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A Defiant Portrayal of Women in Beth Henley's Crimes of the Heart

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Abstract

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This study deals with the analysis of women's conditions and their representations in the modern three-act play, *Crimes of the Heart* (1982), written by the American female playwright Elizabeth Becker Henley (1952), or as nicknamed Beth Henley. The play under research is her masterpiece in which Henley shows how each of the sisters violates cultural norms and experiences a process of self-discovery. The study will then outline the theoretical framework that the play's analysis is based on. Thus, it sheds light on the reasons why the play has been approached from a feminist view point, using Showalter's concept of gynocriticism. Moreover, it explores how female characters are represented throughout the play, and how the hidden layers of patriarchal oppression are examined and challenged. It also justifies how Henley faces up stereotypical representations of women alongside their space in society, giving reference to the speeches and quotes from the play.

1. Introduction:

Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* is a dark comedy in three acts focusing on the relationship of three adult sisters in Hazlehurst, Mississippi. The play is a character study concerned with the Magrath sisters (Lenny, Meg and Babe) who have come together at their grandfather's house after their youngest sister, Babe, was taken into custody following an attempt to murder her husband. Their reunion causes much joy, but also many tensions. The sisters try to survive the crises and they deal with family problems, especially the case of their mother's suicide many years ago. During the course of the work, the sisters unearth

grudges, criticize each other, reminisce about their family life, and attempt to understand their mother's suicide. This paper will examine the struggle of women characters in the play to satisfactorily define their roles in society independent of romantic or familial relationships.

This study will make use of Showalter's concept of "Gynocriticism" and other theories of feminist criticism to examine the realistic depiction of Henley's protagonists, how these women were relegated to the domestic setting traditionally familiar to women, such as kitchen. The research also

analyzes how the stereotypical images of women in literature, “the angel in the house” and “the madwoman in the attic” will be challenged by the female characters during their process of self-discovery, and in becoming autonomous individuals in a society dominated by males. Furthermore, the aim of this study is to explore the ways in which these sisters react to and violate cultural norms of that patriarchal society.

Why a Feminist Approach to the Play?

It is crucial first, however, to define what it is that makes a play “feminist,” a topic which has received considerable attention in literature. Jill Dolan begins her important study, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), with a statement that the theatre spectator has traditionally been assumed to be white, middle class, heterosexual and male. While the male spectator is perceived as an active subject and encouraged to identify with the male hero in the narrative, women spectators and actors are relegated to marginal status; they are regarded as “passive, invisible and unspoken subjects” (Dolan, 1988, p. 13). From this perspective, any play which moves women to the center of the narrative, foregrounding women’s experience and concerns, can be considered feminist (Murphy, 1999, pp.195-6).

Emerging to prominence in the 1960s, feminist criticism is one strand of feminist studies. Informed by feminist literary theory (the theoretical and practical approaches to literature) and scholarship, feminist criticism is an umbrella term for a variety of approaches to culture and literature that are of particular interest to women (Bressler, 2011, p.144). Challenging patriarchy comes at the center of the diverse aims and methods of feminist criticism.

While some scholars do celebrate *Crimes of the Heart* as feminist, there is no universal agreement, and the debates continue. However, Opravilova` states that when Henley was asked about her *Crimes of the Heart* and feminism, in retrospect, she recalls:

Looking back, to me, at the time I wrote it, people would say, ‘Are you a feminist?’ and I was kind of perplexed by the question. But now I see it as very much a play of its time in such a specific way that it, perhaps, is more universal, because it is very much about women in a rage. It takes place in 1974, right at the cusp of the women’s liberation movement. But when you’re in the South, you don’t have that to hold on to, so you end up shooting your husband. They take their anger out in other ways. I mean, trying to sing and get a life that is creative. So looking back on it, I find that kind of surprising ‘Wow, it really is a feminist play!’ (Opravilova`, 2017, p.15).

To disregard *Crimes of the Heart* as a feminist play is actually a mistake, since Henley creates a female-centered environment in her play with community largely defined by women. This is also stated by Marwah Ghazi Mohammed when she describes the play this way:

Thus, Henley uses a new mode of realism that shows tragedy in feminist theatre is not an imitation of life but a re-thinking, and re-defining of life, thereby rendering a new approach to it. At the same time, as a female playwright, reflecting a woman’s point of view, Henley focuses on a group of women and not on one female protagonist (2014, p.496).

Dealing with the historical periods of feminist movement, Billy Harbin, writing in the *Southern Quarterly*, places Henley's play in the context of different waves of feminism since the 1960s (*Encyclopedia*, 2020).

There is something very period-specific about the immediate second wave feminism infused in the play, it premiered in 1980, and is set in 1974, a time when the civil rights movement and the issue of equal rights were of significant concern for American feminists and in the American society (Abelman, 2016).

