

The Woman in Modernism

Heike Wrenn, English 428

“King and Queen of Serbia Murdered!” “Revolts in Russia!” “Greeks Revolt in Crete!” “King Carlos and Crown Prince Assassinated!” “Bulgaria declares Independence!” “Revolution in Portugal!” “Archduke Ferdinand Assassinated in Serbia!” These were just some of the headlines that appeared in newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century. The beginning of the century was a time of confusion and growing tension, of unease with social order and of uproar and revolution which eventually led to World War I. It was also a time of new advents, inventions, thought patterns and a sense of liberation from many traditional bonds; it was the beginning of the modernist era. Modernism is often defined as a response to the scientific, political and economic developments of the time and the way people dealt with those issues. The tension and unease that these issues brought along with them also manifested in the art of the time; it affected music, philosophy, visual art, and of course literature. Writers and authors of the time who reflected on these issues could not help but to give voice to the tension and change in their work, and a new literary genre, the modernist movement, was developed.

Modernism embraced the issues of class, gender, the struggle for knowledge, and the senselessness and alienation of the time. The movement was a response to an international sense of depression, the helpless feeling held by many at that time that nothing was concrete or reliable anymore. It dealt with the way human personality seemed to change, as Virginia Woolf once stated in 1910, and it embraced disruption and rejection to move beyond the simplistic. Gender issues have always been a topic in society as well as in literature, so naturally gender became a major focus of the modernist movement. Women, their intelligence and their judgment had always been regarded with contempt by a male-oriented society (Marsden). Women had been seen and treated more as complements to the men in their lives than as individuals or spiritual entities; they were depicted in literature as womanly, weak, dutiful, and stupid. Most authors continued to write with the misguided perception that women were always inferior to men.

For centuries, women were defined by men; the world was male-centered and male-dominated. Male philosophers and social theorists were the ones who identified woman with disorder, savagery, chaos, unreason, and the excluded “other.” According to James Branch Cabell women were considered nothing more than conveniences; they were useful for keeping a household as well as for copulation and pleasure. Hegel describes womankind as the “eternal irony of the community,” and Freud defines it as “the implacable enemy of civilization” (qtd. in Glasgow). Theory, logic, and order were considered to be masculine traits, the opposite of femininity. In her article “Feminism,” Ellen Glasgow states that “in the past men have confidently asserted that woman exists not as an active agent of life but merely as a passive guardian of the life force and that it is nature’s purpose that woman sit and watch.” The philosopher Schopenhauer claims that one needs only to look at a woman in order to realize that she is not intended for great mental or physical labor. Schopenhauer goes as far as to state that women are childish, silly, and short-sighted; he does not acknowledge women as human, but instead implies that men are the only fully human beings and that women exist on a plane somewhere between them and children (qtd. in Glasgow). Evil is another trait that has been attributed to women for centuries, a characteristic that dates back to the Biblical allusion of Eve’s temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden. Until the early twentieth-century, these traits and characteristics were all considered feminine and women were portrayed and treated accordingly.

In 1912, Mary Coolidge asked whether the characteristic behavior described as feminine is in fact an inalienable quality or merely an attitude of mind produced by the coercive social habits of past eras. After she carefully studied societies which stress gender differences from infancy and compared them to primitive societies where men and women were mostly equal in status she concluded that it is the stressing of these differences, the imposing of values and traits rather than inherent biological characteristics, which is responsible for perceptions of “the feminine.” Coolidge suggests that it is civilized man who has molded woman according to his standards and desires: “A successful woman must

be what man approved of,” and for that reason women have always conformed to the standards set for them (85). Coolidge further postulates that it is because women are never given the opportunity to act as they feel, because all traits and characteristics not in line with the feminine are suppressed and perverted from infancy, that “the womanly woman” stereotype was created with its excessive dependence on men for support and guidance (90).

