

WOMEN AS CHARACTERS: LITERATURE AND IDEOLOGY

Ana Lúcia Almeida Gazolla - UFMG

The treatment of women in American literature of the nineteenth century, from Romanticism through Realism to Naturalism, presents recurring features that contradict the accepted notion that these literary trends are totally opposed in the worldview conveyed.

The general aspiration of Realism is to deal with contemporary life and observed phenomena, breaking away from the stereotyped formulas of Romanticism. Realism, in Howells' famous definition, is the "objective representation of contemporary social reality," thus rejecting the fantastic, the fairy-tale quality, the allegorical, the improbable. Social criticism reflects a didactic intention, accompanied by a refusal of absolute moral positions and of the aristocratic and heroic view of reality. The exclusion of subjectivism and lyricism results in the technical demand for impersonality, for the suppression of the author's presence in the text, and the refusal to use fiction as a vehicle for wishful thinking. In theory, poetic justice is abandoned, since no moral judgement on the part of the author should influence the outcome of the work.

Naturalism moves one step further. Based on a refusal to accept teleological explanations for human conflicts, it finds in natural causes the laws that control all movements of mind and matter. Taine states that the human being is determined by the forces of Race, Time, and Milieu, a theory which denies the power of free will. Fiction, attempting to divorce itself from tradition, deals with the unpleasant as well as with the pleasant, and often presents a

bleakly pessimistic view of life. A bitter indictment of society is the mark of most works written in the turn of the century.

However, in spite of the apparent change in the treatment of their material, American Realist and Naturalist writers are often unable to transcend or challenge the dominant ideology, the value system, the timebound moral code pertaining to their society.

Although there is an objective narration based on criteria of probability and even scientific necessity, and in spite of the influence of Freudian psychology and Marxism, we find in most of these novels the same moral principles which are at the basis of the Romantic worldview. Characters, although presented in their human complexity, as in the case of Jamesian Realism, or as products of Deterministic laws, are usually subject to the same type of poetic justice and moral judgement characteristic of Romanticism.

The point of departure chosen for this analysis is the relationship between the female condition and the dominant ideology, since it is one of the best ways to define whether a system of values is being reproduced or contested. In the patriarchal system of most Capitalistic countries, as Althusser has explained, the nuclear family is one of the ideological apparatus of the State. It is an instance where the dominant ideology is reproduced and it provides regulation and repression of new ideas. The woman, the basic cell of the family, responsible for the procreation and education of the children (and thus for the survival of the family itself), is therefore the critical element in this ideological system. This is why, even in societies undergoing profound change, the treatment of women most times remains tied to traditional values. A real change in the view of the role of women is therefore, in my opinion, an adequate referential criterion to measure the transformation of the moral values of a group.

placed not on her, but on the world, a place of "transgressions and selfishness," the character is punished for her "sin." Love and marriage, which are seen respectively as a regenerating force and a prize for virtue, are not open to her. She loses the Deerslayer because she has lost her dignity and therefore her right to happiness.

Interestingly enough, the male standards which pervade the text find expression even in the choice of the title. Since the moral point of view is that of the man, the novel bears as a title the name of the male protagonist, reinforcing the situation of inferiority in which the woman is placed by the moral code of society.

In Henry James' novel *The Portrait of a Lady* we find a female character in a position of prominence. She even makes it to the title of the work, not, however, in her own right as a human being, but as she accepts the role of a lady, behaving according to the standards and labels imposed by society. While *The Deerslayer* is a text in which the emphasis is placed in the situation, in James' psychological novel there is a methodological shift, and characterization is foregrounded. The novel focuses on Isabel Archer, whose point of view frames the story. The reader gradually perceives that what seemed to be merely a narrative technique evolves to make of the narrator the very heroine whose psychology is expressed.

In her fight for freedom and quest for happiness, Isabel is trapped into marrying a man drawn to her exclusively because of her money. Freedom is ironically actualized as imprisonment and Isabel becomes the victim of Mme. Merle and Osmond, who use their cultivated aestheticism to attain their purpose of manipulating her. Although realizing that she has been acted upon, Isabel believes that in her case, because money has given her a certain degree of freedom of choice, moral responsibility is even greater and entails

Female characterization in American novels of the nineteenth century reveals to what extent, and in spite of theoretical statements, an ideological line relating Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism can be traced. The works chosen for this analysis are Cooper's *The Deerslayer*, James' *The Portrait of a Lady*, Dreiser's *Jennie Gerhardt*, and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*.

A typical Romantic treatment of women is found in James Fenimore Cooper's novel *The Deerslayer*. Judith Hutter, the female protagonist, is characterized on basis of the gross oversimplification of Romantic manichaeism which divides characters in good and evil. The outcome will then be an instance of poetic justice, bringing about reward for the good character and punishment for the evil one.

Judith's process of moral development begins and ends at the same point, thus resulting in a closed circle of which she cannot escape. There are three stages in her development: sin, repentance, and new fall. The major part of the process is her attempt, doomed to fail, to overcome certain traits of her character and attain purification. Judith's beauty and extreme vanity, her infatuation with fine clothes and appearance had led to her seduction by Captain Warley. She realizes - too late - that she had been used by him only as an object of pleasure, and she repents. Her love for the Deerslayer motivates her to strive for purification. She offers herself in marriage to him, proposing to burn the brocade dress which symbolizes her past life and become a new woman. He, however, refuses her, partially on account of her past light-mindedness. Alone and with no more motivation to pursue her goal, she will eventually "relapse into her early failing."

