

Women Protagonists in the Male and Female Modernist Writing: Comparing *Mrs. Dalloway* to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

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Abstract This article delves into the intricate portrayal of women protagonists within the realms of male and female-authored modernist literature, specifically comparing Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* to D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. The selected literary pieces, penned in 1920s England, serve as windows into the prevailing sociocultural milieu. The exploration of these iconic works aims to unravel the nuanced dimensions of the male and female gaze, dissecting their impact on the depiction of female characters in literature.

Introduction

The question of whether male authors can authentically capture the female experience has long aroused debates among critics. A prevalent sentiment among female critics contends that male writers might struggle to grasp the intricate complexities of women's perspectives, thereby raising doubts about the authenticity of their portrayals (Lange, 2008). Gender inequality oppresses women not only in real life but also in literature. In a male-dominated society, the oppression of women cannot be adequately represented in novels written by male authors since their lives have not been negatively affected by gender inequality, especially when the male author belongs to the elite class. Men cannot write about realistic experiences; they can only speculate. Unlike men's novels, women's novels mainly depict the oppression of women and also express a strong desire to end the patriarchal system (Pratt, 1975). However, it is crucial to recognize that the core of this discourse often lies not solely in gender but rather in the depth of identity when crafting female characters (Lange, 2008).

The Issue of Gaze

At the core of this debate lies the concept of the "male gaze," initially formulated within the realm of film theory and subsequently adopted by scholars in literature and the visual arts, making it one of the pivotal concepts in feminist art philosophy (Karami, 2019). Termed as the representation of women through the lens of male preferences, the "male gaze" remains a focal point for analysis. The genesis of this concept is attributed to Laura Mulvey, a film theorist, who also introduced the idea of the "female gaze" as a counterbalance (Goddard, 2000). The "female gaze" can be interpreted as an alternative perspective—one that strives to represent women on their own terms, fostering a distinct vantage point (French, 2021).

In a patriarchal society, the heterosexual male's viewpoint often defaults to the status of the "standard" perspective (Mulvey, 1989). Consequently, women become objects viewed primarily through a sexualized prism, defined by the male gaze (Chaudhuri, 2006). This division carves two roles: the observer (men) and the observed (women) (Mulvey, 1989). In the same vein, Agnès Varda, a filmmaker, offers a resolute act—declaring

the right to not only be observed but also to observe the world without the filter of another's perception (French, 2021). In the realm of literature, certain pioneers like Jane Austen and Emily Bronte dared to write from a distinctly feminine perspective, unburdened by the need to emulate a masculine narrative (Woolf, 2012).

For much of history, a woman was an enigmatic reflection, magnifying a man's image to twice its natural size. As Woolf articulates, women, although diverse and multifaceted—gentle yet ruthless, brilliant yet mundane, exquisitely beautiful yet terrifyingly repulsive—are rendered absent from historical accounts. In literature, however, they hold immense power, ruling the lives of kings and conquerors (Woolf, 2012). Yet, in reality, they remain marginalized, oppressed, and subject to maltreatment. The prevailing notion that was forged by male authors centuries ago still echoes—“La Belle Dame sans Merci.” The notion of femininity, shaped by the male gaze, has become deeply ingrained in the female psyche, establishing a standardized norm. In contemporary times, while the grip of patriarchy has weakened, women continue to navigate the labyrinth of self-expression, endeavoring to break free from the mold of idealized femininity meticulously shaped by male authors.

This article embarks on a mission to differentiate between authentic portrayals of women crafted by female writers and illusory depictions created by male authors. The ongoing debate about whether male writers can effectively capture the essence of female perspectives has sparked lively discussions among critics. While some argue that a character's identity holds more weight than their gender when creating compelling female protagonists, others contend that female authors excel due to their firsthand experiences. These conversations provide the context for this study, which aims to dissect the impact of an author's gender on the portrayal of female characters. The central research objective is to explore how the gender of the author influences the development of female protagonists. This examination is conducted

through the analysis of two English modernist literary works—Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

Methodologies

In this study, three distinct methodologies, New Historicism, Close Reading, and Deconstruction were employed to thoroughly analyze the personalities of Clarissa Dalloway and Constance Chatterley. These methodologies provided unique insights into the characters' identities, motivations, struggles, and interactions within the sociocultural contexts of their respective narratives.

