

The Re-Writing of Women in Society

Michaela Knapp

Writing literature and creating art, especially by women, have not always been as freely viewed and respected in all societies throughout the world. Women have been under restrictions from the male societal rules as to what to include in a proper painting or literary work to make it acceptable. Many educated males have criticized women for their art and writing since it did not always fit the dominantly male classifications. During the Middle Ages, Christine de Pizan was struggling with the rules and regulations of a woman's expectations in society. In 1405, Christine de Pizan wrote *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which demonstrates her frustrations with these rules and regulations; she formed her own city where women were free of these burdens. In 1890, Henrik Ibsen of Norway wrote the play *Hedda Gabler*, which demonstrates the effects of bourgeois regulations on women, dictating what was an acceptable part of a woman's daily activities and what was not. Later in 1972, Adrienne Rich wrote "When We Dead Awaken: Writing As Re-Vision" about the effect males have had on women in writing literature over time and how she has also been affected by these male restrictions. The question of how women have been affected by these male expectations remains.

Expectations of women changed from the Middle Ages to the late 1800's and again to the 1970's. During the Middle Ages, Christine de Pizan was well aware of

the difficulty of reconciling the demands of writing with the occupations of women....

Although I was naturally inclined to scholarship from my birth, my occupation with the tasks common to married women and the burden of frequent childbearing has deprived me of it.

(263)

Christine de Pizan was "married when she was fifteen years old, and became a widow with three children when she was twenty-five" (263). During the late 1800's, bourgeois women were expected to be proper: waited on and served day and night. Hedda, the main character in the play *Hedda Gabler*, is an excellent example of this constant neediness. She expects only the best, which is why she agreed to marry Tesman, since he has a stable life and money supply. However, not all bourgeois women in the play demand these high standards. Mrs. Elvsted has been collaborating with Eilert Loveborg on a book, and this work is all that matters to her; it is her heart and soul, and she treats it like her child. Hedda does not understand Mrs. Elvsted's continual desire and work on this book because she thinks that women are supposed to be talking with others in their social circle or housekeeping, not collaborating on a book. In the 1970's, women had more freedom, yet their lives were still "extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage" (Rich 502). Rich describes the 1970's as an "exhilarating time to be alive during this awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorienting, and painful" (Rich 496). The 1970's was a time when the old and new expectations of women began to clash. Women began to take chances with their writing while they challenged the past images of female writers. The courage of women who took the risk to go against the past expectations of them thirty years ago has allowed women today to become so successful in distaining the past.

Christine de Pizan's book begins by describing a land where women would be free from the previous strains of a male societal view. It is the beginning of women taking a stand and showing that they are indeed equal to men. At first, Pizan is concerned with why God would have created woman if she were exactly as men had described her, a vile creature. She prayed that she had been born a man since they were seen as perfect. However, Pizan uses Lady Reason, Justice, and Rectitude's words to demonstrate that women are equals to men, and even though the City of Ladies "will be stormed by numerous assaults, it will never be taken or conquered" (Pizan 267). This point also demonstrates that no matter how many educated men write about women in a negative way, women will remain strong; they will stand for

themselves: “Gold becomes more refined the longer it stays in the furnace, which means the more women have been wrongfully attacked, the greater waxes the merit of their glory” (Pizan 268). Pizan’s explanation for these assaults on women is that they are from male authors who “base their own writings on what they have found in books and repeat what other writers have said” in order to make themselves look more scholarly (Pizan 269). However, if women writers were to follow this type of behavior, it would only hinder them even more.

Hedda Gabler demonstrates wavering on the view of what activities a proper lady can and cannot do. The young Hedda is set in the prim and classic bourgeoisie; she has a hard time accepting anyone below her. She is described as being “a real lady,” who “insisted on having it all” (Ibsen 2481-2). When Mrs. Elvsted goes to town, after leaving her husband, to follow Eilert Loveborg in order to continue their working relationship, Hedda is astounded that a woman would leave her husband. Hedda follows the restrictions the society has placed on her, while Mrs. Elvsted has abandoned them; she does what she wants to do and does not let the societal standards hold her back. When Hedda is talking with Mr. Loveborg, she says, “So you find it incredible that a young girl, given the chance to do so without anyone knowing, should want to be allowed a glimpse into a forbidden world of whose existence she is supposed to be ignorant?” (Ibsen 2511). This reference to ignorance shows how Hedda has been influenced by the male views of women during the late 1800’s when women were supposed to be uneducated.

