A PORTRAYAL OF VICTORIAN MEN AND WOMEN AS SEEN IN O'NEILL'S "THE GRAND MATCH"

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the portrayal of Victorian women and men in the poem of Moira O'Neill, entitled "The Grand Match". The poem gives the description of men and women relationship related to the discussion of love and marriage. As one of Victorian female poets, O'Neill tries to satirize the relationship of women and men by portraying the love story of a stereotypical male fortune seeker, who marries a rich woman and denies his own feeling toward a young-charming woman. This study is an attempt to show that O'Neill's female characters are not typically women commonly found in a literary text during the era in which it was written. In many ways they position themselves as a complete break from the traditional stereotyping of women, and they even can be seen as the representation of "New Woman". In addition, through this study, the readers would be able to broaden their perspectives that although the Victorian Age was known as the era of prose, there are a lot of poems worth reading.

Key words: Images, Victorian Age, Moira O'Neill, Poem.

INTRODUCTION

> Poetry can be many things. Poetry can be philosophical, or emotional, or sentimental. It can paint pictures, in a descriptive mode, or tell stories, in a narrative one. Poetry can also be satirical, or funny, or political, or just informative (Wolosky, 2001, p. 1)

The above quotation illustrates how powerful poetry is. It can say so many things and it can be told by using various styles. It is clear that by reading it, the readers can enhance their knowledge. Gill's adds that poetry can explore someone's feelings, and create pictures (either detailed or impressionistic ones) about many things, such as ideas, feelings, places, people and events (1995, p. 4).

Victorian women poets, for example, discussed a variety of topics in their poems, although as stated by Breen, "the Victorian reading public increasingly read prose in preference to poetry" (1994, p. xIii). One of the examples of poetry written in the Victorian Age was "The Grand Match" by Moira O'Neill. This poem can be found in her book entitled *Songs of the Glens of Antrim*, which was published in the year of 1900. In this poem, O'Neill is trying to satirize the relationship of women and men by portraying the love story of a stereotypical male fortune seeker, who marries a rich woman and denies his own feeling toward a young-charming woman.

O'Neill (pseudonym of Agnes Nesta Shakespeare Skrine née Higginson), unlike some of the early Victorian Age's poets, wrote her book under a female pseudonym (Breen, 1994, p. xxiv). It is quite interesting because some of the finest and well-known poets still used a male pseudonym. The examples of the above case are Mary Ann Evans who wrote as George Eliot and the Bronte sister (Charlotte, Anne and Emily) known as Currer, Acton and Ellis Bell.

Seeing this fact, the researcher sees the importance of studying the works of O'Neill since it also can be regarded as a record of women's experiences, as Montefiore puts it:

> … a woman's poems are the authentic speech of her life and being. In reading or listening to a woman's poem, we share the poet's experience, which is the experience of suffering and resistance common to all women, and we enter into her mind (1994, p. 3).

Thus, as an authentic record, the poem of O'Neill can portray the experiences of Victorian women, as well as men, related to the discussion of male and female relationship (in this case is related to the discussion of love and marriage).

In line with Montefiore, Breen (1994, p. liii) also says that "the reading of a full range of women's poetry from the period, with its variety of preoccupations, enhances our appreciation of this women's tradition and expands our understanding of Victorian poetry."

That being said, this paper will examine O'Neill's "The Grand Match" which reveals complicated problems in the relationship experienced by men and women in the Victorian Age. As a Victorian woman poet, O'Neill gives a serious attention to the women's problems, especially those related to the marriage life. Furthermore, she does not only discuss this imperfect portrait of marriage from the

point of view of those who are bound together in the name of marriage, but also gives voice to those Victorian women who remain single for several reasons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Gender Roles to the Stereotypes of Men and Women

Some theories have argued that there are problems of gender which has an immense effect to the relationship of men and women. Men and women are not only described as biologically different, but also having a slightly different activities, and even roles in the society (Triandis, 1994, p. 48). Moreover, unfortunately there are some people in the society who are believed in a certain stereotype of men and women. As stated by Triandis, men are seen as adventurous, aggressive, forceful, courageous, dominant, enterprising, powerful, independent, progressive, robust, strict, and wise. On the other hand, women are seen as affectionate, dreamy, sensitive, sentimental, obedient, and superstitious (1994, p. 49). Snowden also adds that many people considered women as creatures that have no abilities to do better things than men. Thus, in the perspectives of the society, men are socially superior, while women are inferior (1975, p. 99 100).

