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The True Genius of Woman: Use of Genre to Embellish Meaning in 19th Century Works

The nineteenth century, or the epoch reserved for “the genius of woman” (Gilbert and Gubar 407), was a thriving time for both social dispute and social demands. Not only were women still demanding freedom from oppressive social expectations surrounding their public and private spheres, but they were also beginning to protest aspects of society that had remained largely untouched by their predecessors. With the emergence of transcendentalism came a newfound respect for nature as well as a sense of foreboding when dealing with science or other practices that attempted to cheapen or expose the “secrets” of nature. Women identified, either consciously or unconsciously, with the enslaved men and women of the South and vehemently protested their being held prisoners in the so-called land of the free. The emergence of strong and industrialized sectors in cities in England and America soon developed into another field where men could subjugate young women and children. In spite of allegedly being the age of womankind’s intellect, women were denied almost all rights, including the right to vote. Hoards of women joined together in combatting these massive societal problems, their outcry ranging in volume from the most delicate form of satire, found in Jane Austen’s *Love & Freindship* [sic] to the more classic polemic prose from Florence Nightingale, with the poetry, novels, and speeches of many in between. Many writers, like Austen, Fanny Fern, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and Harriet Jacobs use the genre itself of their writings to embellish whatever claim they make within their works, using the public’s expectations for each genre either to obscure their views with

subtle satire or to shock and provoke passionate response. Others, like Mary Shelley and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, use popular trends or beliefs of the time period to further their arguments. Finally, the polemic prose of Margaret Fuller and Nightingale is most direct in delineating the purpose and argument of each woman's work.

In some major works of the 19th Century, many authors deliberately manipulate the genre of their work in order to emphasize their argument. An example of this practice lies within Jane Austen's *Love and Freindship*, a satirical epistolary novel. At the time, the epistolary novel was commonly found in the pulpy and sentimental romance novels that were so popular among ladies and uneducated women alike. These books perpetuated the 19th Century ideas that the ideal woman was highly emotional and easily overwhelmed in emotional situations. These women were constantly under the influence of these wholly irrational whims. This, Claudia Johnson proposes, suggests "that attaining the coveted status of heroine requires denying what every body needs to sustain life," pointing out that the "truer heroine" of *Love and Freindship* faints and dies in the face of grief (164). In dialogue showing the pitiful dependence of the family on its servants, Austen criticizes the "unconsciously fixed patterns of behavior" ushered in by the restrictions of early Victorian society (Stone 33). She mocks the eagerness with which women greet marriage in the following exchange between Laura and her noble and manly suitor: as he asks her, "Oh! when will you reward me with Yourself?" and she replies "This instant, Dear and Amiable Edward" (Austen 465). Austen also satirizes the sentimentality immortalized by romance novels in the relationship between Laura and her immediate confidante Sophia when the two women "flew into each others arms & after having exchanged vows of mutual Freindship for the rest of our Lives, instantly unfolded to each other the most inward Secrets of our Hearts" (467). According to Austen, selfishness has caused the disintegration of earnest

relationships, instead defining them as “contrived rebellions against obviously reasonable parents” and “casual, instantaneous affairs disguised as idealistic love” (Brown 333). Austen also employs selective capitalization of certain words to draw attention to and mock aspects of the overly-dramatized relationship between the two women, showing her disdain for the “inflated diction” that marred the genre she satirized (Hopkins 409). Similar to Austen’s subtle mocking of social problems are the satirical columns of Fanny Fern¹. These columns portray an exaggeration of everyday life for many women of the 19th century, providing a source of laughter and common experience for them. In “Mr. Pipkin’s Ideas of Family Retrenchment,” the patriarch of the Pipkin clan belittles his wife for spending one dollar on carpet cleaning, stating, “Pity you did not make it [money] yourself, Mrs. Pipkin; wives ought to live their end of the yoke” (Fern 589) while he himself spent four hundred dollars on “last year’s clothes” (Fern 589). He further suggests that Mrs. Pipkin dismiss the “nursery maid, and take care of baby yourself” (Fern 589), rendering Mrs. Pipkin’s ability to make money herself even more obsolete. Fern’s depiction of normal household affairs actually “destabilize[s] many culturally sanctified beliefs, and as a result the contradictions of the patriarchy end up trouncing the patriarchy” (Wright 109). Fern makes her point lightheartedly in some columns, like “Family Retrenchment”, much like Jane Austen’s consistent and playful exaggeration in “Love & Freindship.”