Adrienne Rich demonstrates the greater equality women have gained by the end of the twentieth century; however, even a hundred years after Ibsen wrote, full equality for women still does not exist. Rich believes that men’s power over women has allowed women to express their emotions more fully in poetry, both in style and directive. Rich describes herself as being lucky because she was “born white and middle-class into a house full of books, with a father who encouraged her to read and write” (Rich 499). However, while she was working for a company run by a man, whom she was constantly trying to please, she noticed that she was writing so that he would approve of it, rather than writing how she wanted to write. Many women are constantly trying to fit into the roles that males have fulfilled for years. Thus, they believe that they need to achieve the same standard as the men have always used, rather than to set a new standard. Women are “influenced by the myths and images of women... who are products of culture” (Rich 499). As Rich says:

if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience, it has to question, to challenge, to conceive the alternative, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name. For writing is re-naming. (Rich 503)

Rich had been taught to write for a universal audience, who was anything other than female. “Much of women’s poetry has been of the nature of the blues song; a cry of pain, of victimization, or a lyric seduction” (Rich 507). It is through imagination and questioning of the past standards and regulations of society that women have been able to challenge the societal standards. Rich and other women began to re-write what a female author could write about and express in literature.

The victimization and classification of women have also occurred in art. In many of the paintings viewed during Barbara Rothermel’s lecture about women in art during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the men made the paintings, and the women in the paintings were both his subject and his creation. Women were just a “frame of reference” for the male artists (Rothermel). Women were generally depicted in various stages of life. In the painting, *An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump*, by Joseph Wright of Derby (English, 1734-97), the father is completing an experiment with a dove in a vacuum, and the young female is shown as a decorative figure, covering her face from the terror; the middle-aged girl watches with great excitement, and the oldest girl is more entwined with the boy next to her; she does not

even realize that a science experiment is being preformed. This painting represents the societal views of women in the sciences along with the developmental expectations of a marriageable girl.

Recently, works of two artists were displayed in Lynchburg College's Daura Art Gallery, one male, Robert Godfrey, and one female, Beverly Rhoads. It was interesting to see which paintings the students felt were more voyeuristic. The males felt that Rhoads' paintings were more voyeuristic, whereas the females felt that Godfrey's paintings were more voyeuristic. This observation demonstrates opposite poles of gender perception in how each individual sees a painting. There is no right or wrong interpretation of a painting, for everyone who looks at a painting uniquely interprets it. Paintings can also mean something different to people at various stages in their life.

The multiple interpretations of art can also be applied to literature. Christine de Pizan mentions her reactions to the male audience who describes women as vile creatures. She cannot understand how the educated men are able to support these thoughts. However, the male authors wrote how they felt about women at the time; they were not thinking about how a woman would feel reading it since their literature was intended for a male audience. This male-driven literature is also demonstrated in Hedda's opinion of Mrs. Elvsted and her collaboration with Mr. Loveborg on their book. Men were supposed to do research and write books, while women cleaned the house and raised children.

As a female going into the science field, I can understand why these women are generating these feelings of criticism. Science has always been a male-dominated field, which women have only recently ventured into. I am the only female in my Calculus 3 class, and I constantly feel that I need to perform as well as the males surrounding me, if not better. I am always comparing myself to them. At the same time, this competition that I have created for myself also helps me perform my best. This idea has also been true for women over the years as they have tried to make themselves be seen as equals to men; they have tried even harder to make their work unique and ground-breaking, whether it is art or literature. Women have slowly begun to re-write the societal standards for women who have ventured into various occupations. Many women choose to operate under the previous standards and to maintain the prim and proper idea of a woman who cleans, cooks, and raises children; however, at least there is an option for women to choose what role they wish to follow in society today.

Works Cited

- De Pizan, Christine. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. 263-270.
- Ibsen, Henrik. *Hedda Gabler*. *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces: Expanded Edition*. Ed. Maynard Mack et al. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997. 2476-2537.
- Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *The Norton Reader*. Ed. Arthur M. Eastman et al. 8th ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 1992. 495-508.
- Rothermel, Barbara. "Women in Art." Daura Gallery, Lynchburg College. 10 Nov. 2004.
- Wright of Derby, Joseph. *An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump*. 1768. The National Gallery, London.