

Listening to Herstory: A Comparative Study of Works by Nathaniel
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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to deal with the concept on “herstory”. This term is the non-word in dictionary; however, why we have “his”tory, rather than “her”story? Virginia Woolf once suggests that “we should unearth and give voice to women’s life story and experiences. That is to make herstory.” Throughout history people could learn that there were many stories about outstanding men, but only few brilliant women were memorialized even if there were many great heroines. As Woolf claims, the ideology of “The Angel in the House” has become the stumbling block which prevents women from breaking the traditional burden of taking care of her families. Based on the concept “Killing the Angel in the House”, this study shall analyze five female characters, Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One’s Own*, Eveline of “Eveline” in *Dubliners*, Emily Sinico of “A Painful Case” in *Dubliners*, Celie in *The Color Purple*, and Georgiana in “The Birthmark,” and probe into their success or failure in self-assertion and self-affirmation.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, the angel in the house, Judith Shakespeare, “Eveline,” “A Painful Case,” *The Color Purple*, “The Birthmark”

摘要

維吉尼亞·沃夫曾經說到：「為什麼這個世上沒有女性莎士比亞？」這句看似無稽之談的句子深深地啟發了我，並且讓我思考：為什麼在我們的歷史（History）幾乎都是男性佔了所有值得後世緬懷的頭銜，像是：巴哈，音樂之父，然而音樂之母卻不是女性，而是韓德爾。因此這篇論文的主要目的便是透過五位女性主角：Judith Shakespeare, Eveline, Emily Sinico, Celie, Georgiana 來分析以前女性不能在歷史上名流青史的原因。傳統的社會對於女性有諸多限制，往往短短幾個字便會抹殺所有女性求知的權利及追求成功的野心。我認為女性只要能夠為自己判斷究竟生命導師是否有益於她們的人生，她的人生就成功了一半，這也是我想透過這篇論文想傳達的觀點，女性要勇於為自己發聲。

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I. Introduction

The objective of this study is to analyze five classic women characters: Judith Shakespeare, Eveline, Emily Sinico, Celie and Georgiana. The herstory of these five women can help us define their success or failure in self-assertion and self-affirmation. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf said: "All I can do was to offer you an opinion upon one minor point--a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." However, this point is not as minor as she humbly assumes. After women fulfill these two necessary conditions, they could write fiction, poem, or any other genres of literatures. They are free from the traditional burden that patriarchal society imposes on woman, the burden of taking care of family. In other words, these women successfully kill the angel in the house. Moreover, in Woolf's book, she answered the question, why there is no woman Shakespeare. That is, women are too afraid to challenge the traditional gender ideology, and the society does not give women a chance at the same time.

Therefore, we can realize it is too difficult for women to success in this world. In this paper, I will also discuss the help from mentors for these female characters. By looking in to these female characters' hearts and life stories, we can conclude that a good mentor will help women to find their own world again. On the contrary, they will be tied down with

the shackles of tradition.

I. Judith Shakespeare

Why there is no woman Shakespeare? In "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf once imagined that William Shakespeare, the greatest British poet, had a wonderfully gifted sister called Judith. Whereas William Shakespeare went to grammar school, Judith just stayed at home. Her parents controlled her thought, restricted her movement, and even deprived her of the right to education. When she was in her teens, her father asked her to marry with a neighboring man. On account of Judith's refusal, her father started to beat her and scold her, but after a while, he stopped to beg her not to feel ashamed of what he had done. Considerate as she might, she still followed her nature gift to London. When Judith arrived in London, she tried to find a theater job, but what she obtained was the men's mock, humiliation and sexual exploitation.

Judith Shakespeare finally committed suicide to end her desolate life. The gender ideology is the biggest barrier for her to make her own story. In her life, we can find that she doesn't have any mentor to give her advice and help her. Judith's mother is a traditional woman in the 16th century, she cannot give her child any suggestion about how to get rid of the patriarchal gender ideology. Instead, she wants her to obey her father and the

social order. From this point, we can clearly realize that her mother cannot be her mentor. Judith can only count on herself. Even though Judith Shakespeare is a fictional character, we still can learn many lessons from her story. In the same period, even women have already killed the angel in the house, it is still hard for people to change a deeply ingrained notion towards women.