In Mary Shelley’s fictional tale “The Mortal Immortal,” as well as in Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s oration “Address to the New York State Legislature, 1860,” strong arguments are presented and supported using popular beliefs of the time. Shelley, a fierce transcendentalist, spoke out against the scientific community’s assault on nature using a pointedly gothic, or eerie, tone. While not specifically a genre, the gothic qualities of the work serve to increase the

¹ Scholar Elizabeth Wright notes that Fern’s irony is ambiguous and subject to multiple and often contradicting interpretations on account of a varied audience and unclear personal views.

popularity, and thus demographic reach, of the ominous short story. The spooky quality of alchemist Cornelius's laboratory and unnatural descriptions of a shady potion—"of a soft rose-color [...] First, it will turn white, and then emit golden flashes" (Shelley 502)—contributes to a warning against attempts to conquer nature. This culminates in a truly gothic image of Winzy heaping "the sod over her corpse" and longing for the elusive "deep silence of the iron-bound tomb" (Shelley 508), as his drinking of Cornelius's potion has rendered him with a "Forever [...]" thus truncated and null" (Shelley 508). Rhetoric and tale combine in warning readers of the "danger of ambition [and] the overindulgence of one's intellectual pursuits" (Markely 115). Shelley's literary exploitation of such a popular tone of work obscures her message without stripping it of its foundational power. In contrast to Mary Shelley, Elizabeth Cady Stanton uses not the popularity of a certain tone to further her argument, but instead employs widely-held societal prejudices against women, only to destroy them later. In her argument for women's suffrage in her oratory "Address," Stanton poses the rhetorical questions "What have women and Negroes to do with rights? What know they of government, war, or glory?" (631) simply so she can destroy these common convictions. She reassures the men of the New York Legislature that they have nothing to fear from a woman—especially not her "size, ferocity, [or] power" (Stanton 632). In reaffirming the notion of a meek, mild, and powerless woman, Stanton only strengthens her argument that suffrage should be extended to women at no cost to men at all.

In contrast to the more subtle use of societal "norms" to further an argument, employed by Mary Shelley and Elizabeth Cady Stanton are the more abrasive and straight-forward tactics of both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Jacobs. In her poem "The Cry of the Children", Browning employs dramatic juxtaposition to draw public (female) opinion to the horrors of child labor brought about by the movement to industrialize larger cities. The strong contrast between

“young birds [...] chirping in the nest” and “young, young children [...] weeping bitterly!” (Browning 527) is stark, clear, and disturbing, designed to draw immediate reaction and repulsion toward this corruptive force. Browning’s use of irony is obvious, as well, especially as she describes the children’s sentiment that “It is good when it happens [...] / That we die before our time” (528). Once again, in the unexpected image of children wishing to die, Browning prods her readers into acting out against the atrocity she has identified. Furthermore, in addressing her audience as “my brothers” in her very first line, Browning identifies this child abuse with male origins (527). She contrasts these neglectful, earthly fathers with a more Divine neglect, using the words of children once more: “‘Our Father!’ If He heard us, He would surely / [...] Answer” (Browning 530). Finally, Browning’s poem culminates in gruesome imagery of the purple blood of children covering the soles of “the strong man in his wrath” (531), an explicit decrial of the masculinity of industry. With the imagery of children and fathers, though, Browning’s metaphor is incomplete without mothers. In addressing the answerless and action-less “brothers” (528), Browning identifies women as the protectors of the children from the heels of patriarchy, making her views on “the degree to which women [...] should participate in the economic and political life of the country” (Byrd 31). Harriet Jacobs, in choosing to write an autobiography entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, uses this genre to her advantage. Although she assigns false names to people and places, Jacobs’s account of the psychological torture associated with being property garners much more clout in a first-person narrative. When Mr. Flint, Jacobs’s master, whispers “I would make a lady of you” (Jacobs 624) into her innocent ear, even the most feminine reader, a member of what Franny Nudelman would refer to as the “cult of sexual purity” (Nudelman 940), bristles against the coarse use of such a typically refined word. In touching upon her complete loss of dignity at the hands of such a perverted and masculine

