The mirror image
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Introduction

The Mirror Image

Throughout history women have been depicted in literary works in certain standard ways. Some examples of such stereotypical images, used in Western literature, are the ‘Madonna,’ ‘Eve,’ the ‘Virgin,’ the ‘Angel in the House,’ the ‘Femme Fatale,’ the ‘Monster’ and the ‘Whore.’ The use of specific images varied with the historical context and setting. In the nineteenth century, the images of the ‘Angel in the House’ and the ‘Monster’ became popular. The ‘Angel in the House’ depicted the ideal nineteenth-century woman, a beautiful, selfless and nurturing being, perfect according to nineteenth-century Victorian standards. Alongside this stereotype of women, a more disturbing image appeared, representing the negative side of woman; this came to be referred to as the ‘Monster’ and it evolved under the influence of Gothic literature.

These images appeared in writings by both male and female authors. Yet, in the work of several women writers during the period 1849-1930 these representations come to depict more than just stereotypes. Four female authors stand out in particular: Charlotte Brontë, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Jean Rhys. On the one hand, their stories present a narrative that seems to confirm traditional role stereotypes in relation to women, but on the other hand their stories also question these roles and put forward alternatives.

What struck me was that all four writers applied a ‘mirroring’ technique of the images of women as the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster,’ which confers a certain ambiguity on their novels. How these mirroring techniques work in the novels of the aforementioned authors will be examined in this dissertation. By representing and comparing both socially acceptable and deviant behavior, these women writers were able to depict the impact of patriarchy on the lives of individual women. I argue that through the use of this technique these writers thus contributed to the contemporary debate on social roles for women. Contemporary readers could obtain a clear picture of the norms and social roles compulsory for women, but they were also presented with other options.

I have selected four novels by these authors as ‘case studies.’ These novels are: Shirley by Charlotte Brontë, The Awakening by Kate Chopin, The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton and After Leaving Mr Mackenzie by Jean Rhys. Throughout my examination of these four novels, I will use a theoretical framework by Annelie Hegenbarth-Rösgen as a tool. A close look at the contemporary social context will provide a second frame of reference.

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1 The phrase ‘The Angel in the House’ originates from a sequence of poems by Coventry Patmore (1823-1896). Patmore wrote these poems in praise of his first wife Emily. To him she represented the ideal Victorian woman: the perfect wife, housewife and mother. The idea, however, is much older and it was Virginia Woolf who developed the modern understanding of the concept in the essay “Professions for Women,” a talk given to the National Society for Women’s Service on 21 January 1931. It was then that it acquired a less idealistic connotation and came to criticize the patriarchal construct of the ideal woman.


3 Annelie Hegenbarth-Rösgen, Soziale Normen und Rollen im Roman (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1982).
The idea of ‘doubleness’ is everywhere in feminist critics’ commentaries upon British and American women writers of the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Ideas about doubleness find their way into feminist theory through sources varying from Elaine Showalter’s belief that the literature by women of this time can be read as a “double-voiced discourse, containing a ‘dominant’ and a ‘muted’ story,” to Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s discussion of the Victorian woman writer who seems to conform to conventional expectations, but simultaneously subverts them by rewriting the traditional images of women inherited from male fiction. Noteworthy, too, are Barbara Hill Rigney’s linkage of female madness with the use of the Doppelgänger and Joanne Blum’s theory of the male/female double which seems to reflect an attempt to transcend traditional gender roles, but these last studies are of less immediate importance to this examination. Doubleness, on the whole, is considered to be a strategy for investigating the differences between and within the male and the female of the patriarchal society of the nineteenth and twentieth century.