Based on *Gender Stereotypes: Masculinity and Femininity*, the two terms, gender roles and stereotypes, are closely related. When people try to relate a pattern of behavior of men or women, they may fail to see individual variations and they fall to a misleading judgment "that the behavior is inevitably associated with one gender but not the other. Therefore, gender roles furnish the material for gender stereotypes".

During the Victorian age, according to Lewin, many people at that time belief in gender stereotypes, especially those related to women. There is a change of the lives of majority people in Europe, the United States, and Canada because of the Industrial Revolution (Brannon, 1996, p. 169). In line with Brannon, an article entitled "Gender Stereotypes: Masculinity and Femininity" also stated that men at that time have to work outside of their homes "to earn money and leaving women at home to manage household and children". Furthermore Lewin (Lewin in Brannon, 1996, p. 169) adds, this separation forcing men and women to adapt by creating new behavior patterns. As men coped with the harsh business and industrial world, women were left in the relatively unvarying and sheltered environments of their homes.

Based on the above explanation, it is obvious that men's domination over women will be much stronger when women have to enter the marriage's life. In this stage of life, women have to be wives as well as mothers for their children. When the women are busy with their domestic work, on the other hand, the men will have to fulfill the family's need by working outside of the house. The men duty, then, are seemingly give them an opportunity to 'escape' from the domestic works (Snowden, 1975, p. 99-100).

Ziegenfuss in *Marriage in the Victorian Era*. also adds that it was difficult to find love within the marriage in the Victorian age since it only had a very minor role. In fact, "an engagement was entered into as one would approach a business deal, and there were some generally accepted rules and guidelines to follow."

According to Ziegenfuss, some of the general accepted rules in the Victorian marriage are: firstly, Victorian man or woman has to marry "within the same class" (he or she can marry someone who comes from the higher class, but he or she should not choose the one beneath his or her own social class); secondly, when a man wants to make a proposal of marriage to a woman, he has to prepare himself with a gift. The gift can be seen as a symbol that he can support his soon-to-be-bride's lifestyle; thirdly, after a single woman reaches the age of 21, she can inherit some amount of money and also property. However, when she enters into the marriage life, her husband will take control over her money and property.

The Images of "New Woman"

During the nineteenth century, there were many women who challenged their subordinate position. Some of those women labeled (or were labeled) themselves as "New Woman", which is also known as "Liberated Woman". As stated by Richardson and Willis, this movement appeared as the effect of Mary Wollstonecraft's book entitled *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Those "New Woman" inherits the radical view of Wollstonecraft who had "condemned the sexual double standard and urged women's right to education, employment and full citizenship" (2001, p. 1).

Showalter argues that the "New Woman" tends to be more intellectual and more self-defining among others (1999, p. 122). She also adds that the "New Woman" can stand alone, reason, lead, instruct and command. She is a powerful person who can take hold on man's mind (Jane in Showalter, 1999, p. 123). Linton

then adds by saying that the "New Woman" is a forthright, spontaneous (Linton is Showalter, 1999, p. 107), clever and sharp-spoken person (Jane in Showalter, 1999, p. 123). After all, she does not depend on man for political and emotional support (Showalter, 1992, p. 49). Interestingly, most of the "New Woman" is never engaged in open competition with man, are very much in competition with other woman (Oliphant and Braddon in Showalter, 1999, p. 104).