II. Eveline

Eveline is a woman who tries to escape from her father's domination; however, she fails to cross out the threshold of the ideology--"The Angel in the House." In her life, her mother was her only mentor, the only thing she could do is follow her mother. As L. L. Veazey commented in his paper "*Drowning in 'Eveline.'*" Eveline was often described in terms that suggested a struggle to keep her head above the drowning forces of her life: "Eveline was tired" and fought with her father "had begun to weary her unspeakably"(Veazey 26). The only thing her mother passes down to her (the traditional burden) that she has to face and accept the gender ideology which makes her choose to stay in her unhappy family world rather than escapes to Argentina. Eveline is not only hesitant but also imprisoned by patriarchal gender ideology. In the end, Eveline returns to her family for her father. Z. Köseman suggests that Eveline's sudden emotional change implies how she is spiritually

paralyzed under the expectations of her environment. But, I argue that Eveline's mother, even while in her deathbed, still imbues her with the traditional gender ideology and makes her "the angel in the house." Her mother's word "keep their family complete" makes her change her mind. Her attitude is not as strong as the first time that she wants to elope with Frank. Thus, she fails to kill the angel in the house and asserts her life as well as dignity in the end. No matter how earnestly Frank calls her, she just clutches the iron railing tightly. She is obsessed with duty and her mind occupied by the sense of responsibility. Therefore, she cannot change her life and make her own story. The only thing she can do is passing down this distressing spirit to the next generation, like what her mother has done to her and victimized her.

III. Emily Sinico

Another heroine in James Joyce *Dubliners* is Mrs. Emily Sinico of "A Painful Case". Mrs. Sinico had a "wonderful" family life, she lives in a nice house; however, she does not have a great marital life. Captain Sinico does not really care about his family. The only thing he does is earn money, just earn money. Even her daughter seems not really care about her mother. Mr. Duffy and Mrs. Sinico first meet in a concert which he finds the ladies besides him are Mrs. Sinico and her daughter, and they become soul mates then. In "A Painful

Case,” James Joyce gives a foreshadowing for their relationship. “The house, thinly peopled and silent, gave distressing prophecy of failure.” This foreshadowing is not only for the failure of the concert, but their relationship. Ever since they meet each other, they become closer and closer. In other words, they entangle spiritually with each other. Nevertheless, all Mr. Duffy wants is just keep their relationship as a friend or soul mate, whereas Mrs. Sinico wants more than that. Because of her unhappy marital life, she finds comfort and compassion on Mr. Duffy. To her, Mr. Duffy is her whole world. When she finally plucks up her courage to show her love to Mr. Duffy, he is very shocked and wants to put an end to their relationship. Four years later, Mr. Duffy learns his ex-soulmate’s recent life from a newspaper with a heart-broken tittle--A Painful Case—in a newspaper. Although the description of the news seems to show her death was an accident. In fact, she committed suicide.

B. Knapp’s asserts in his paper “Joyce’s «A Painful Case»: The Train and an Epiphanie Experience:

The train, a more powerful machine than the tram, will be instrumental in bringing on what James Joyce called the epiphany. He defined it as “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself”, and as “the most delicate of evanescent moments”; its intent is to

bring awareness to the individual experiencing its numinosity (Knapp 56).

That is, train becomes a symbol to represent the epiphany. When this accident happened, Mrs. Sinico must realize the consequence of suicide, and she still let the tragedy happen. To Mr. Duffy, the train is a loss of his soul mate and his whole world. Choosing death to fight against patriarchal gender ideology, Emily Sinico seemingly is a brave woman who tries to change her life, kill angel in the house and is willing to pay the price for the consequence. However, the end is not as wonderful as one assumes. Due to Mr. Duffy’s high moral standard, he refuses to accept her love. In committing suicide, Emily Sinico in fact fails to make her own successful story since she has not developed to assert and affirm herself but still yearns to count on man—Duffy this time. In short, Emily Sinico remains mired with traditional gender ideology.

IV. Celie

The heroin in *The Color Purple* is Celie. Celie is an Africa American who can has a very wonderful life until her stepfather replaced her father. Fonso, Celie’s stepfather, has a disposition towards acts of violence and lust for women. He not only forbids Celie to go to school, but also rapes her and abandons her children. Celie’s mother does not pay more attention to Celie when she is dying; however, she regards

Celie as a devil and screams to her. This action makes Celie feel depressed and hopeless. Celie's mother has completely dismissed Celie from her life; and in her death, she fills her daughter with venom and loathsome thoughts. Her stepfather's ploy to isolate her in order to further her victimization is successful (Martin 28). After Celie's mother died, Celie's last spiritual support is Nettie. Moreover, we can say that Nettie is the first real mentor in Celie's making of herstory. To protect Nettie from her beastly father and her husband's harassment, she helps Nettie escape her terrible husband's house. The relationship between Celie and Mr.__(Albert) is very unequal. Why Celie has to call her husband Mr.__(rather than Albert)? That is because this relationship is a transaction negotiated and done by men—Celie stepfather and Albert. Celie's relationship with Albert is like that of slave and master. In her letters to God, we could clearly realize that she was powerless to this relationship. The bond between them is not husband and wife but master and slave. The most important common place of Albert and Celie's father is they both objectify Celie and turn her into a piece of their belongings.