My own adoption of the term ‘Mirror Image’ rather than ‘double’ results from both the historical uses of notions of the ‘double’ and Doppelgänger and the more specific feminine connotations that the ‘Mirror Image’ has. The traditional function of the double has been mainly linked to the use of the motif in literature by men and often focuses on psychological aspects, as I will explain in more detail later on. In this dissertation, I argue that in literature by women the double motif has a more social function. In the work by the women writers examined here it is especially the social aspects related to both female protagonists that are represented and compared. The phrase the ‘Mirror Image’ is a very suitable phrase to stress this social function. If something is a mirror image of something else, it is like a reflection of it, either because it is exactly the same or because it is the same but reversed or perhaps even distorted; and there is always a link to a larger and different context. Mirror images are not isolated representations, they could not function in that way. In general, the female main characters who are mirrored are not exact replicas; they resemble each other, but they are also significantly different, if not opposed.

Noteworthy, too, in relation to the mirror or looking-glass is that it is a very feminine attribute and seems to be linked to women more than men, as so much emphasis is always placed on women’s appearances. This is especially true during the timespan examined here.

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6 I do realize that there might be a drawback in using this term as it closely resembles ‘the mirror stage’ and ‘the mirror image’ used by Lacan. In Lacan’s theory ‘the mirror stage’ indicates the phase in the child’s growing up (between the ages of 6 – 18 months) in which it begins to recognize its reflection in the mirror as being him/herself and becomes aware of the ‘I.’ It also initiates the use and understanding of language. I can even see an analogy with ‘The Mirror Image’ in literature by women in that the confrontation with the other female protagonist makes the main character become aware of who she is and what her position in society is. At the same time the female main character seems to develop a language to speak out for herself. Yet, because the doubling I study overall seemed to relate more to the social context, I do not develop this more psychological aspect further. Kay Stockholder, “Lacan versus Freud: Subverting the Enlightenment” American Imago 55:3 (1998) 361-422.
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in which women’s looks were heavily prescribed by rules and regulations concerning outward appearances, fashion and hairstyles. In addition to comparing and contrasting both protagonists, the authors also held up a mirror to the reader. Rather than telling the reader what the contemporary social context was like, they showed it through the (opposed) images they used.

Throughout history, the mirror theme has played an important role in literature. Its use has varied from the self-loving Narcissus of Greek mythology to the Biblical reference to seeing “through a glass darkly,” to the evil queen in the European fairy-tale of Snow White who asked “Mirror, mirror, on the wall ... who is the fairest of them all?” Some of the most popular uses of mirrors in literature range from Shakespeare’s introduction of the motif in Hamlet where the play staged within the play is presented as “holding a mirror up to nature,” to Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass and “The Mirror of Erised” in the Harry Potter series.

The use of the aforementioned motif of the double and the representation of doubleness were especially popular during the Victorian period. The overall socio-historical context of the Victorian period is also important in other ways. Both this period and the decades after it showed significant changes for women. In retrospect, we can say that this timespan supplied the first wave of women’s liberation. This motivated my choice for the period 1849-1930. The overall timespan, almost a century, comprises important subperiods. It might therefore seem inappropriate to refer to it as one ‘period.’ But as it was the first timespan in which a great many changes for women occurred in rapid succession, I prefer to link the period together for this investigation. It was only in the 1960s and the 1970s that we again saw such a liberating tendency for women in history.

Among examples of the changes between 1849 and 1930 is the fact that women’s access to many types of education improved, inheritance laws were changed and women were given the vote in both Great Britain and the United States in 1918. More and more women entered the labor force and some even entered the professions. Such liberating changes were reflected in women’s appearances in a more simple and practical style of fashion and less complicated hairstyles. In the domestic sphere many labor saving devices were introduced that allowed middle class women more leisure time. And, in spite of all of the limitations sometimes still present, the overall developments were never reversed again in the Western world. In both England and the United States the suffragettes also gained quite

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7 Narcissus was a hero from the territory of Thespiae in Boeotia who was renowned for his beauty. In the stories he is cruel, in that he disdains those who love him. As divine punishment he falls in love with a reflection in a pool, not realizing it is his own, and perishes there, not being able to leave the beauty of his own reflection. “Through a glass darkly” is an abbreviated form of a much quoted phrase from 1 Corinthians 13 in the Christian New Testament, meaning that earthly views of the divine are often obscured, like looking at something with a darkened mirror. “Mirror, mirror on the Wall” is a famous phrase uttered by the wicked queen in Snow White, a fairy tale by the German brothers Grimm.