Under the impact of this movement, Bressler argues that American feminism's main concern is to restore and include the writings of female writers to the literary canon after, quoting the American feminist critic Elaine Showalter, "they were deliberately excluded from it by the male professors who established the canon itself" (Bressler, 2011, p.154).

In her influential essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics" (1997), Showalter asserts that feminist theorists must "construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt to male theories" a process she names gynocriticism (Showalter, 1997, p.153).

Gynocriticism involves aspects such as: the examination of female writers and their place in literary history, the treatment of female characters in books by both male and female writers and the discovery and exploration of a canon of literature written by women (Yadav and Yadav, 2018, p.60).

Showalter divides feminist criticism into two types. The first type is concerned with woman as

reader, as the consumer of male produced literature. This kind of analysis is called the feminist critique and its subjects include the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism. The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with woman as writer, as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women. Showalter develops the term gynocritics for this second type of analysis (Rice and Waugh, 2001, pp. 146-7).

Similar to Showalter, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, authors of *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), declare that the male voice has, for too long, been dominant and they also work on the place of women in literature, evaluate and contextualize it. According to them, the two main stereotypical images of women "the angel in the house" and "the madwoman in the attic" are both unrealistic, and in order to gain autonomy "women must kill both the angel in the house, and its opposite and double, the monster in the house" (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000, p. 17).

In the light of what has theoretically been said above, the next section studies the position of women in *Crimes of the Heart*, assesses the reactions of women to patriarchal control and life as viewed from a purely female perspective. Feminist theory, in this respect, should help with the analysis of the nature of arguments constructed by female characters of the play and why women are chosen as main role players of the play. It, too, would justify the defiance women engage in the play.

Women as Depicted in the Play

In literature, women were rarely presented as women and realistically. They were either selfless, sacrificing, complaining angels, who represented beauty and purity, or shown as villains and victimizers, which were the features of a monster. Women characters were given no positive roles even as house-makers. In *Crimes of the Heart*, Henley draws on stereotypic images of women, especially those associated with the South, in order to undercut and reshape them. The play also challenges such falsely represented images and characteristics of women in literature. Henley points out such misinterpretations and exposes them (Yadav and Yadav, 2018, p.61). Therefore, this section focuses on the analysis of women's conditions, more specifically the Magrath sisters' representation in the play.

Henley states the setting of the drama clearly at the beginning. *Crimes of the Heart* is located in Hazlehurst, Mississippi in 1974. There are three acts in the play; all the scenes are set in the Magraths' kitchen, which is described this way:

The old-fashioned kitchen is unusually spacious, but there is a lived-in, cluttered look about it. There are four different entrances and exits to the kitchen: the back door, the door leading to the dining room and the front of the house; a door leading to the downstairs bedroom; and a staircase leading to the upstairs room. There is a table near the center of the room, and a cot has been set up in one of the corners (Henley, 1982, p.4)

The kitchen is a significant setting in the feminist theatre, it implies that it is "a woman's personal and intimate space", however, Henley also points out the

role of the kitchen as "a place of imprisonment, tying women to the domestic sphere and to their roles of caregivers" (Laughlin, 1986, p.581). Rice and Waugh argue that "the construction of a public/private split consigns women to the 'private' realm of feeling, nurturance, and domesticity" which was often the site, if not the cause, of women's oppression (Rice and Waugh, 2001, p.144). In the play, the oldest Magrath sister, Lenny, has actually taken to sleeping in the kitchen in order to be able to meet her grandfather's needs better during the night, which indicates that she is totally tied to this space and, as if, belongs to it. The kitchen including a dining table with a bed to sleep on is an indication to the private space generally occupied by women within households. It also, as reiterated by Mohammed (2014, p.504), shows the autonomy women have within that space as most of Lenny's activities occur there.

The play reflects and in a sense responds to the fears of female criminality that can be observed by dramatizing violence by women that is inwardly-directed and therefore poses a threat to the society at large (Laughlin, 1986). The three sisters have very individual distinctive characters, but all carry out "crimes of the heart" and subsequently are forced to face the consequences of what they have done, as Opravilova` explains:

Babe's crime is shooting her husband because he hurt someone who was innocent. Her mother's crime was killing herself and leaving her children because she could no longer bear the pain of being left by her husband. Meg's crime was being so afraid of Doc. She left him with his broken leg saying she would marry him and went off to Hollywood. Lenny's crime is more of a crime to herself in that she won't tell the

truth to the man she is in love with because she is afraid if he knows the truth he won't love her so she just chucks the whole thing. A lot of it is them coming to terms with their crimes and trying to unshackle themselves from the past (Opravilova, 2017, p.18).

