

Literary texts call into question many of our essentialist ideas about gender ess...



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Human history has undoubtedly been male dominated. As a result, our literature too has tended to be male orientated, and while obviously I do not discount the great women writers of the last few hundred years, it is common knowledge that many struggled to publish because of their gender. Writers such as Mary Ann Evans Cross found it necessary to write under a male pseudonym (George Eliot) in order to guarantee publication and a readership. Traditional gender representations and literary theory reflect long-established societal roles: man is in power, head of a patriarchal society, while woman plays the subordinate role.

The most essential truth in gender studies is biological: that men have a penis and women do not. From this comes the notion that men are 'strong, active, rational'¹ while women are 'weak, passive, irrational'. (ibid.) The pen was seen as an extension of the penis in the power it held, which not only made language and literature patriarchal but phallogocentric, excluding women from the arena of writing. It also affects the way that women are represented in male literature - an historical portrayal is of male as subject and woman as object.

Bennett and Royle in their Introduction to Literary, Criticism and Theory are careful to distinguish between patriarchy which 'involves upholding the supposed priority of the male' and phallogocentrism which 'involves some of the more subtle, more symbolic and... more fundamental ways in which the phallus can be equated with power, authority, presence, and the right to possession. ' They summarize this in a passage by Jonathon Culler: 'Phallogocentrism unites an interest in patriarchal authority, unity of meaning, and certainty of origin. '(ibid, p. 143-4)

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Harry Clifton's poem *Monsoon Girl* is an interesting challenge to typical gender representations. Much modern poetry in fact does tend to be much more flexible in its rendering of the relative roles of men and women. On my first reading of *Monsoon Girl* however, I was struck by a few things that gave me a very negative impression of the poem. The words that remained in my mind after my initial scan were 'room we rent by the hour' (line 2), 'pleasure-girl' (line 10) and 'executive power' (line 26). I was left with the sensation that this was an account of a sordid liaison with a prostitute.

The mention of executive power suggested a business man indulging himself whilst away from home, and the connotations of the location, Bangkok, added to my feeling that this woman was being exploited. The fact that this was about a sexual encounter somehow literalized the symbolism of the phallus, thus emphasising the activity of the male in contrast to the passivity of the woman, his power over her and his right to possession. Indeed, a prostitute would seem to epitomise the passivity, submissiveness and objectification of woman.

However, upon a second reading, I noticed that this was not a passive woman. Nor is there a lack of respect in the way that the man describes her; rather she is admired: 'lovely and naked' (line 4). She is confident in front of him, enough to stand naked whilst she goes 'to the telephone... to put through a call/ For drinks, or hire a car/ To take us home.' (lines 3-6) Not only does she appear to have more control than we might expect, but it is noticeable that even in the first verse, there is evidence of equality between the man and the woman.

The room we rent by the hour' (line 2) and ' a car/ To take us home' (line 6) - my italics. There is no sense of a dominant male. On the contrary, he almost seems to have relinquished his position, and he does not relate to the world in a characteristic manner. The poem seems to be about his escapism, so he casts himself as a passive character, letting the world pass him by. He is inside, although ' outside, it will rain/ For weeks, months on end... ' (lines 13-14) while ' forgetfulness lies down/ With executive power' (25-6).

He uses the passive ' we'll be driven back', (line31) and again makes the reader conscious of an outside world, here behind the glass of the hired car. It is not the real world, and her ' delicate sex' (line 30) is a ' lotus-flower' (line 29), making him forget and pushing the world further from him, enabling him to ' dream the rainy months away' (line 23). But she is not his; neither has the upper hand. They are one, ' a tangle of legs and juices' (line 27-8), and ' a world turned upside down' (line 28) indicates the subversion of normality and perhaps by implication the roles in which they would be traditionally cast.

The poem remains enigmatic because of the penultimate line which brings the reader back to the sense of something not altogether legal: perhaps the woman still suffers. However, I am still persuaded that there is equality presented here that negates the traditional image of man, and it is emphasised by the implication that this woman is a prostitute. This seems to be a deliberate subversion of expectations: there is mutual respect and affection, and she is not cast as dependent, submissive and inactive. If anything, in his need to escape from the world, he is dependent on her.

Changes in society reflect on literature.

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Over time this has been a gradual process, but in the last century it is possible to look at small periods of time, crisis points, where change has happened quickly and in an unprecedented and extreme manner. One of these times is the First World War, where the whole structure of society was called into question, not only in the field of gender but in terms of class, religion and politics too. As far as gender was concerned, people saw the empowerment of women. It was necessary for them to take over men's jobs and they became important and far more active in society than ever before.

But I do not want to look at female war experience. I am more interested in the painful change that men were undergoing. For men fighting in the trenches, this was a change to be less chronicled and celebrated than despised and ignored. Although there were soldiers, many of them well-known, who chose to enlighten non-combatants about the war experience, it is rare that we are given the whole picture in poetry of the time. The Great War was attractive to many men of fighting age who saw it as the ultimate masculine adventure.

Lampada, where he compares war to sport, encouraging soldiers to 'play up! play up! and play the game!' (line 8) The slogan 'Women of Britian say "Go! "' enforced the heroic ideal: the lads were off to fight in a glorious war for their country and their women. But while gone, the women began to take their roles. This in itself was dispiriting for men who assumed that they would be able to fit back in to normal life upon returning home. It is no wonder that Ivor Gurney sees the unwelcoming Blighty as 'a grim-faced black garbed mother... a work-house matron' (lines 16-18).

The country has become feminine - or has feminine become masculine? If so, then can we look to poetry to prove that masculine has become feminine? I believe so. I looked at Herbert Read's *My Company* and Siegfried Sassoon's *Repression of War Experience*, and to me these presented two important aspects of what brought about the change that overcame so many men entrenched in the battlefields. Men broke down in the trenches. This is a well-known fact, and is a common subject in the poetry of writers such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon.

The condition was known as shell-shock and affected thousands of men, yet by those in charge it was given little credit as a real problem, simply a coward's way out. The effort required to not break down under the horrifying circumstances, was immense. Added to this was the sheer helplessness engendered by being imprisoned in the trenches, which involved little physical activity. In the first 32 lines of Sassoon's poem this internal struggle is reported: it is a forceful, determined, mock-cheerful attempt to hold his memories at bay.