8 Shakespeare Hamlet. Prince of Denmark 3.2.21-22. In the play Hamlet stages a play, re-enacting his father’s murder; with this he wants to determine Claudius’ guilt or innocence by studying his reaction. Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871) is a work of children’s literature by Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgen). The “Mirror of Erised” is a magic mirror which shows the “deepest and most desperate desire of our hearts.” It appears various times in the Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling.
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a lot of followers and influence; far more than in The Netherlands, for example. These factors greatly influenced my choice of both the period and the writers. How exactly these points, together with the presence of the images and innovative narrative techniques, contributed to my choice of these four novels by Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys I will explain in more detail later on.

My research defends the thesis that in the novels under investigation the mirroring of the traditional images of the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster’ is used to both represent and question social roles for women. By thematizing the available social roles for women in this way, the novels raise the norms and values of contemporary patriarchal society to a more conscious level of understanding for the reader. The techniques used can thus aid contemporary readers to get a different view of society and can also contribute to the contemporary debate on social roles for women. That the novels succeeded in doing this can be demonstrated by means of an investigation of contemporary reader reports and reviews.

I chose novels by Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys also because all of these female authors were relatively well-known and respected in their own time. In spite of the different countries, time-frames, or social levels, these women writers used strikingly similar techniques and images. Because of the popularity of these writers, the wide availability of their work, and the accepted habit of women to read novels, these writers could and did reach large groups of women. These authors were, on the whole, not considered subversive writers, but each author was very much concerned with and about the role of the woman in contemporary society. This tendency can be seen in all of their work. However, I argue that, in the novels selected, they used the traditional stereotype opposition of the ‘Angel in the House’ and the ‘monster’ to enquire further into the influence of contemporary society on the lives of women. Without explicitly stating that the norms and values were still oppressive for women, they show it to the reader through their use of the stereotype opposition, which I rephrase as the ‘Mirror Image.’

The first novel to be examined is Shirley (1849) by Charlotte Brontë. This less well-known work by Brontë was praised for its social aspects even at the time of its publication. In this realist novel, attention is paid to both the position of the woman and the plight of the worker. In my analysis, I focus on the way in which both female main characters, Shirley
Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, are being portrayed and compared. My analysis of this
British novel focuses on the opposition of the ‘good’ woman and the ‘bad’ woman. I
examine whether the images of the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster’ can be directly linked to the
labels ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or whether there is a more subtle subdivision. And, if there is, what
is the role of the mirroring technique and how does it function? The novel Shirley takes
place in the Yorkshire of 1811, but the book itself was written a little later, namely in 1849.
At the beginning of the novel both female main characters are still quite different from one
another. In the course of the story, however, things begin to change and the novel ends with
the marriage of both women. Throughout the novel, contemporary readers were presented
with a good example of both traditional and alternative behavioral patterns for women; and
they were made aware of the fact that there were indeed more options available to women.
Yet, they could take notice of these options without running the risk of being criticized
themselves. That they did take heed of these options becomes apparent from an
examination of the reception of the novel in 1849.\(^1\)

In the second novel I analyze, The Awakening (1899) by Kate Chopin, the two female main
characters are mirrored again. The style of this novel can be referred to as emotional
realism. This time Edna Pontellier and Adèle Ratignolle are being compared. During a
period of nine months both women undergo an intense process of personal change. For the
year 1899, when this American novel was published, the narrative was quite unusual.
Points I will examine in relation to this realist novel again focus on the mirroring technique:
both women are structurally compared and contrasted here as well. But the period and the
setting are quite different. In my analysis I investigate the differences in relation to the
earlier novel, and test the hypothesis whether there is a development in the use of the
mirroring technique. The tragic consequence for the writer of this quite controversial novel
was that its publication almost turned out to be the end of her literary career. An
investigation of the reception of this novel in 1899 will further clarify this point.