Writing as late as 1935, Dr. Adler, a Viennese psychologist, agrees with Coolidge that “there is absolutely no biological basis for the inferiority of women” (“Idea of Women’s”). Adler, like Coolidge, holds men instead of women accountable for the feminine myth. Adler sees women’s inferiority as “fictitious invention of the male sex” and claims that women are made “to feel that they are not at the level with men from the very beginning” (“Idea of Women’s”). Adler makes the valid point that this myth of feminine inferiority is so strong that it will take women a long time truly become free of it and declare their independence.

Dora Marsden, after carefully examining the same issue in her article “Bondwomen,” also concludes that femininity and women’s inferiority are a social construct. Yet she claims that this is not necessarily due to the downgrading of women by men because “it is not possible for an outer force to give or take away freedom, it is born in the individual’s soul” (Marsden). Marsden suggests that the perceived inferiority of women exists because some women instinctively see themselves as inferior and have accepted this inferiority without question. These women seek comfort and protection, they long to be at the side of a man, and it is for that reason that women in male dominated cultures have been willing to sacrifice their image and identity for centuries. Since femininity is only a construct and not an underlying fact, Marsden claims it can be deconstructed. To unravel the myths of femininity women must choose to feel a sense of equality, that women can be fully independent of the men in their lives.

Ellen Glasgow has similar notions. She suggests that the years of false stereotyping of women by men have bred in many the dangerous habit of applying these misconceptions to themselves. They have denied their own humanity for so long and with so much earnestness that they have come to believe in the truth of this denial. The deconstruction of traditional views of women is a challenge not only because it is so established in male-dominated culture but also because women have often shown such an eagerness to conform to the ideals of men that they have defied nature and reshaped both their minds and their bodies after the model placed before them. Glasgow is in agreement with Coolidge when she suggests that this apparent passivity is not inherent but acquired, that it “is obliged therefore to disappear in the higher development of the race.” Glasgow, much like Marsden, believes that a woman’s identity is formed by her willing acceptance of society’s norms.

The turn of the century and its many changes, industrialization in particular, gave a number of women the chance to work outside of the home. According to Coolidge, “not a few” of these women were able to use their inherent intelligence and started to question and defy the traditional place of woman in western society (85). As time progressed a gradual change took place and “the new woman” emerged between the two world wars. One of the major aims of this modern woman was economic and financial independence. This type of freedom brought with it other rights: to choose whether to marry or remain single, to obtain work positions, the right of sexual expression and so much more. What was most important for “the new woman” was intellectual freedom; women were looking for self-realization, for the ability to use their intellectual abilities and talents to find themselves and their true identity. Needless to say this new woman became not only a threat to male-dominated societies but also a great source of material for the writers of the time.

As a result of the new feminist movement, literature of the modernist period often depicts the female as an individual who insists on her right to have a career or a family, or both, depending on her individual choices and desires. The “new woman” in literature is depicted as one who “emphasizes the identity of interests that all human beings have. While she recognizes the diversity involved in true equality, she sees that the diversity isn’t necessarily on the sex-lines but on the lines of what each individual has to contribute to society” (West 14). The “new woman” was far from perfect and some of her aspirations and behavioral patterns were far from admirable, but much of this, according to June West, was simply “a result of woman’s not being accustomed yet to freedom of choice” (14).

Although many changes are seen in the way women are portrayed in modernist literature—and

the “new woman” can certainly be detected page after page—many male writers were unable to let go of the old, established, feminine view of female characters. Tradition was still too strong and the “womanly woman” remained an important literary figure alongside this “new woman.” William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, Ernest Hemingway’s “Snows of Kilimanjaro,” and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* offer examples of how this new feminist view coupled with the old view of woman in modernist literature.

