

# [Analyse 166) isabella believes this is a](https://assignbuster.com/analyse-166-isabella-believes-this-is-a/)

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Analyse the representation offemale criminality AND/OR subversive female behaviour in works studied on themodule.  This essay will explore how femalecriminality and subversive behaviour is represented within the novellas TheHistory of the Nun and The Fair Jilt. The essay will analyse how andwhy the female heroines came to commit such crimes, and the aftermath of theiractions.

It can be argued that crimes within the novellas are committed becauseof the harsh restraints assigned to women of the time period they were set. This essay puts forward the idea that within The History of the Nun, femalecriminality takes place because of the protagonist’s desire to protect herreputation, and within The Fair Jilt, crime is represented as a way forthe main female character to break away from the sexist gender roles by takingon more masculine characteristics. This essay will also explore the effect thatviolation of vows has on crime, and the punishment given after.    WithinThe History of the Nun, Aphra Behn explores eighteenth century femaledesires. Behn designs Isabella, who incorporates ‘ conflicting versions of theperfect woman.’ (Hultquist, 2015, pg 488) Isabella is both the virtuous nun whoremains true to her vows, and also the lustful woman who desires a marriage. Behn purposely forms a situation in which Isabella’s desires are not the issue. On the other hand, the patriarchal society’s rules and expectations of womenare what cause the problems.

Behn builds an environment where Isabella’scomplicity within the patriarchy ruins her, and the story concludes in frenzy, however, not without justice and pardon.   As Isabella grows up, she falls in love withthe handsome Henault. Isabella’s emotions clash as she concurrently tries tosuppress her feelings for Henault and remain true to her vows. ‘ She triedfasting long, praying fervently, rigid penances and pains, severe disciplines, all the mortifications almost to the destruction of life itself, to conquer theunruly flame; but still it burnt and raged the more.

‘ (pg 166) Isabella suffersin silence; as her feelings for Henault torment her, she in return torments herbody. However, her feelings grow stronger; the more she shows ‘ penance’ themore her feelings ‘ raged.’ Isabella eventually concludes that her growingfeelings, even after her attempt at repression, must be approval from God: ‘ itwas resisting even Divine Providence to struggle any longer with her heart.'(pg 166) Isabella believes this is a sign from God; his acceptance andforgiveness in breaking her religious vows. However, as suggested by Behn, breaking a law, or here a ‘ vow’, is regarded as a sin (pg 139), and leads torevenge and punishment.

Therefore, here, Behn is emphasising how crime, especially crimes against Heaven, always ends in punishment. However, perhapsBehn is also emphasising the unfairness women were subjected to due to theirlack of choice. Isabella is forced to choose between her lover and her vows; tofollow her heart would be to break the laws of heaven.

Introducing her narrativein a monastery, Behn emphasises the outcome of violated laws to lovers and toGod, but also ’emphasises that vow-breakers can avoid rash decisions abouttheir fate’ (Hultquist, 2015, pg 488) if ‘ nunneries and marriages were notentered into till the maid so destined were of a mature age to make her ownchoice.’ (pg 141) Isabella was deemed suitable to make her decision when shewas 13, and as having a ‘ virgin innocence’, Isabella does not understand theimplication of her vows. Though Behn is condemning broken vows, ‘ the narratoremphasises the role that proper patriarchal protectors should play in a woman’slife, especially when she is too young to understand or protect herself.’ (Hultquist, 2015, pg 488)  Therefore, Behn is emphasising how women who act out of line, whether that be law-breaking or an attempt to subvert their strict gender role, often has the patriarchal society to blame, and the women become victims to thepatriarchy.

If Isabella’s father had allowed her to wait until she was of age, she would have chosen Henault, and no vows would have been broken. However, this first event foreshadows the rest of the novel, and the horrors thatfollow. After Henault’spresumed death through war, she remarries to an old suitor, Villenoys. Committed and devoted to her husband, Isabella, ‘ wanted nothing that couldcharm; so that she was esteemed the fairest and best of wives.’ (pg 178)Isabella values the essence of her dedication over the actual commodity. Isabella’s need for her two husbands, and for the approval of God and societybecome transgressive when they come to clash with the restrictions of thepatriarchal society that suggest that women should not have desires. Furthermore, Isabella’s love for her first husband come into conflict with thefeeling of duty to her first.