The New Historicist perspective contextualized the characters within the historical eras of their stories, uncovering the influence of societal norms, cultural values, and significant events on their development (Pugh & Johnson, 2014). This approach shed light on how these external factors shaped their personalities, choices, and responses to their surroundings.

Through Close Reading, the study delved into the psychological depths of the characters, revealing their inner conflicts, desires, and hidden motives (Pugh & Johnson, 2014). This methodology allowed for a nuanced understanding of how Clarissa and Constance navigate their internal worlds, grappling with suppressed emotions, societal pressures, and their quests for self-discovery.

The Deconstruction method further examined the characters' identities by challenging binary oppositions, exploring power dynamics, and uncovering hidden meanings within the text (Pugh & Johnson, 2014). By critically analyzing the language and contradictions within the narratives, the Deconstruction methodology provided insight into how Clarissa and Constance embody multi-faceted personas that transcend simplistic interpretations.

Results

Mrs. Dalloway by Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's groundbreaking work, *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925, emerges as a modernist novel featuring a non-linear narrative and stream-of-consciousness technique. The central figure is Clarissa Dalloway, the eponymous protagonist, a 51-year-old woman married to politician Richard Dalloway. Clarissa is a rounded and dynamic character, her compassionate personality contrasting societal norms and the pursuit of identity. Antagonists are replaced by societal norms, psychological conflicts, and characters' emotional landscapes.

Set in London's Westminster neighborhood on a day in June 1923, the narrative follows Clarissa navigating her social circle while reflecting on past choices. Noteworthy characters include Richard Dalloway, Peter Walsh, Sally Seton, and Septimus Warren Smith. The narrative explores human consciousness, individual complexity, and cultural influence.

Applying the lens of New Historicism to Clarissa Dalloway offers deeper insights into the character and her role as a product of her sociocultural context. A complex persona, Clarissa embodies both English snobbery and existential contemplation, a duality that enriches her identity and underscores her intricate relationships with others. Externally, she mirrors the stereotype of privileged women entrenched in snobbish ideals. Trapped in her role as a politician's wife, she adheres to London's routines while yearning for more profound meaning amid the monotony.

Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* begins with Clarissa Dalloway's declaration of buying flowers for her party:

"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself." (Woolf, 2016, p. 1).

Interpreting her decision as a subtle yet potent act of defiance against early twentieth-century patriarchal norms offers a glimpse into Woolf's feminist narrative. This act exemplifies

Clarissa's multifaceted nature as she hungers for significance beyond her societal duties.

A Close Reading reveals the poignant transformation within Clarissa's psyche:

"..this being Mrs. Dalloway; not even Clarissa anymore; this being Mrs. Richard Dalloway." (Woolf, 2016, p. 8).

This metamorphosis from "Clarissa" to "Mrs. Richard Dalloway" symbolizes her surrender of personal agency to her marital status. The shift underscores the dichotomy between her inner self and the external world. By fully adopting "Mrs. Richard Dalloway," Clarissa subordinates her individuality to her husband's social position. She relinquishes her identity, dreams, and desires, becoming a vessel for her husband's reputation. What remains is the persona of *Mrs. Dalloway*, embodying the loss of Clarissa's selfhood. Furthermore, even the title *Mrs. Dalloway* symbolizes Clarissa's marital status and societal position. "Mrs." implies surrendering individuality to the role of a wife.

Probing the depths of Clarissa's persona using Deconstruction, *Mrs. Dalloway* delves into the layers of human cognition and dissects the complexity of Clarissa Dalloway:

"How delightful to see you!" said Clarissa. She said it to everyone. How delightful to see you! She was at her worst—effusive, and insincere." (Woolf, 2016, p. 148).

Clarissa's repetitive expression reflects a falsified cheerfulness. The term "everyone" universalizes her greeting, disregarding the uniqueness of individual interactions. "Delightful" carries an insincere undertone, hinting at the theatrical nature of social exchanges. Just as Clarissa is compelled to maintain a polished facade, even if it means concealing genuine emotions, she complies with the role of a gracious hostess, which reinforces her commitment to societal norms.