It is practically impossible to read “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” and not notice the influence that modernism has had on Hemingway and his work. He clearly acknowledges the rapid changes that have taken place in society and the way these changes have affected women and their status. His story attributes the character Helen with traits common to the new woman, though he struggles with his acceptance of the freedom and change in status that this new woman signifies. The hold that tradition has on Hemingway, and other writers of the time, is just too great; as Adler states, the feminine myth is so strong it will take more time to break it. Hemingway first introduces his reader to Helen as a caring, nurturing, motherly type of woman; she is concerned about her husband, Harry, whose leg is injured, and about his physical and emotional comfort. She takes on a very traditional, maternal role and she is portrayed as somewhat naïve and single-minded when she denies the reality that Harry will die. Hemingway strengthens the traditional aspect of Helen through Harry’s responses to her nurturing behavior. He apparently does not respect Helen or her thoughts; he accuses her of calling him names, calls her “a bloody fool,” disrespects her opinion and disregards her wishes when he has Bwana fetch him a drink she thinks will be bad for him. Yet within this same conversation between Harry and Helen, the reader is given a clue that she may not be as traditional as she first appears, especially after Harry alludes to the fact that this woman and “her bloody money” have supported him (Hemingway 1985). A traditional relationship would have had Harry supporting Helen and, with this role reversal, Hemingway addresses the fact that Helen’s financial support has not only allowed Harry to become slack in his writing but that it is also the reason for Harry’s resentment of Helen; he feels threatened by his dependence on her. In their next conversation Harry again shows total disrespect for his wife, and, keeping with the traditional treatment of women from that time, he makes it clear that he sees her as an inferior. As he meditates on their relationship, he first holds her accountable for his misfortune, as well as his death as an artist, but he quickly comes to realize that it is he and not she who is to blame. She is a good woman, a woman who loves him “as a writer, as a man, as a companion and as a proud possession” (1989). His new opinion of Helen is very modernist. Her opinion of him as a “proud possession” is in clear opposition to traditional relationships in which the woman was held as the man’s possession, in which the wife is always subordinate to her husband.

In one scene Hemingway presents the reader with a completely modernist view of Helen, a total role reversal: “She had gone to kill some meat and, knowing how he liked to watch the game, she had gone well away so she would not disturb this little pocket of the plain that he could see. She was always thoughtful, he thought. On anything she knew about, or had read, or that she had ever heard” (1988). In the past it was the man’s role to be the provider, to be thoughtful enough of his wife to care for and protect her. Hemingway even portrays Helen in a manly manner when she comes back into camp “wearing jodhpurs and carrying a rifle” (1989). As Harry continues to reflect on his wife he comes to the realization that what she most wanted was “someone that she respected with her” (1989), a desire very characteristic of the new woman. Harry realizes that “she had acquired him” (1989); she built him a new life, and he traded his old one for security. Traditionally, it had always been the woman who traded in “her life” for the security and protection a man would provide for her. As Harry continues to reminisce about his wife and becomes aware of her modernist traits, it appears that the hold that tradition and the feminine myth has on Hemingway prompts him to display her womanly traits again and blur those long-held associations with those of the new woman. In the middle of Harry’s struggle with death Helen is preoccupied with the way she thinks things ought to be, the way she wants things to be and with trivial, superficial things. As death comes for Harry, Helen dreams about Long Island, her father and her daughter’s debut. Hemingway clearly identifies the change in female status throughout this story. He firmly acknowledges that men were attracted to modern women yet feared the change and challenge presented by these women. These men are unable to let go of the womanly woman of the past, of that

long-established view of femininity. Hemingway continuously blurs the line between the feminine and feminist, not only in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” but in many of his other works as well.

F. Scott Fitzgerald experienced a similar struggle while writing *The Great Gatsby*. According to critics and Fitzgerald’s own statements made in interviews and letters, he was influenced greatly by his own experiences in Jazz Age New York. His fictional character Daisy was closely modeled after his wife Zelda, while many readers and critics saw similarities between the fictional Gatsby and Fitzgerald himself. The couple did what they wanted to when they wanted, they were both originally from the South, they were irresponsible, and just as Gatsby adored Daisy the author greatly loved his beautiful wife. *The Great Gatsby* was written as a result of Fitzgerald’s personal experiences in the 1920s and as a response to the issues of the time, among them the way women were perceived. Though women play a big role in his novel Fitzgerald only gives them secondary roles in the story, which keeps with the traditional view that women do not have a voice. Though these women have tremendous effects on men, which are often detrimental, they are portrayed as what Marsden has called “mere complements” to the men.