When Henault returns, ‘ Shame and confusion filledher soul, and she was not able to lift her eyes up to consider the face of himwhose voice she knew so perfectly well.’ (pg 181) Isabella no longer lovesHenault: ‘ she now only loved Villenoys.’ However, she is entrapped by theclashing of society’s rules. Even though her love for Villenoys is greater thanany feeling she still posses for Henault, she cannot justly stay with hersecond husband after discovering her first husband is still alive. ‘ She haslegal recourse, but a proceeding in court cannot remove the social stigmaattached to bigamy, nor can it clarify her emotional confusion.’ (Holquist, pg490) Isabella is terrified of the shame this will bring onto her name: ‘…shameunimaginable (…) the scorn of the town, who will look on her as an adulteress.'(pg 181) Therefore, Isabella has to make a decision.

Similarly, theintroduction to the novella held a decision for Isabella; she had to choosebetween her vows and love Now, she must choose between her reputation and thedevotion she has for her second husband. Helpless against her feelings, Isabella falls into a pit of misery, similar to which she experienced years agowhen she had to choose between violating her vows and marriage. Isabella decides theact of murder is the only solution: ” she resolved upon the murder of Henault, as the only means of removing all obstacles to her future happiness.’ (pg 183)Isabella believes murder as her only option.

Because of the strict gender rolesenforced on women, the importance of their behaviour,  and the sympathysubjected to them, Isabella would rather murder her first husband, then, in away, murder her reputation. In a sense, due to the strict gender role and theemphasis on a woman’s role, Isabella feels as if she has no choice but to killHenault. Isabella believes ‘ murder the least evil.’ To her, committing murderis less evil than keeping him alive and facing the shame of being named aadulteress by society. Isabella commits the murder in an attempt to reduce her’desires and keep her social identity.’  Perhaps, Behn is placing part ofthe blame on the strict gender roles the patriarchal society enforces on women. If not for the suppression and lack of freedom women had, Isabella would nothave had to break her vows in the first place, nor would she have had to worryabout her reputation.

Therefore, Behn places part of the blame for crimes ontothe patriarchal society, perhaps emphasising how sometimes women are a victimto the patriarchy and are drove to commit such crimes. Due to Henault’sreturn, Isabella’s desires are beyond the authorised rules created to shieldher. Her lack of ability to suppress her clashing emotions take the form of themurder of her two husbands. ‘ Emboldened by ones wickedness’, Isabella murdersboth her husbands to ensure her the safety of her reputation. Isabella admitsto her actions immediately after the accusation she was the ‘ murderess of twohusbands (both beloved) in one night.’ The phrase ‘ both beloved’ incorporatesthe issue of her ’emotional absolutism.’ Because of her desire for both men, her contrasting emotions are dismissed as overdone and extreme.

Throughout her life, Isabella follows the role prescribed to her. She plays the virtuous role, andthe devoted wife. However, Isabella’s attempt at accepting her desires andgoing against her assigned role, she faces harsh consequences. The conclusionof contrasts and conflict constructed into the roles assigned to women ispsychological, as well as physical. However, Isabella dies as a woman ofvirtue, as shown through the description of her death: ‘ everyone bewailed hermisfortune.’ This final scene highlights the contradiction of her death; shefails to accept her desires and societal rules because there is no room for awoman’s ambition in society. Her wants and needs are implacable in the world ofpatriarchal ruling that create irreversible problems and conflicts for women. Therefore, it can be concluded, that because of the harsh suppression women aresubjected to, they often are driven to unthinkable choices and decisions, andsocietal rules can often be a catalyst for crime committed.

On the other hand, within the Fair Jilt, crime is presented a way for females toincorporate more masculine features in an attempt to subvert the patriarchalsociety. Miranda, who takes the position of a temporary nun, falls for thehandsome priest, Henrik. During a church service, Miranda ‘ put her Hand intoher pocket, and was a good while searching for her Purse…at last he drew itout, and gave him a Pistole…while the good man, having received herbounty…proceeded to the rest.’ (pg 81) This is the opposite of conventionalsexual gender roles, and foreshadows a a larger reversal of roles later on inthe novella. ‘ Sexual roles are wholly reversed (…) Behn uses this reversal tomock a whole system of power which more usually manifests itself in maleharassment of women.’ The inversion of roles here becomes less about thesubversion of male power and more about the grouping of women to question theirassigned gender role and to present a different type of system andhierarchy. Miranda takes on a moremasculine role within the novella. She becomes alive and effective, whereasHenrik remains inactive.