Lady Chatterley's Lover by D.H. Lawrence

D.H. Lawrence's novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, published in 1928, faced a thirty-year ban due to its daring use of previously taboo sexual language. This work delves into themes of love, passion, adultery, class conflict, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment, all set against the backdrop of early twentieth-century England.

At the heart of the story are three primary characters: Constance "Connie" Chatterley, Oliver Mellors, and Sir Clifford Chatterley. Connie, the protagonist, defies societal norms and embarks on a passionate affair with Mellors, the estate's gamekeeper. The novel's title, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, highlights the intense emotional connection between Connie and Mellors while underscoring their contrasting social statuses. In essence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* navigates themes of personal growth, romantic awakening, and the pursuit of pleasure within societal norms. Lawrence contrasts the oppressive upper-class environment, epitomized by Connie's marriage to Sir Clifford, with Mellors' raw vitality and autonomy as a representative of the working class.

Applying the New Historicism approach to Constance Chatterley offers a nuanced perspective on her character within the sociopolitical context. Married to aristocrat Sir Clifford Chatterley, Constance represents the changing societal landscape of the 1920s, post-World War I, when established norms were evolving. As the class system crumbled and women challenged traditional roles, the emergence of the "New Woman" sought independence. Constance embodies facets of this New Woman, shedding light on her portrayal through a New Historicist analysis.

"She was too feminine to be quite smart" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 14).

As described by Lawrence, Constance's appearance is that of a soft, rural girl with traditional features. Her feminine qualities and conventional appearance lead her to be seen as not entirely aligned with contemporary sophistication. Beneath this exterior, Constance possesses intelligence that

defies the perception that intellect and femininity are mutually exclusive. Lawrence's portrayal challenges societal limitations on women and dismisses the notion that being feminine hinders one's intelligence.

Constance's complexity is further revealed through Close Reading:

"She clung to his breast, murmuring 'My love! My love!'" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 152).

"She was a little afraid of him as if he were not quite human" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 200).

These passages delve into Constance's emotions and her evolving relationship with Mellors. The phrase "she was a little afraid of him" suggests that Mellors instills a mix of fear and attraction. This emotional turmoil arises from their forbidden connection, contrasting backgrounds, and Mellors' enigmatic nature. The exclamation "My love! My love!" showcases her profound affection for Mellors, rooted in an attraction to his masculinity. Through him, Constance embarks on a journey of self-discovery, challenging norms, and experiencing complex emotions.

"Give me the democracy of touch, the resurrection of the body!" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 107).

This quote, from a Deconstructive angle, prompts readers to analyze its implications. It underscores a desire for equality and connection through touch, transcending class barriers. The emphasis on touch as a tool for equality implies its power to unite individuals regardless of social rank. Constance might not fully grasp its significance, but this idea of a "democracy of touch" emphasizes physical closeness as a means to challenge societal hierarchies. Lawrence offers a profound understanding of Constance Chatterley's character as a product of her time. It is notable, however, that Lawrence's emphasis on her sexual desires overshadows her emotional and psychological dimensions.

Comparative Analysis

The examination of Virginia Woolf's *Clarissa Dalloway* in *Mrs. Dalloway* and D.H. Lawrence's *Constance Chatterley* in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* yields a profound contrast in the authors' approaches to depicting female characters. Both Woolf and Lawrence delve into the intricate aspects of gender and women's societal roles, yet their perspectives and methodologies diverge significantly. Woolf, as a female writer, offers an authentic insight into the female experience through the lens of the female gaze. In contrast, Lawrence, a male author, predominantly portrays *Constance* from a masculine viewpoint.

Woolf's depiction of *Clarissa Dalloway* centers on the female gaze, unveiling *Clarissa* as a multifaceted and introspective individual who defies conventional male-centric perspectives. Woolf places emphasis on *Clarissa's* thoughts, emotions, and inner world, challenging societal norms and delivering an authentic portrayal of women's experiences. *Clarissa's* life takes on the semblance of a carefully orchestrated theatre performance, where roles are defined, and individuals merely play their parts. Behind her flawless exterior as the quintessential hostess lies the unadorned *Clarissa*, grappling with the weight of wasted time and regret over her life choices.