The third novel I examine is The Age of Innocence (1920) by Edith Wharton. The style of
this novel is realist as well, but with a strong focus on society, so much so that it is often
referred to as a novel of manners. The two female protagonists in this novel are from the
upper middle classes. The story takes place in the New York of the 1870s and this time
May Welland and Ellen Olenska are mirrored. In the course of the story the division
between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ seems to become blurred. Edith Wharton’s subtle and intelligent
use of the mirroring technique creates distinctions that cannot simply be labelled with these
opposites. How Wharton applies the mirroring technique and introduces subtle changes will
be discussed in the chapter on The Age of Innocence. Whether her techniques were
appreciated and understood by contemporary readers is shown by my investigation of the
novel’s reception in 1920.

In the last novel I discuss, After Leaving Mr Mackenzie (1930) by Jean Rhys, the two main
female characters are the sisters Julia Martin and Norah Griffiths. Rhys’ depiction of both
characters is again quite different from the earlier novels. The images of both the ‘angel’
and the ‘monster’ are present in this story, but it is especially the contemporary patriarchal
context and its influence on the lives of both female main characters that receives a lot of
attention and criticism. Rhys’ novel was published in 1930. It is the last and most modern
novel that will be discussed. Rhys’ writing style is very different from the earlier novels

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\(^{1}\) See Chapter 3.5 of this dissertation.
and approaches modernism. How this influences her use of the mirroring technique and the depiction of the stereotypic images are important points of investigation. Whether and how contemporary readers appreciated her modernistic and sometimes even impressionistic application of the technique is studied in my investigation of the reception of the novel in 1930-1931.

Many other women writers wrote novels with two female main characters or ‘doubles.’ But very often the ‘double’ would assume a particular shape, like the ‘mad(wo)man.’ Examples of this use can be found in “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Brontë, and *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) by Virginia Woolf. The male/female double was popular as well. *Mrs. Dalloway* has already been mentioned, but another example would be *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) by George Eliot. Yet, rather than just focus on one mental element of a female protagonist, I was interested in all aspects of femininity, so neither of the other models was so apt or relevant.

By means of the examination of the ‘mirror image,’ my research illuminates the techniques used by Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys to raise awareness of the contemporary system of norms and values. The methodological framework for this investigation is, in part, offered by Hegenbarth-Rösgen whose approach blends an interpretative and a sociologically-based analysis of the ways literature can be a vehicle for social norms. The other part is an examination of the contemporary social context. The period 1849-1930 seems to have been a transitional period in which a great many changes in the social context for women followed each other in rapid succession. How women writers have represented these changes and perhaps even encouraged some of them are important focus points in this research project. A close look at the employment of the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster’ substantiates the claim that women writers have often succeeded in reversing the implied meaning of the original images through the mirroring technique.

Through two sections, an examination of the images and representation techniques first, and the subsequent study of reader-reports, this study suggests ways in which the novels by these women writers functioned in the contemporary negotiation of social roles for women. Because of the complexity of the phenomenon that is being investigated - novels at the intersection of the literary and the social – the theoretical framework of my research project is interdisciplinary, including women’s studies, narratology, history and sociology.