Miranda attempts to seduce Henrik, which leads to hisrejection. His rejection is the catalyst that Miranda needs to falsely accuseHenrik of rape, which causes his imprisonment: ‘ She elevated her voice so sucha degree, in crying out: “ Help, help. A rape.'” (pg 94) The inversionfollows through, and Miranda has successfully incorporated malecharacteristics. Miranda ruins Henrik’s name and reputation by accusing him ofrape. Even though Miranda’s is lying, she deceives everyone, and Henrik isalmost put to death. Miranda uses the words of the patriarchal system in areversal when her effort at force fall through. She uses this power she createsfor herself to gain more power, and manipulate situations to heradvantage.

Miranda moves on tomarry Prince Tarquin, and after running out of money, attempts to kill hersister, Alcidiana. She persuades her page, Van Brune, to try and execute hersister, but this fails. Eventually, her husband, the prime Tarquin, tries andfails to kill her also.

‘ The failure that begins in the convent culminates in afailed execution, a metaphoric representation of the failures Behn’s sees asinherent in societies that try to contain women.’ (Goulding, pg 44) Aduplicated theme is of a prevented action. This prevented action is repeated inthe narrator’s inability to write the novella as a moral fable. ‘ The narrator’svoice questions and subverts this facile moral framework and creates a worldmore complex and disturbing in its ambiguities.’ (Pearson.) The ‘ moralframework’ is defective and Behn’s power over the narrative emphasise thatidea: Miranda remains unpunished because the society in which she lives wouldtry to punish her because she was a woman.

Miranda is not a ‘ good’ person, however, Behn created her show Miranda as someone who acts outside of the law, and in turn, breaks away from the constraints of society. Therefore, Mirandabreaks the law in order to shake off her the strict gender role the societalsystem has assigned her since birth. However, in contrast, Isabella within the History of the Nun put to death. Behn is suggestingthat it is not necessarily the crime for her punishment, but the violation ofher vows. ‘ The vows are inherently dangerous for Isabella because the narratorhas led us to recognise that ‘” sins” sometimes occur because of circumstance.'(Goulding, pg 46) The monastery represents female suppression and entrapment toIsabella. Her desires are shown to be unimportant to the patriarchal society, which leads to her deadly crimes. It becomes clear to the audience that thesocietal system and suppression of women leads to sin by the violation of vows.

‘ The moral is, that without real choice, cannot take-or make-vows, and withinthe patriarchal system, there is no choice.’ (Goulding, pg 47) The crimes thattake place are the result of a patriarchal society that surpasses women so theyare void of making their own choices. Because women areneglected the choice and freedom of men, this seems to prevent them fromfollowing moral codes. Although Miranda is described by be ‘ innocent by nature'(pg 181), she cannot break away from the suppression she is subjected to. Isabella becomes ‘ also a heroine’ despite ‘ the loud proclamation of a moralpurpose.’ (Pearson.) What was introduced as a story about the consequences ofviolated vows, turned into a story of the effects of the patriarchsociety.

Similarly, Miranda actsimmorally through the entirety of The Fair Jilt. However, theintroduction begins with commemoration of love, as the ‘ most noble and divinePassion of the Soul.’ (pg 75) Female fragility is responded with male weakness. The narrator becomes frankly moralising: ‘ the fair Hypocrite…the deceivingFair.’ (pg 109) However, the irony throughout the novel questions the constantmoralisation. Behn’s characters are in conflict; they do not know whether tochoose the moral system that suppresses them or to rebel against it. Mirandaescapes punishment from her crimes and sins, presumably because she did notviolate any crimes as Isabella.

‘ To the end, the the narrator’s voice works todefuse its own simple moralizing.’ (Pearson.) The narrator dismisses any detailof Miranda’s ending, and instead reports with ‘ they say…’, taking a step backfrom her narration to only offer a simple moral ending. Overall, Behn, withinher novellas, presents patriarchal society as catalyst for a woman committingcrime.

She is suggesting that society is to blame party for a woman’a crimebecause, due to their harsh treatment and suppression, often, their lack offreedom, will lead them to lash out. Women will turn to crime, driven by thepatriarchal society, or to gain the freedom that it refuses them. Within theHistory of the Nun, Isabella turns to crime to protect her reputation fromshame. However, within the Fair Jilt, Miranda takes on a more masculinerole in order to resist the harsh entrapment that society places on her. Toconclude, Aphra Behn represents female crime as a way to subvert the sexistsystem and to resist strict gender roles.