

How does carol anne duffy present the theme of gender in litany and havisham?



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Duffy presents gender in the poems *Litany* and *Havisham* through society's views and expectations of women, and the effects it has on them show how being female was harmful to their wellbeing.

*Litany* creates an example of the ideal, successful woman. The reference to the brand 'American Tan' creates the image of all-American women - wholesome and patriotic, the perfect type of housewife to have, dutiful to their husbands and conforming to societal expectations with ease. The women's 'red smiles' allow the reader to infer that they manage to put effort into their appearance for the benefit of their husbands, while looking after the family and home, and keep a positive outlook - again, fulfilling the role of women at the time. Alternatively, the red of their lips connotes pain (blood) and danger, showing that this may be all a façade, and that underneath the make up, they're struggling and unhappy with the unsatisfactory, monotonous lives they lead. The 'Pyrex' and 'passing the catalogue' repeats the notion of the women mentioned as merely homemakers and nothing else - even when with friends, they still talked about housework, rather than anything else they could find more enjoyable; these women literally dedicated their lives to being an unpaid maid. This is Duffy showing the background of the time she grew up in - in the 1950s and 60s, women had no expectation to be anything more or less than mothers and home makers, and the patriarchal society had traditional values of nuclear families.

*Havisham* creates an example of the unsuccessful woman of the time - the word 'spinster' and the bitter tone alongside it presents the idea of being past a certain age and unmarried as tragic and the epitome of what women

<https://assignbuster.com/how-does-carol-anne-duffy-present-the-theme-of-gender-in-litany-and-havisham/>

didn't want to be. Havisham's 'yellowing' dress shows how unexemplary women didn't take care of themselves, contrasting the carefully made-up women in Litany. The dress no longer being white mimics how Havisham wasn't pure or wholesome like the ideal woman should be. The 'lost body over me' implies that she once had a body over her, implying that Havisham had premarital sex, proving that she was impure; however, it was a taboo subject in the 1950s-60s, especially for Havisham to talk about - Miss Havisham was a character from Dickens' Great Expectations, published in 1860, when societal expectations of women were even more strict than in Duffy's time - women had an image of being innocent, prim and proper, the opposite of the brass Havisham in Duffy's poem.

Despite the way the women were presented in Litany, Duffy displays how they were repressed underneath the figurative masks. The fact that 'language embarrassed them' shows how the women were so reserved and eager to be feminine, they were dumbing themselves down to maintain an appearance of being perfect. Additionally, the way they 'balanced' their smiles demonstrates that it was a forced action that the women struggled to do, again, only enduring it because they were expected to by everyone they knew. The use of onomatopoeia with 'crackled,' as well as 'cellophane' and 'polyester' invoke the sense of the women and their lives being plastic, and therefore man-made and induced, none of it authentic - it was all fake and for show, rather than for their actual happiness.

Unlike in Litany, Havisham is openly unhappy. The 'Whole days' she spent 'in bed cawing Nooooo' show that on the contrary to the women in Litany, Havisham is unreserved with her emotions, as she doesn't have anyone to

<https://assignbuster.com/how-does-carol-anne-duffy-present-the-theme-of-gender-in-litany-and-havisham/>

put on a show for - her fiancé left her, and she doesn't appear to have friends or family around, so she doesn't feel the need to repress her feelings that may be deemed unladylike; she is so hidden from society as a recluse, that she is unaffected by the expectations of her as a woman. Furthermore, the speaker in Havisham continues to go against societal norms when she says that she 'wished him dead.' She is countering stereotypes of women as meek and obedient by being so unfeminine and violent in her thoughts. In hindsight, the reader knows Havisham is lucky to be free from the relationships in the 1950s and 60s, which were sexist in their nature in the male-dominated world, but Havisham desperately wants her relationship back - her life has been destroyed by her break up. The women in both Litany and Havisham were as a whole, unhappy, which is possibly due to the role of women at the time being one that would be hard to find pleasure in.

In Litany, the structure shows the development of the speaker, but not the older generation. Firstly, the mother is proud, shown by her listing of objects such as the 'display cabinet,' used to show off enviable, beautiful items to visitors. Then, Duffy shows a lack of expression when the 'butterfly stammered itself in my curious hands.' The slow death of the butterfly, often bright and colourful shows the constraints of individuality in the strict 1950s/60s. Finally, then speaker's mother is humiliated to the point of speechlessness - 'mute shame.' But, unlike her mother, the speaker is liberated by the words that embarrassed her mother - the 'thrill' she got from it encouraged the speaker to keep fighting the expectations forced upon her. The speaker, as a member of the new generation, will see change and adapt with it as times move on, however, the mother is set in her ways,

and will never move on from how she has been raised to almost enforce the expectations to be the ' perfect' housewife on herself.

The structure of Havisham shows the speaker's emotions travelling in circles. Initially, she is angry, shown by her ' dark green pebbles for eyes.' The green has connotations of envy and jealousy and the pebbles suggest that she has hardened and is cold and inanimate. This, paired with the violent imagery, such as her wishes and prayers for his death, and the ' ropes on the back of [her] hands [she] could strangle with.' The use of ropes, rather than her bare hands is less personal, indicating less passion towards the victim themselves, she just wants to get out her anger. Next, she's upset - the ' cawing' and ' trembling' are pathetic and weak actions that highlight the misery of the speaker, as ' cawing' is reminiscent of a bird crying and ' trembling' tells the reader how the speaker is afraid to do menial tasks such as open her wardrobe. Then, the speaker is enraged again; the ' red balloon bursting' is a clear example of this as red connotes anger and danger (eg blood) and the plosive consonance of ' balloon bursting' creates the image of the speaker spitting as she rages on. Finally, she is back to misery as ' don't think it's only the heart that b-b-b-breaks' creates the image of the speaker blubbing as she sobs. The repetition of the two emotions show that the speaker is failing to move on, like the mothers in Litany. Miss Havisham from Great Expectations was jilted by her fiancé at the altar, and spent the rest of her life in her wedding dress, and even projected her bitterness onto her adoptive daughter.

Duffy explores gender in the poems Litany and Havisham through the speakers' development in the poems, and how they represent women at the time Duffy grew up and how she saw and was influenced by them.