McKever-Floyd observes in his paper *"TELL NOBODY BUT GOD": The Theme of Transformation in "The Color Purple."*

Letter writing, the vehicle to Celie's liberation and the reader's entry into the

inner workings of her life, constitute her rituals of rebellion. Celie's writing to God thrusts her into a rich symbolic life which results in her repudiation of the life she has been assigned and a desire for a more expansive daily existence. (McKever-Floyd 427)

Maybe it is the God's reply to her letter, she meets Kate, Sophia, Shug in this period. Shug is the most important mentor to Celie, she is the one who guides her to learn to fight the injustice, scolds the thief behavior of Albert, and lives for herself. Shug as a good mentor makes Celie reborn.

Thus, I suggest that sisterhood leads to mentorship and Celie's self-assertion. Whether the real sisterhood between Celie and Nettie or the sisterhood between Celie and Shug, both of them bring about the process of Celie's transformation. As Celie is empowered through quilting, she learns important factors about artistry and self-expression. She succeeds in business because her pants are an improved improvisation of traditional pants, and the artistry of them attracts a following (J Martin 36). Shug plays an important role in Celie's production of herstory. She encourages her, leads her to the unknown world. Moreover, she helps Celie find her talent and create successful herstory. Therefore, I assert that they are the happiest sisterhood and most successful mentorship.

V. Georgiana

Georgiana is the last heroine of this study. From short story's title, *The Birthmark*, we can learn that it is a "defect" of the heroine. In the story the birthmark is Georgiana's facial defect. No matter how beautiful she is, she just cannot escape her husband Aylmer's complaint about the birthmark—even if he claims he loves her so much. Although she tries hard to persuade her husband that the birth mark has taken a refugee in her heart and it cannot be removed, Aylmer still uses his ridiculous dream to push Georgiana to finish his science dream. One may ask why he cannot bear with his wife's defect but marry her. It is Aylmer's arrogance as a scientist. He believes in the power of science and himself as a god. He also believes his science knowledge to erase Georgiana's mark even all of his experiment results are fake. Aylmer asks Georgiana to remove the mark, she promises him, and Aylmer is happy for this. From this point, we can be sure that he is proud of himself and love himself more than his wife. On the contrary, Georgiana loves Aylmer more than herself. She is the angel in the house, pleasing her husband and even sacrificing her life and dignity to satisfy her husband's desire to be a scientist-god--no matter how dangerous this experiment is.

As Barbara Eckstein suggested in her research paper "*Hawthorne's 'The*

Birthmark: 'Science and Romance as Belief'":

... she loves him because he is obsessed with his singular power of creation, which she imagines includes her—in fact, is she. They both imagine she is his creation. Neither his overreaching code of science nor her overreaching code of romance addresses the physical creation possible through sex. (Eckstein 515)

For Aylmer, Georgiana is one of the evidence can prove he is over the Mother Nature. No matter how the crimson hand threatens him, he can always deal with it. The reason why Aylmer will love Georgiana is all because he believes his science power. As for Georgiana, she actually knows she may die in Aylmer's experiment, she still wants to help her husband to fulfill his dream. Her decisions are all out of love to his husband. Although she tries to struggle and fight for her birthmark, she can't go against her husband. She is so obedient that she will do whatever her husband demands. She fails entirely in asserting and affirming herself. Therefore, we can infer that Georgiana corresponds to the ideology of the angel in the house.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I discuss various reasons why women cannot create their own story or the reasons why they can successfully kill the angel in the house. We use five heroines to be my research objects, they

are Judith Shakespeare, Eveline, Emily Sinico, Celie, Georgiana namely. Celie makes herstory successfully; however, Eveline and Georgiana are failed to kill the angel in the house. In my opinion, the consequence of Emily Sinico and Judith Shakespeare's their stories are tragedy, but they pluck up their courage, kill the angel in the house, and break the confinement. They are also heroines of their stories. The most important reason why some heroines cannot make her own story is the ideology of "The Angel in the House." This gender ideology limits the development and fulfilment of women, and generates constraints and confinement to women. This concept has created a society which women have no status and women have to obey men's rules unconditionally.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf said "'I' is only convenient term for somebody who has no real being." (5). 'I' is just a compensation justice for women. That is, in "his" story women are not respected by the men, and women just have no real being in history. Therefore, I contend it is very important for women to make herstory, and let women have the same right like men to be somebody in herstory. To sum up, killing angel in the house is very difficult task for women to undertake, but the achievement will be the most valuable reward. Thus, I assert every woman should assert her right to create herstory.

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