Moreover, the real crime among the Magrath sisters is their lack of self-esteem, which they seem to have inherited from their mother, Mrs. Magrath. As Auflitsch states "the mother image evoked in the play is dysfunctional, for the mother character is presented on the one hand as a violent agent, and on the other, as a victim of a male-dominated society" (Auflitsch, 2001, p. 270). Thus, because she felt so worthless after the sisters' father had left the family, she decided to commit suicide by hanging herself. That is why the sisters share and inherit feelings of inferiority.

The characters in the play are outsiders at risk. Since by virtue of their nonconformity they are intentionally marginalized, they risk being unable to share their feelings, insights, and experiences with others because they are alone and need some love in their lives, just as Babe recalls about how Lenny spends her life alone and all she does is "take care of Old Granddaddy" (Act 1: 22), and that she needs some love (Andreach, 2006, p.9).

Isolation threatens the self's development because the character needs interaction with the world to test herself. This need explains why the threat of exclusion, whether imposed by the self or society, is so grave a danger to one's well-being. *Crimes of the Heart* develops a critique of patriarchy by sympathetically portraying the heroine's struggles

against her proscribed role and its absurd limitations. Told by Zackery that he will have her confined in an institution and because she is not "crazy", Babe attempts twice to commit suicide, as her mother did. This repeated possibility of suicide forms the beginning of Babe's self-discovery in the play. Feeling worthless, betrayed and unlovable, Babe considers suicide in a final hopeless gesture against her abusive husband. Such act, in Harrington's viewpoint, can be seen as "a remedy for dishonor, self-destruction becoming a means for a generally passive woman to protest, or at least abandon, her subordinate position in the patriarchal system" (Harrington, 2012, p.51). Since her mother hanged herself, Babe attempts the same, but the rope breaks, sending her into the kitchen and into the oven. Gaining insight into her mother's final act, this time she tries to abort suicide by removing her head from the oven, only to hit her head and fall back into it. Meg has to rescue her by pulling her head "out of the oven" (Andreach, 2006, p.18).

Although Meg does not allude to their mother's suicide as often as Babe does, the fear that they inherited their mother's mental instability is a specter haunting her, too. The shock of finding the mother's body drove Meg to steel herself against emotional involvements so as not to be a "weak person" who might attempt suicide (Andreach, 2006, p.12).

In *Crimes of the Heart*, the conflict on the simplest level is between society's perception of the female character and the character's striving to overcome that perception without sacrificing individuality. An example is between socially conditioned Chick and Meg. When the latter lights a cigarette, the former reminds her that smoking causes cancer. Meg rebuffs her by telling her that flirting

with death gives her a “sense of controlling” her “own destiny” (Act 1: 19), then Lenny interrupts to break the tension (Andreach, 2006, p.31).

Women can cause one another’s low self-esteem. An example could be when Chick always complains about that the sisters’ mother “had shamed the entire family” and that Babe is “getting as much publicity and humiliation” (Act 1: 20) for her again. Yet in an androcentric culture, men are the principal detractors of women’s worth. Examples of such men are the two implied male characters: the Old Granddaddy and Zackery Botrelle. According to Murphy (1999, p.196), a society which “exposes the patriarchy as a controlling force and the culture as defined, determined, and shaped by men, thus limiting women’s development and range of life choices”. The Magrath sisters of *Crimes of the Heart* live lives their Old Granddaddy had planned for them. Lenny’s defense of him is that “all he ever wanted was the best for us”. Meg agrees, but with reservations: “but sometimes I wonder what we wanted” (Act 1: 42). Their problems derive from patriarchal assumptions. Lenny sees herself as rapidly approaching spinsterhood, and the Old Granddaddy is the one who takes part in the emotional suppression of Lenny by making her “feel self-conscious” about her “deformed ovary” (Act 1: 23). She cannot bear children, which prompted her to end a relationship with Charlie Hill, whom she met through an ad in a dating service (Murphy, 1999, p.197).

Meg also lived her life trying to please Old Granddaddy, striving to fulfill his ambitions for her and telling him elaborate lies when she fails in order not to fail him while he was always saying “with your talent all you need is exposure” (Act 1: 16), Lenny exclaimed (*ibid.*).

Zackery’s abuse of Babe indicates that she has also been shaped by the dictates of a patriarchal society, although according to Old Granddaddy, Zackery was “the right man for her whether she knew it now or not” (Act 1: 16), but their marriage was a failure and ends with Babe’s shooting of her husband. This fear of the implied male character causes many more problems in the sisters’ lives (*ibid.*).

