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Wounded Women, Varied Voice

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This essay was

originally developed for the course *Women Writers Since 1900* in the spring semester of 2011, under the mentorship of Meredith Dutton. She would like to thank Professor Dutton for her encouragement with this piece. After graduating, Kathryn plans to enter a graduate program at Bridgewater State University while pursuing a career in education.

D*aphne du Maurier and Sylvia Plath both use voice as a tool in their respective pieces, “La Sainte-Vierge” and “Lesbos.” Through the implementation of varied voices, these women convey female interiors. Du Maurier’s use of a third-person narrative voice in her short story “La Sainte-Vierge” allows her to comment on the lives of the main characters through the eyes of an outsider. Du Maurier’s outsider reveals a naïve and delusional housewife, unhealthy in her denial within a failing relationship. Contrasting with du Maurier’s Marie is Plath’s first-person voice of a scorned, dissatisfied housewife in her poem, “Lesbos.” Plath’s use of the first-person voice is central to this poem’s effectiveness, allowing for an emotional reading of the thoughts of a bitter woman. Although the reaction of the wronged woman differs, both pieces powerfully employ voice to illustrate the effects of a failing relationship.*

“La Sainte-Vierge” is told through the voice of an outsider, not only to Marie’s relationship, but also to her entire village. This choice for third-person narration allows du Maurier’s audience to identify as outsiders with the narrator and to draw more objective conclusions about Marie’s circumstance. A description of Marie is given early in the story:

Her face was thin and childish, rather plain and pathetic, and though she was twenty-three she looked little more than seventeen...She was a typical Breton peasant, hard-working and reserved, whose only beauty was her youth, which would quickly pass. When the Breton women sorrow they show no grief upon their faces, they would rather die than let their tears be seen; thus Marie bore no outward trace of the pain that was in her heart. (du Maurier 246)

This passage alludes to Marie’s youthful demeanor seen throughout the story; she is repeatedly referred to as a child not only by the villagers but the narrator as well. This childish exterior is in contrast with Marie’s “Breton woman” interior. This description of the peasant women contributes to an understanding of Marie’s preference to die before expressing pain or humiliation, associated with not only Jean’s departure but also his infidelity. Marie represses the reality of her relationship; she is naïve in her hopefulness and longing for a man who does not care for her. This impartial description of Marie, vital to understanding the character, would not be possible if the story was told from her own perspective. Furthermore, without an outside

perspective of her husband Jean, the audience would be susceptible to the same deluded perception as Marie.

Du Maurier does allow her third-person narrator a limited omniscient perspective, incorporating occasionally the select inner thoughts of Marie and allowing us to see just how unhealthy her love for Jean is. Marie's love for her husband is often associated with pain, in particular Marie's willingness to subject herself to pain for the sake of expressing her love:

Her love for him was so great that she felt it would choke her if she spoke. She wanted to kneel at his feet, to bury her head against him, to implore him to stay with her. If only he would understand to what depths of degradation she would sink for his sake. (du Maurier 249)

The relationship du Maurier presents is sickly and tainted. Not only is Jean a bad husband to Marie; du Maurier makes the reader aware that Marie's devotion to Jean is amiss, disturbing.

If the portrait of the Breton women presented early in "La Sainte-Vierge" is not enough evidence for Marie's denial, her repression can also be noted subliminally throughout the story. Marie is delusional in her love for Jean, yet it seems that she is on some level aware of his infidelity, though unwilling to express her pain even to herself. Du Maurier conveys the unsettling reality of a woman unable, or unwilling, to abandon a dysfunctional marriage. As Marie's husband prepares his alibi for the night, even giving a brazen and incriminating wink at a fellow fisherman, "Marie [does] not notice anything, but the sick feeling [begins] again in her heart" (du Maurier 248). The description of Marie's "sick feeling" indicates more than just a concern for her husband's departure. Later, while praying to the Sainte-Vierge, Marie pleads, "I care not if my heart breaks, nor if he should cease to love me and should ill-treat me, it is only his happiness I ask, and that he shall never know pain or hardship" (du Maurier 251-2). Although the reader is not informed of Jean's fate, in a way du Maurier gives Marie exactly what she is asking for. The "vision" of Jean, disrespecting his wife, happily philandering with Jacques' sister, is an exact response to this selection of Marie's prayer. Yet even with the divine evidence thrust in Marie's face, she remains delusional, "her heart was at peace and she was filled with a great happiness" (du Maurier 254). Unprepared to face reality, Marie continues repressing her intuition.