**Framework**

Gilbert and Gubar’s thematic study of the traditional images used by both men and women to represent women in their work provides a useful starting point for my investigation. In their feminist study they examine the origin and the history of the images of ‘the angel in the house’ and ‘the monster’ (Gilbert & Gubar, 73-76). They indicate that related motifs have their roots in the way women are portrayed in literature by men. They notice that throughout literary history men have used specific images to depict women in their work. These images, especially “the angel in the house” and its “necessary opposite and double, the ‘monster’,” have taken on authority (Gilbert & Gubar, 17):

> As a creation ‘penned’ by man … woman has been ‘penned up’ or ‘penned in.’ As a sort of ‘sentence’ man has spoken, she has herself been ‘sentenced’: fated, jailed, for he has both ‘indited’ her and ‘indicted’ her. As a thought he has ‘framed,’ she has been both ‘framed’ (enclosed) in
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his texts, glyphs, graphics, and ‘framed up’ (found guilty, found wanting) in his cosmologies. (Gilbert & Gubar, 13)

Gilbert and Gubar also point out that the impact of these images of ‘the angel in the house’ and ‘the monster’ has been devastating on both women’s understanding of themselves and on their creative writing. Just as the passivity of the image of ‘the angel’ discourages women from writing, so, too, the image of ‘the monster’ backs up the idea that creativity is the domain of men, because any woman who tries to assert herself through writing is considered unnatural and dangerous, and looked upon as an abnormality.

Gilbert and Gubar believe that before any woman can write, she first has to deal with these male images of her ‘self.’ At the same time, Gilbert and Gubar indicate that women often “use and misuse” male literary traditions (Gilbert & Gubar, 80). Instead of destroying the male images of women (the images of ‘angels’ and ‘monsters’), these images abound in writing by women, too. The most important difference lies in how these images function. Gilbert and Gubar claim that:

women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards. (Gilbert & Gubar, 73)

Most women’s writing contains a hidden story according to Gilbert and Gubar, who observe that:

in publicly presenting acceptable facades for private and dangerous visions women writers have long used a wide range of tactics to obscure but not obliterate their most subversive impulses. (Gilbert & Gubar, 74)

They note that, in doing this, women writers “have been especially concerned with assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature” (Gilbert & Gubar, 76). The opposed images of ‘the angel’ and ‘the monster,’ and the mirroring of them, become important as an equivalent for the opposition between the “publicly … acceptable facades” and women’s “private and dangerous visions.” By rewriting the monstrous image(s) of themselves, as created by their male precursors, women seem to give expression to their feelings of frustration and anger, according to Gilbert and Gubar. The analysis in The Madwoman in the Attic expounds that in literature by women the use of the images of ‘the angel in the house’ and ‘the monster,’ and the use of these images as doubles, mainly concerns the representation of the struggle of the female protagonists with patriarchal society.

Another useful basis was an examination of the tradition of the motif of the Doppelgänger or double. In critical tradition, basically two types of double have been distinguished. The first type, usually referred to as ‘the objective double,’ possesses external reality, clearly independent of the original self, but lacks any kind of inward linkage or continuity with the latter; it is similar, but not ‘self,’ and an example of this external type would be the allegorical double. The second type is referred to as ‘the subjective double.’ This double
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shares a basic psychic identity with the original self, but lacks external reality and thus any convincing simultaneous identity of its own; it is ‘self,’ but not ‘other;’ an example of this type would be the psychological double.  

As we will see, the type of double present in the literature by women during the period 1849-1930 seems to belong to the objective type. Aspects of the subjective double are present, though, and to be able later on to describe more exactly what the character of the double in literature by women is like, what form the motif may assume, how it is presented, and what the meaning of the motif is, I turned to the main traditional studies of the motif.  

In spite of their different approaches and terminologies, the explanations that these studies offer are quite similar. In their investigations of mainly the same (male) writers, they all state that the figure of the double is created by the author, either consciously or unconsciously, to express in fiction the division within the author’s own mind. According to these studies the motif of the double represents the author’s shortcomings, his ‘darker side,’ the self which he really is, as opposed to the ‘good’ self that he would like to be, or at least would like to be thought to be. As a result the double seems to be a figure of threat and hatred, who stirs up fear, loathing, and shame in his ‘better’ self with whom the writer tends to identify himself. According to these views, the double never seems to be just a technical device; instead the motif appears to be a symptom of the writer’s own mental disorder.  