The preoccupation with sin, female virtue, and morality are indications of the worldview which underlies the text. Although the narrator points out that the blame for Judith's mistakes should be

personal renunciation. She believes that she must bear the consequences of her blindness, and, refusing to leave her husband for the man she now loves, she decides to maintain her marriage and take care of Osmond and Merle's daughter. Her behavior, it cannot be denied, is indeed that of a lady!

This view of acceptance of duty is related, on the one hand, to the Puritan tradition to which James is indebted, and on the other to the view of the woman as the abnegate being who forgets her own needs for the sake of other people. Renunciation to self-fulfillment is something required from women in our culture and Isabel Archer does fit the model. She assumes the role of mediator and mother, reproducing therefore the value system dominant in society. Had she refused to fulfill the pattern and to obey the standards of society, would she still have deserved the epithet of lady?

Theodore Dreiser's novel *Jennie Gerhardt* had, as its first title, *The Transgressor*. The female protagonist is characterized as a self-giving woman who yields herself to Senator Brander because he has saved her brother from jail. A poor and beautiful girl in a world ruled by money and power, she has no chance. She becomes a victim of society but she is herself seen as the transgressor of the moral code. She, not the male, has to be punished. And so she is cut off from society, she is expelled from home because she has borne a child out of wedlock.

Dreiser makes a point of showing that she represents Nature, while Society is the Convention. He wants to stress the deadening effect of outmoded conformities and of the hypocrisy of society, and shows how all value systems are arbitrary. Personal ethics are then superior to morals, and Jennie, becoming dignified through suffering, rises above her environment.

However, under the appearance of an indictment of society, the same ideology discussed in relation to *The Deerslayer* and *The Portrait*

of a Lady is revealed in this novel. Jennie lives for the sake of others, she sacrifices herself and renounces all possibilities of self-fulfillment due to her sense of duty. She does not care about herself, for she is prepared, by culture and tradition, to endure her suffering. And her "crime," although self-sacrificial, is a stain that follows her in spite of all acts that reveal her goodness of heart. All the male characters end up by understanding her, but they use her in the name of love as they had used her for the sake of their sexual desire or their code of honor. Her father, who had repudiated her, comes to live with her when he needs it; he dies in her arms, blessing her. Senator Brander would have married her, because he feels guilty, but he dies; Lester Kane, her lover later on, is abandoned by her because she knows his family will not leave him any money if he marries her. Then he comes back only to die in her arms. And finally her daughter dies, completing the cycle of punishment. The novel ends in words that praise Jennie's qualities, but nothing has prevented her from being punished. A kind of compensatory solution is found by the author, who makes her adopt two children who will make her happy. Again, motherhood compensates for all suffering.

It is thus seen that Dreiser, in spite of the fact that he presents a criticism of society and that his sympathies remain with his heroine, ends up by reproducing the dominant ideology and requiring from his character an attitude of conformity to the standards of society. The half-prize she gets at the end and her seeming peace are just not too convincing, and social morality again seems to have prevailed as an underlying force in the text.

In 1905 a female writer, Edith Wharton, publishes her novel *The House of Mirth*, a real indictment of convention and its destructive impact on women. Hers is a novel of manners, in which

she attacks the vulgarities and failures of the American society and the philistinism dominating the United States. Taking as subject matter the question of personal relationships as they are defined or destroyed by the standards of the group, Wharton gives expression to her statement that "a frivolous society can acquire dramatic significance only through what its frivolity destroys. Its tragic implication lies in its power of debasing people and ideas."

Again, a female character will be the central victim in the conflict between personal desire and accepted forms of conduct. Lily Bart is guilty of breaking the taboos of class, and her journey from one group to the other is regarded by her and her friends as a fall. Left without any real alternative, and unable to react in terms of a meaningless sense of duty, Lily kills herself in an act of despair which constitutes, in all of these texts, the first real instance of social criticism. Lily Bart cannot sublimate her suffering through duty, motherhood, and a spirit of self-sacrifice, for she is no Isabel Archer, no Jennie Gerhardt, no Hester Prynne. Her creator is not a man, who would be able to solve her conflict through the sublimation of a sense of renunciation ultimately expected from women. Her creator is a woman, who knows how heavy the burden of the value system can be. Lily Bart's suicide is the answer to the moral code, as it becomes the measure of its destructive effect.

The three male authors discussed above, in spite of any theoretical postulates, reveal a common moralism which leads to the reproduction of the dominant ideology. Their women are all stereotypes who, rather than presenting a criticism of the female condition, are made to conform to the rules of the patriarchal society. Edith Wharton, the female writer, refuses the stereotypes inherited from tradition and bases her characterization on a profound understanding of the repressive role of society. In her challenge of the

dominant ideology she is then the only one of the authors analysed in this essay who really fulfills the Realist/Naturalist postulates.