In contrast, Lawrence's portrayal of *Constance Chatterley* exhibits a more intricate interplay. While Lawrence introduces elements of the male gaze, particularly in his physical descriptions of *Constance*, she actively rebels against societal norms. *Constance's* pursuit of personal fulfillment and exploration of desires extend beyond the constraints of the English aristocracy. However, it is crucial to critically scrutinize whether Lawrence's perspective accurately mirrors the actual experiences of women or whether it veers into the realm of romanticization.

Discussion

The portrayal of female characters in literary works is undeniably influenced by the

gender of the author. Female writers, drawing from their unique perspectives and personal experiences, often present a more authentic representation of women. By adopting the female gaze, these authors delve into the inner thoughts, emotions, and lives of their female characters, challenging prevailing societal norms and the expectations imposed upon women.

In contrast, male authors, lacking direct experience, approach the depiction of female characters from a male-oriented perspective. This approach can inadvertently introduce the male gaze, which tends to objectify women and relegate them to mere objects of desire. However, it is important to recognize that not all male authors adhere to this pattern, as each writer brings their individual approach to character development.

To assess the resonance between *Constance Chatterley's* character and the reality of 1920s women, a thorough examination of the historical context and the specific challenges confronted by women during that era becomes imperative. The novel's focus on *Constance's* defiance of societal norms, particularly within the context of the English aristocracy, brings to light the limitations and constraints women faced in their pursuit of personal freedom and fulfillment. However, it remains essential to critically evaluate whether Lawrence's portrayal simplifies the intricate realities of women's experiences or genuinely captures the multifaceted nature of their struggles.

One could posit that *Constance Chatterley* represents a prototype or a symbol of autonomy and liberation rather than a wholly authentic representation of women. While acknowledging D.H. Lawrence's intention to empower women through his writing, a pertinent question arises: Does this empowerment inadvertently involve oversimplification? In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the abusive and oppressive conditions endured by women throughout history, it can be argued that works such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* offer a more nuanced exploration of women's circumstances. The concise yet profound opening line of

Mrs. Dalloway - “*Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.*” (Woolf, 2016, p. 1), encapsulates the fundamental reality of women’s circumstances in 1920s England more potently than Lawrence’s depiction of a woman defying all societal limitations. *Mrs. Dalloway* symbolizes the initial steps towards emancipation, delving into the intricate layers of women’s lives and thoughtfully challenging societal norms.

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf’s portrayal of women in literature, particularly exemplified in *Mrs. Dalloway*, offers a more realistic depiction within the historical context of the 1920s. By delving into the complexities of women’s lives and actively challenging societal norms, Woolf provides readers with a profound understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and struggles. In contrast, D.H. Lawrence’s depiction in *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* prompts questions about the potential oversimplification of women’s experiences. While Lawrence’s aim was to empower women, Woolf’s nuanced exploration captures the fundamental realities of women’s circumstances with greater poignancy. Recognizing these distinctions allows for a deeper comprehension of gender representation in literature and the intricate complexities of women’s lives during distinct historical periods. This exploration contributes to an enriched perspective on the multifaceted realm of gender portrayal in literary narratives.

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Author's Note



Shorena Lekaidze is 22 years old and lives in Tbilisi, Georgia. She recently completed her Bachelor's degree in English Philology at the International Black Sea University. Her academic journey is far from done as she is resolute in her pursuit of a Master's degree in Literature. Her ultimate goal is to harness her love for learning and channel it into teaching. During moments of leisure, she seeks solace in books, cultivating an appreciation for both contemporary and classic literature. Her interest also extends to Classical Philology, urging her to explore the fascinating worlds of Ancient Greece and Latin literature. Delving into the works of thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics brings her immense joy. As she embarks upon this scholarly odyssey, her motivation is underpinned by a profound commitment to both acquiring and spreading knowledge. She is only at the beginning of her academic journey and is eagerly looking forward to the opportunities and growth that lie ahead.