By contrast with these masculine examples, the ‘double’ in the work of women authors seems to be more of an ‘independent’ phenomenon, representing the comparison between the two female main characters in the book. It also appears to have a more social function rather than a psychological one. This supported my decision not to use the term ‘double’ for the motif I investigate. As indicated before, the term ‘Mirror Image’ will be used. This seems a more suitable phrase for a motif that is used to compare and contrast the female protagonists in the social world of the novel. Throughout my examination of such a comparison, the focus is on women’s social roles, and in this investigation the mirroring of the two female protagonists will be studied concerning their relation to accepted roles.

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12 This distinction is made by many critics of the Doppelgänger or Double, but the division mentioned here is taken from the notions C. F. Kepl er expounds in Chapter I of his study The Literature of the Second Self. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1972) 9-10.


14 Examples of books by British male writers which seem to substantiate these theories are: R. L. Stevenson, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), and Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891).
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My examination thus differs from the existing studies. With its focus on the use of the ‘mirror image’ in literature by women, and in particular its social connotations, this study introduces a new angle on the doubling or mirroring technique. I will not just discuss the motifs, but I will also investigate how the various cultural roles and values are represented. This requires an approach that seeks to connect a literary text and the social context. Although her work is not very well known, a study by the aforementioned Annelie Hegenbarth-Rösgen proved very useful. In her study, *Soziale Normen und Rollen im Roman* (1982), she presents a theoretical framework to examine the representation of social norms and roles in the novel.

I examine Hegenbarth-Rösgen’s approach in the first chapter of this dissertation. Overall, her method can be divided into three main points of interest in relation to my study. First, it contains some suggestions for the analysis of texts with regard to the representation of norms and social roles. I will add an examination of the way in which mirror images are used to portray social roles for women. Her second point of interest is the organization of the elements of a text through the different perspectives represented in a text. In this context she refers to the distinctions made by Wolfgang Iser in his study *The Act of Reading*. Her last point is a study of the ‘text side’ and the ‘reader side’ as the two complements of the communication frame of texts. I will examine all of these points to inquire further into the application of the mirror image, and I will concentrate on its use in the novels under investigation.

In this sociological approach, Hegenbarth-Rösgen importantly distinguishes four functions that literature can have in relation to social norms and roles. She assumes that all literature reflects social norms and values, even if it is in an indirect way. The first function in this context she calls “thematization.” This idea offers insight into how novels may raise an awareness of norms and roles by thematizing them. By giving the readers of their novels an interpretation of the social context, and a shared experience of both conformist and deviant behavior of the female protagonists, Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys raise the values of the social context for women to a higher and more conscious level of understanding. The second function is called “stabilization” by Hegenbarth-Rösgen. This is a technique that can be used to stabilize norms and roles in both real life and in literature. It is in relation to this process that the ‘mirror image’ has an important function. Stabilization of norms and roles can be achieved through a de-legitimization or problematization of the undesirable role or inadequate norm. The ‘mirror image’ introduces the possibility of comparing and contrasting the social roles represented by the two main characters. The comment or criticism, which in this case implies de-legitimization of the undesirable role or norm, devalues one character and the social role connected with her, and thus also “stabilizes” the desired alternative. The ‘mirror image’ thus introduces the possibility of a ‘sanction.’ Hegenbarth-Rösgen’s third function is called “problematization.” This technique describes the process of how readers (and characters) become aware of certain norms and roles, and the way they function through a critical approach. The fourth function Hegenbarth-Rösgen distinguishes is “anticipation.” This concept indicates how readers can become acquainted with alternative conventions or codes of living through literature. All four concepts and the method are dealt with more extensively in Chapter One of this dissertation.