As mentioned earlier, the two feminist critics Gilbert and Gubar identify the stereotypical images used in literature, which are “the angel in the house” and the “madwoman in the attic” (Bressler, 2011, p.154). They assert that “the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy” (Rice and Waugh, 2001, pp.155-6). Arguably, this replacement of images can be seen in the form of transitions within the Magrath sisters in the play. Babe undergoes a transition from an imperfect angel to a monster or madwoman. She outwardly seems to be the innocent, peaceful angel of the home and a happy wife with her marriage, but then proves that she is not by attempting to murder her abusive, violent and unloving husband, whom for so long abuses her physically and mentally and beats her. According to Donaldson, this act of transformation to a “monster” or going mad might be considered “the only sane response to an insane world” in which women “have been bitterly and totally repressed sexually and emotionally” (Donaldson, 2002, p.100).

Drawing on such insights, Gilbert and Gubar’s work suggest some of the reasons why “the female body has been controlled or confined within the domestic space” (Rice and Waugh, 2001, p.145). For example, Lenny is characterized by self-consciousness, the roots of which can be traced to her

grandfather's treatment of her in the past, when he caused her to feel ashamed of her "deformed ovary" (Act 1: 23), that is her infertile body. This physical distortion is reminiscent of "the bodily as cultural projection of an inner state" (Auflitsch, 2001, p.272). Thus, women become "angels or monsters to be feared, but hardly regarded as actual human beings" (Rice and Waugh, 2001, p.145). As a result, Lenny's feelings of inferiority enable the old man to misuse her as his personal nurse.

Conversely, when present, men can help women discover themselves. As Doc Porter and Barnette Lloyd, whom Henley looked at favorably because they take part in the process of the sisters' self-discovery. Doc, whom Meg has abandoned years earlier, is still near to the Magrath sisters, especially Meg. When they are out one night, Doc "kept wondering about why" Meg has abandoned him, and she says "Cause I didn't want to care" (Act 2: 50), but then with the help of Doc, she discovers that she can care about someone when she rescues her younger sister in her suicidal attempt, and figures in Babe's self-discovery (Andreach, 2006, p.10).

Babe's young lawyer, Barnette, hopes to uncover all of Zackery's criminal dealings to save Babe from her abusive husband and from getting imprisoned. Barnette also has a personal vendetta with Zackery for reasons never stated clearly, but the major thing Zackery did "was to ruin" his father's life (Act 2: 38), he also remains fond of Babe, but their case is left open at the end of the play (*ibid.*).

During the course of the play, Lenny has also undergone the process of discovery. She discovers that she is a person of worth who can have a loving relationship with a man. Lenny is chasing Chick out of the house after the cousin called Meg a "tramp"

which makes her "feel so good" and emboldens the oldest sister to phone Charlie, whose desire to see her again is the basis of her discovery (*ibid.*).

Babe's moment of self-discovery was after her attempts of suicide, when she realizes that her husband cannot have her committed to an asylum. Babe discovers that she is "not insane" and when the three sisters are together, Babe finally overcomes her fears and can say, "And I'm not like Mama. I'm not so all alone" (Act 3: 70), because she has two sisters with whom she can talk (*ibid.*).

All at once, the play takes a comic direction, it ends with a magical moment, and laughter becomes a component of the closing scene of the play. Their laughter comes more out of hysteria than joy. The playwright demonstrates, by inserting laughter into her characterizations, how human spirit copes and survives despite despair. The fact the sisters are having the birthday cake for breakfast evokes the morning of their mother's funeral, when the sisters were given banana splits for their morning meal. By having a birthday cake for breakfast this time, and especially by sharing food, the sorrows of past loneliness can be left behind. Auflitsch argues that "not only a new day but perhaps a new life has begun for them" (Auflitsch, 2001, p.279).

Conclusion

In search for different and self-reliant female characters, come Henley's protagonists: Lenny, Meg and Babe, the three Magrath sisters of *Crimes of the Heart*. Henley's marginalized heroines are protagonists seeking meaning in an absurd and dangerous world. Henley pays great attention to the image of women. She examines the change of the play's female characters from traditional southern

ladies to modern women who begin to develop awareness to challenge the social inequality and prejudice. The play's community, which is female-centered and largely defined by women, is confined to one indoor set, according to the traditional public/private split of society which is the kitchen, traditionally the heart of the home and the province of women, where men are conventionally seen and treated as interlopers and intruders upon female space.

In her play, Henley did not put her protagonists into the typical roles that assign women as supernatural creatures; rather, they confront and overcome the "real bad days" (Henley, 1982, p.69), and eventually become aware of their prospective as worthy and autonomous individuals. They are neither angels nor monsters, they are only women; human beings who make mistakes like everyone else, but what is important for them is that they discover their identities. Hence, they are females who were able to stand united in the face of adversity and resist social and cultural pressures in a society run and dominated by male figures.

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