monster, Jacobs identifies her own suffering as a “condition of shame and misery” (623). Interestingly enough, Jacobs appears to use some sexist assumptions of her time to her advantage when she writes “But my heart is so full, and my pen is so weak” (621), exposing the fallacies of the assumptions “not by definitively rejecting them, but by elaborating them from within” (Nudelman 941). This also allows her to imply a shared sentimentality between herself and her readers in order to inspire passionate outrage at the abhorrent conditions under which she grew up, despite a clear separation between them. This separation is most evident in the dichotomy of her diction, which fluctuates “between the highly stylized and oblique language that characterizes the sentimental-domestic fiction of the antebellum period, and a direct, succinct and descriptive style” (Nudelman 939). The oxymoronic tone of defiant and apologetic writer allows her to maintain a “vexed relatedness” to her white readers (Nudelman 942). In choosing stronger, less passive genres, both Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Jacobs can inspire more definitive support for their respective causes from each of their audiences.

Finally, polemic prose, characteristic of women writers of all centuries, is evident in the works of Margaret Fuller and Florence Nightingale, who use the genre as a tool to clearly define their problems with society. Fuller, in *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, develops a strong argument against the “ludicrous pictures” of women defacing voting booths with their mere presence (560). She attacks the viewpoint that a woman’s “delicacy was impaired by appearing in public” (Fuller 561), and questions if “Man will always do justice to the interests of Woman” (Fuller 561). Her position on the role of men in the continued degradation of women well into the 19th century is clear because her choice of genre allows her to craft a direct, if caustic, argument. While sometimes muddied with unclear rhetoric, Fuller’s views that “the deepest failure has been that of individual men” and “of individual women to their potential achievements”

(Robinson 86) ultimately prevail. Florence Nightingale joins Fuller in having a transparent genre within her polemic prose *Cassandra*, stating in her second paragraph that “passion, intellect, moral activity—these three have never been satisfied in a woman” (1017). Openly disgusted by the contradictory dichotomy of men’s attitudes toward *why* women cannot write, Nightingale clarifies that this is “from a material difficulty, not a mental one,” recognizing that “[n]othing else [besides feigning illness] will excuse us from” women’s demanding daily duties (1018). In what some scholars have called “explicit angry feminism,” (Showalter 407), she blames society, stating that it “fritters away the intellects of those committed to her charge” (Nightingale 1019). According to Nightingale, society itself forces women to excuse their having truly intellectual ambitions, blaming them on slights of character. Here, Nightingale’s argument is proud and unapologetic, aided by the no-nonsense tone of her polemic prose and by her belief that “women must be shocked into an awareness of their own anger and frustration” and thus into action (Showalter 410).

The implementation of genre to aid in the development of a thesis is prominent within nineteenth century women’s writings. Some, like Jane Austen and Fanny Fern, selected genres that made light-hearted social commentary possible, hiding their true intentions under a thin veil of subtle satire. Mary Shelley and Elizabeth Cady Stanton used certain societal fixations or assumptions to increase appeal for their own theses. Writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Jacobs implemented stronger techniques, like the sharp irony and contrast of Browning’s dramatic poetry and the shocking first person narrative of Jacobs’s autobiographical prose, leading to a more emotional response from readers. Finally, the classic polemic prose of Margaret Fuller and Florence Nightingale allow the women to forgo maneuvering around an argument in order to make their strong convictions known.

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