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Such a focus on the representation of social norms and roles requires an examination of the contemporary social context. As the timespan 1849-1930 was a transitional period that has produced the first feminist wave with a great many changes in the social context for women, a close look at the actual social context seems necessary. Within eighty years, Western society developed from a traditional, mostly rural and quite religious type of society to a modern, urban and industrial society in which women did seem to have more freedom in spite of the still restrictive legislation. The Victorian Era gradually gave way to the Jazz Age. The whole of Chapter Two, therefore, presents a brief social history of the education of girls and the role of the woman in England and the United States during the period of the four chosen novels, drawing on various socio-historical works focusing on the circumstances for women at the time, in particular, to get a better understanding of the workings of socialization processes, I briefly discuss a study by George Herbert Mead who gives a clear picture of these processes in an examination written towards the end of the period under investigation here (1934). A more general reflection on the function of education in reproducing social norms and distinctions will be discussed as well. The sociological perspective of Bourdieu and Passeron offers a good basis for the understanding of the working and reproduction of power systems in education, culture and society. In spite of the improving possibilities for education, the type of education girls received would still focus on the social roles they were assumed to adopt later on in life. A noteworthy aspect of the socialization of girls, at the time, was the important role fulfilled by the family. It was especially the mother who served not only as a guide and teacher, but also as a role-model for the girl. Compulsory primary education gradually came into being, but secondary and higher education for girls developed much more slowly and most girls received such training in a domestic context.

Alongside the issues of socialization and education, other points of interest gain attention. Practical changes in daily life are important. The introduction of new household appliances made life easier for some women at the beginning of the twentieth century. So did the introduction of new fashions and different hairstyles in the 1920s. Certain groups of women also gained more leisure time which they could use studying or working. And some women became involved in the campaign for women to be given the right to vote. Yet, even with more spare time, and more job opportunities, women’s participation in the workforce hardly increased until the 1930s. Individual women and organized groups did strive for the ‘liberation’ of women, and though both British and American women’s movements were successful in getting women the vote and in realizing more extensive possibilities for education, they never became mass movements, and they did not succeed in changing the traditional gender-role divisions. In general, women’s political power remained negligible during the entire timespan investigated.

16 A similar concern for the link between literary works by women and the interaction with and influence of the contemporary social context is investigated in Women and Literature in Britain, 1500-1700 edited by Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Even though this study concerns quite a different timespan, it was still very useful to me, as it provided a good example of how to approach such a topic.


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gradually got used to the everyday reality of girls studying and women participating in the labor force.

All of these trends can be noticed in the individual novels, and an examination of the ‘mirror image’ helps to illuminate these processes. Within each novel the behavior of the female main characters and the narrative strategies underlying this representation reveal both the limitations and the gradual changes in the immediate social context. It is especially the opposition between the traditional and accepted pattern of behavior with the changing context and ideas that is stressed. This comparison is graphically depicted through the contrasting images of the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster.’ In general, creative literature during this time seemed to encourage cultural reflection and social change. The writing by women was no exception, and each individual woman writer discussed here contributed to the changing social context in her own way.

The focus throughout this dissertation is on how female authors represented the ‘feminine condition’ in novels and the narrative techniques they used to do this. This practice will be explored in Chapters Three-Seven, the main bulk of this dissertation. In these chapters the novels by Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys are discussed by means of the theoretical studies on social norms and roles, drawing also on the social and historical context. In relation to the theoretical framework, it is the use of the ‘mirror image’ and the representation of norms and social roles that gains special attention, though I would like to stress that it is especially the creative and imaginative side of such representation in literature that will be focused on. I hope that my account of some representation techniques illuminates these creative processes. A similar approach is adhered to in relation to the study of the use of perspectives in the various texts and an examination of the ‘text side’ and the ‘reader side,’ to borrow Hegenbarth-Rösgen’s phrases.

