional attachment whatsoever.

She uses the men as a way of feeling loved but does not intend to return that love. Weldon associates Ruth to the actions of the traditional macho, red-
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blooded male who uses women only as a way to satisfy his sexual desires. This aspect of human behaviour and the relationship between men and women is highlighted in John Berger's "Ways Of Seeing". ... "Women are there to feed appetite ... a woman has been to be born ... nto the keeping of men..." (11). Through the character Ruth, the conventions of gender, usually promoted by the romantic fiction are challenged and brought into doubt as Ruth herself proves to be a powerful and an independent woman. However, she also appears to confirm gender stereotypes of the fragile female when she suddenly begins to transform herself into a woman whom men cannot resist, an identity of Mary Fisher. However, it can be argued that the author includes this deliberately in order to reflect that Ruth the she-devil is not deceived by the myths and ironies of romance in that, she achieves the goals she has set out to achieve.

She illustrates this in the final closure of the novel where she achieves Mary Fisher's life, a life which once seemed so fulfilling and desirable yet so hard to obtain. "The Life and Loves of a She Devil" does not follow the stereotypical conventions of the romance genre. It can be argued that an anti-romance is created through Ruth who addresses this myth of romance. The novel does not follow the typical narrative of a romance of the "... boy meets girl and live happily ever after..." storyline.

These typical conventions of a romance are deliberately re-written by Weldon in order to reflect the ironies of an emotion that can be very deceiving to a person's life. The quote below by Batsleer confirms this "Romance is either an eternal verity... or a dangerous delusion..." (12) Ruth sees romance as this 'delusion' and recognises the ironies of romance and <https://assignbuster.com/stephen-kings-misery-and-fay-weldons-the-life-and-loves-of-a-she-devil-essay/>

thus is successful and victorious. Mary Fisher however, is deceived by romance and the virtue of a typical happy ending thus ends up suffering for not recognising this dangerous delusion.

Another novel, Stephen King's "Misery", is also identified as being in both the romance and horror genres. In contrast to "The Life and Loves of a She Devil", a male author writes "Misery" and the main character is also male. However, both novels include female characters that are villainous. In "The Life and Loves of a She Devil", the female is the villain whilst the victim is male. Like "The Life and Loves of a She Devil", "Misery" also challenges the stereotypical gender conventions that are constructed in horror and romance genres. Identical to Ruth, Anne Wilkes is the monstrous character of the novel.

Her physical appearance in comparison to Ruth is described as being ... "a big woman... no feminine curves at all... unwelcoming... solid..." (13) The novel challenges gender stereotypes as surprisingly, the male author gives authority and power to the female character Annie whilst Paul is passive and helpless. This contradicts Batsleer's view ... "the authority of the hero... the dominance, universality and taken-for-granted character of masculinity..." (14) Similar to Mary Fisher, Paul Sheldon is a romance novelist. Anne Wilkes is a nurse and most significantly Paul's fan.

The representation of Annie is of a deceiving one, as one would associate a nurse with loving and caring qualities, a respectable figure who is there to give tender loving care to others. However, she is totally the opposite to these expectations of a caring woman and is reversed into a dangerous and

psychotic figure. The author rebels against the traditional norms of gender roles as he grants all the power to Annie. Her physical appearance lacks feminine qualities and is of a masculine nature, which the reader associates with images of strength and dominance.

She reflects the stereotypical strong male and her power over Paul both mentally and physically challenges the typical gender female stereotype. The fact that Annie forces her breath onto Paul is one that the reader would associate with a masculine way of behaving. ... " the breath... forced into him the way a man might force a part of himself into an unwilling woman... raped back into life... " (15) The above act likens to the act of rape. King reverses the role of power from men who can use a part of their body to rape a woman and gives this power to Annie who rapes Paul symbolically with her horrible breath.

Continuously throughout " Misery", it is Paul who as a result of a car accident is considered to be helpless and weak. In contrast to the constructions of the tough male hero, he relies upon Annie for food, water and most significantly medication. Annie is able to exert control over Paul as he is not physically able to fight against her. In opposition to " The Life and Loves of a She Devil" where the reader sees the novel through the eyes of the villain Ruth, in " Misery" the reader sees the of the victim, the male character. The purpose of this is that the reader can immediately relate to and empathise with his horrifying situation.

Like " the Life and Loves of a She Devil", the significance of romance is reflected. Annie is very hurt by the death of her fictional heroine that she

urges Paul to set alight his new novel and write another, which will resurrect her heroine back to life. Like Mary Fisher, Annie is also deceived by the delusion of the romance and its conventions. The importance of the story is reflected through the mention of the character Scheherazade, a heroine who prevented execution by telling stories. Paul himself uses this method of storytelling in order for himself to survive.

The longer he delays Annie for her new book, the longer the delay will be for his death. As the novel is written by a male author, the reader would expect the male character to be the conventional male hero, who survives by his own means. However, Paul survives by following the actions of Scheherazade, a female. King challenges the constructions of gender that are usually present in horror and romance genres, continuously throughout the novel. Paul is the passive character, whilst Annie represents the dominant figure. This is evident in chapters thirteen and fourteen, when an officer comes to visit the house.

The reader would expect the officer to display the masculine characteristics that are often present in horror and romance genres. However, King reverses this, as it is the female character that displays these characteristics by killing the officer. However, the final closure of the novel confirms the depiction of the tough male hero and good over evil, which Paul displays when gains his strength. .. " I'm gonna rape you because all I can do is the worst I can do. So suck my book... " (16) Paul finally satisfies the expectations of the powerful male.

He does this by symbolically raping Annie with the burning pages of his book, a book that is so precious to her. In the end, Paul completely defeats Annie thus confirms the conventions of the horror genre. Although " Misery", which is written by a male author, challenges several of these gender stereotypes, it finally fulfils the expectations of the romance and horror genre with the victory of the male hero and good triumphing over evil. However, " The Life and Loves of a She Devil" in contrast to " Misery", is by a female author and challenges all of the gender stereotypes as reflected by the horror and romance genres .

According to Batsleer, in romance ... " the most important element of all is the resolution of the fictional conflicts and dilemmas, the individual - but - universal happy ending... " (17)) Both of the novels confirm Batsleer's view. As explained previously, " Misery" is evident of this happy ending in the final resolution of the novel. Although " The Life and Loves of a She Devil" is rebellious against these gender conventions, in that the emale villain is victorious, the reader however is satisfied that a happy ending has been reached as the novel is read from villain's perspective.

The interpretation of a novel depends on the gender of the reader. Both the genders have different perspectives and the conventions that are displayed in a particular genre, are in fact instructions to stereotypical constructions. Therefore, although the author presents these ideas, it is the reader that makes his or her judgment on the novel in order to fulfil their own expectations and decide if justice has been reached.