Plath offers a drastically different perspective, very much rejecting the concept of traditional domestic bliss, in her poem "Lesbos." The first-person voice allows Plath's poem to be emotionally charged with a vicious and consistent tone. While

in "La Sainte-Vierge" the reader only has a limited exposure to Marie's feelings, in "Lesbos" she is made to feel the pain of every experience the speaker has suffered. The speaker is a wife, seemingly unhappy with her unfaithful husband and caged lifestyle. "Lesbos" is her personal rant, directed at both her husband and her rival for his affection. The speaker's voice is tortured yet sarcastic, forsaken yet empowered.

The speaker's discontentment as a wife is made clear through her contempt for her responsibilities; "Viciousness in the kitchen! / The potatoes hiss / ... / The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine" (Plath 1-4). The speaker sees no meaning in the charade that is her life; she resents playing the role. She goes on, making bitter statements, even about having to care for her own children: "Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap" (Plath 33). The reader can decipher that this discontentment grows out of an unhappy marriage. Plath's speaker ridicules her unfaithful spouse: "The impotent husband slumps out for a coffee. / I try to keep him in" (Plath 44-5). However, the reader is assured that despite the speaker's desire to maintain this relationship, she is strong enough to address the disrespect, satirical enough to suggest retaliation. She expresses a desire to misbehave as her husband has: "I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair. / I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair" (Plath 29-30). However, as she also resentfully makes clear, her responsibilities to her children and her house make recklessness impossible. The speaker ultimately exhibits strength as she alludes to leaving her husband: "I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes, I am packing the babies, I am packing the sick cats" (Plath 68-70). Through repetition Plath makes clear that this is a firm decision to leave. This acceptance of her situation makes the speaker in "Lesbos" far more shrewd and self-aware than du Maurier's Marie, who favors denial.

More venomous even than the speaker's condemnation of her husband are the lines directed at his mistress. The speaker ruthlessly critiques aspects of her husband's mistress, claiming, "Once you were beautiful" and alluding to her as a "blood-loving bat" and a "kleptomaniac" for stealing her husband (Plath 40, 80 and 88). Plath's speaker in "Lesbos" seems to be not only attacking the other woman but also pairing her with herself in a form of rivalry: "...two venomous opposites, / Our bones, our hair" (Plath 36-37). This rivalry seems to extend further than the women, as the speaker first notes "The bastard's a girl" alluding possibly to an illegitimate child; then she goes on to compare that child with her own, "You have one baby, I have two" (Plath, 17 and 38). The wife resents that while she is forced to continue on in her monotonous lifestyle alone, this woman is stealing her husband and possibly building a new family with him.

The speaker's emotion is fervent so that even the reader can feel the anger. With prosodic lines Plath's words come together to give the voice this emotion:

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.
I do not speak. (Plath 64-67)

Plath's speaker is expressing her emotion even as she speaks of being silent. The harsh, repetitive sounds contribute to the intensity of lines such as these. This wife is disgusted with her life, her husband, and the woman who is taking him away from her. In this poem, the speaker is not complacent in any way. Her words are powerful; they cut like a housewife's kitchen knife, as they are intended to.

Voice is an element central to the effectiveness of each of these contrasting pieces. Though infidelity may be seen as a link between the two, du Maurier's "La Sainte-Vierge" and Plath's "Lesbos" depict very different female characters through their reactions to this betrayal. While in "La Sainte-Vierge" du

Maurier employs a third-person narrator to criticize Marie's delusional and unhealthy behaviors in love, in "Lesbos" Plath uses the voice of her speaker to convey the inner emotions of a scorned and dissatisfied wife. Additionally, these messages seem to hold specific meanings for the authors of each respective piece. In du Maurier's stories a tendency for dark and delusional love can be observed; it is also well known that Plath experienced the humiliation and pain of having an unfaithful husband. This outside knowledge may further contribute to the understanding of these pieces.

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