In the chapters on Brontë, Chopin, Wharton and Rhys I concentrate on three aspects in relation to the use of the ‘mirror image.’ The first context in which the mirroring of the female main characters is studied concerns the depiction of the primary and secondary socialization of the two females. It focuses on the upbringing and education of the two women in as much as the text formulates any details about this. The second context concerns the class-specific socialization. In relation to this aspect, I examine the depicted use of role-attributes by both protagonists. Such role attributes may be the use of clothes or accessories, or the make-up used. The third context concerns more generally the portrayed behavior of both women. In how far are they shown to be influenced by the social environment in which they live?

In all four novels, one of the female main characters sticks more to the traditional role assigned to the woman, while her ‘mirror image’ seems to be more of a rebel. The often critical attitude of the minor characters and sometimes of the other female character are an important aspect of the social context, and a pointer for both the rebel and the reader about what is considered acceptable and what is unacceptable behavior in the world evoked in the text. At the same time, the very introduction of a certain type of apparently deviant behavior may have made readers question the standards imposed on a woman’s conduct: are they really so appropriate, logical, or just? It is this questioning of the imposed types of

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behavior that may contribute to the emancipation process. Responses by contemporary readers show that such reflections on norms and values in the texts were indeed continued by and within the reader.

Reception

To investigate further the effects of the techniques used by these women writers, I finally examine the reception of these novels by contemporary readers. A useful study in this context is an article by the American sociologists Sarah Corse and Saundra Davis Westervelt. Corse and Westervelt offer an interesting framework for understanding and interpreting reader reviews from contemporary readers. They take as their point of departure the idea that the value of literature differs as evaluation systems change. The interpretive and material resources available within social systems influence both works and the judgments attached to them. In particular, they demonstrate the varying appreciations of texts under different interpretive strategies. They stress that the dominant interpretive strategy of readers during the period 1849-1930 was built on assumptions of reading as moral instruction. Such interpretive strategies would evaluate the novels under investigation differently than late-twentieth-century feminist interpretive strategies would. My research suggests that the representation of the ‘Angel in the House’ seems to make these novels socially acceptable reading at the time; the ‘rebel’ image introduces the subversive aspect, and it is the mirroring of these images that permits the questioning of the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ aspects of each ‘side’ and introduces the possibility of ambiguity. Such questioning contributes to the raising of an awareness about social norms, roles, and images and thus helps to clarify and even expose the social context to the contemporary reader.

Overall, Corse and Westervelt’s approach to the reception of literature focuses on the reception of a novel in relation to the appreciation of the work by groups of readers at various points in history. Wolfgang Iser’s theories concentrate on the reception of a work by an individual, less historicised, reader and the processes that take place in a reader’s mind whilst reading a text. Iser has developed a reception theory that is based on phenomenology. In his view the literary text, as a product of the writer’s imaginative acts, in part controls the reader’s responses, but always also contains a number of ‘gaps’ or ‘indeterminate elements.’ These the reader must fill in by a creative participation with what is given in the text. The experience of reading is an evolving process of anticipation, frustration, retrospection, and reconstruction. This involvement of the reader’s consciousness brings together both the more objective features of a literary work and the coherence, or unity of a text as an interpretive construct. The author’s imaginative and inventive acts create both limits and incentives. It is the readers’ involvement with the text and their creative additions to a text that make a text come alive and develop into a kind of ‘virtual reality’ to the reader. Because of readers’ participation in the text in this way, the reading of a literary text may have a great influence on an individual reader’s mind; and the ideas contained in a text may thus contribute to a ‘consciousness raising activity.’

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21 See note 8; in addition to that study Iser’s theoretical work Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology (1990) has also been consulted.
Introduction

Both Corse and Westervelt’s and Iser’s approach are considered as a basis for the study of the reception of *Shirley, The Awakening, The Age of Innocence* and *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*. I argue that the techniques used in these novels at least created more openness about the position of the woman during the timespan 1849-1930. Whether the narrative strategies used also really contributed to the emancipation of women seems harder to confirm, but the large amount of evidence, some previously unstudied, of reader response provides fascinating ‘proof’ in this context, as we will see later on.