Daisy, though loved and deeply sought after by Gatsby, is used mostly to complement him or her husband Tom Buchanan. Myrtle, who would be seen as the complement of her husband Wilson, shows modernist characteristics in her pursuit of personal desires, but she is still a complement to her lover Tom. Both Daisy and Myrtle are treated with disrespect by Tom, since he sees them as inferior to him. Jordan Baker, though single and described as independent, is portrayed as an incomplete woman who needs Nick to be “that man to keep near her” (Marsden). Fitzgerald, like Hemingway, was influenced by modernism in his portrayal of women but he does not attribute to his characters clear and obvious traits. Daisy, Myrtle and Jordan are indeed modern women in search of pleasure, self-fulfillment and self-realization. Yet Fitzgerald is imprisoned by the long established view of femininity and was unable to free these women from their status as “prized possessions,” objects of man’s pride and pleasure rather than liberated individuals.

William Faulkner’s portrayal of women, too, was shaped by modernism. In his novel *The Sound and the Fury*, Faulkner exposes his readers to several female characters. Faulkner, like Fitzgerald, assigns very feminine character traits to some of his women though, like Hemingway, he also blurs the lines in portraying others, particularly Caddy and Quentin. Mrs. Compson, the mother figure of the novel, is portrayed in a manner that suggests that Faulkner’s view of women is radically old-fashioned and totally based on tradition. Mrs. Compson is characterized as a mindless hypochondriac who is always complaining and concerned only with the way she thinks things ought to be. She is not only unable to love and care for her children but to deal with life and the problems she is faced with. Jason, her son, treats her with a great deal of disrespect which depicts the idea of female inferiority and worthlessness that he associates with her and all women. Jason’s manner of discussing women in general makes it clear that he views all women as inferior to men. He does not trust women or believe they are capable of conducting business; he even suggests that women “do not acquire knowledge” and that they “all have an affinity for evil” (Faulkner 96). Jason’s beliefs and treatment of women, as well as the behavior of his mother, support this theory that Faulkner’s view of women is traditional and old-fashioned.

When it comes to Caddy and her daughter Quentin, however, Faulkner more clearly blurs the lines between the feminine and feminist and his old-fashioned and traditional views are greatly influenced by modernism and its effects on the role of women in society. The fact that Faulkner does not give Caddy a voice to tell her own story reflects his traditional view. Women were not given a voice in the past; their opinion simply did not matter. Faulkner attributes to Caddy a number of traditionally feminine values and traits, but he also gives her some modern and even masculine characteristics as well. The way other characters view and treat Caddy is another indication of how Faulkner blurs the feminine/feminist lines. To Benjy, his sister is a traditional mother figure who is loving and caring. To her brother Quentin, Caddy is a prized possession that he is unwilling to share; his ultimate goal is to protect and keep her to himself. Jason treats Caddy with the same contempt and disrespect with which he treats all women, but at the same time he is aware that Caddy is more than just a prize or possession of men. Caddy is not the old-fashioned southern belle that Jason would like her to be; she is instead a woman with a mind of her own who is strong, self-assured and independent. Not only is Caddy financially independent, but she also supports Jason; it is he who is financially dependent on her. Caddy even becomes a threat to Jason and his

masculinity, a role reversal which offers proof of the modernist influence on Faulkner's writing. In his portrayal of Caddy, he is continuously able to blur the feminine/feminist line.

Virginia Woolf was correct in her statement that human personality changed sometime around 1910. Modernism had a great effect on society and, as a result, a definite part in shaping gender roles in literature. The influence of modernism on writers of that era like Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner is undeniable. At the same time those male authors were unable to break the prominence of well-established and traditional views of woman. Although the womanly woman stereotype was always included in their writings, they were willing to blur the lines of traditional gender roles and portray female characters from a feminist point of view. In literature, as well as in society, the change of gender roles was gradual. The feminine myth is a strong one, however, and it still affects women and their literary representation decades after that initial progress was made.

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