DISCUSSION

"The Grand Match" is a narrative poem consists of 6 stanzas and 24 lines. In this poem there are three characters involved, namely Dennis (the young man), Nannie (the attractive young woman), and the (unnamed) rich young woman. There are three important focuses of narrations. The first is the illustration of how keen Dennis to have a rich young woman as his suitable matches. The second, it also gives the clear description of the attractive Nannie, who is able to catch Dennis' attention. The third focus is the images of the unnamed young woman with fortune. The poem reflects the failure of the young fortune seeker (in this case, Dennis) to gain love and respect in his life.

The Images of Single Men

Robust, Confident, and Dreamy

Starting from the first line in the first stanza, the speaker of the poem gives the readers a clear description of the young man named Dennis.

> Dennis was hearty when Dennis was young,
> High was his step in the jig that he sprung,
> *He* had the looks an' the sootherin' tongue,
> An' he wanted a girl wid a fortune.
> (Lines 1 4, stanza 1)

The above stanza infers that Dennis is a robust and good-looking young man. It is clearly stated by the speaker who uses the word 'hearty' (1st line) to describe Dennis' personality. The word 'hearty' itself is the synonym of robust, which also can be used to depict someone who is full of spirit and energy. While the way he 'jig' (in the 2nd lines), shows that he is also described as an active person who has a high confidence. Then in the last line in the 1st stanza, the speaker explains that Dennis

is a dreamer since he, in his younger age, has had a dream to have a girl who comes from a wealthy family.

Adventurous, Aggressive and Dominant

In line 7, the 2nd stanza, the speaker tells the readers of the poem that Dennis is such an adventurous young man because he tries very hard to seek for his suitable match by socializing with many women. Although then the speaker also says that during his journey to pursue his suitable match, Dennis admits that he likes one of the young women most -*... he liked her the best o' them all,* -

His decisions to socialize with many young women also can be seen as an evidence that he becomes very aggressive in reaching his dream to get a rich young woman as his wife. He does not mind to be acquainted with many women, as long as he is able to reach his final goal.

Related to line 7, 2nd stanza, It is clearly seen that although Dennis has a huge crush on a young attractive woman (named Nannie), he denies his own feeling and tries to find another *likelier match,*- (line 9, 3rd stanza) since Nannie is not *a traneen to her fortune*- (line 8, 2nd stanza). The word 'traneen' in this line infers that Nannie is not the heir of her family's fortune. In this case, Dennis is the one who tends to dominate the relationship. If he thinks this woman will not be able to help him in reaching his goal, then he will leave her right away (without even have to listen to the 'voice' of the woman). This fact also shows that he will not count the feeling of the one he loves.

The Images of Married Men

Materialistic

Dennis' dream of having a prosperous wife has driven him into a materialistic man. The speaker of “The Grand Match” says that Dennis feels very amused when finally he comes to the point where he can stop his journey of finding 'a likelier match' (line 9). He, successfully, finds and married to a young women who inherit her family's fortune *He be to look out for a likelier match,/ So he married a girl that was counted a catch* (line 9 and 10, 3rd stanza).

To add his triumph, without any hesitation, he asks his future wife to give him a lot of fortune *An' as ugly as need be, the dark little patch,/ But that was a*

thrifle, he told her. (line 15 and 16, 4th stanza). Confidently he tells his future wife that she should not be anxious since it is only 'a thrifle' (a small amount of money). Fortunately, his future wife agrees to give him the things that he wants. She gives him gold and cows to attract his attention *She brought him her good lookin' gold to admire,/ She brought him her good lookin' cows to his byre* (line 13 and 14, 4th stanza).

Dependent, Feeble and Obedient.

There is a substantial difference between the conditions of Dennis before and after he gets married to a young woman, who is (fortunately) a daughter of a prosperous man. Dennis' life is not as easy as it seems to be. As declared by the speaker, although Dennis finally able to reach his dream of having a rich wife, he cannot find happiness and love in his marriage's life. In fact, right after he becomes the husband of this woman, Dennis suddenly has to face an awful-inescapable reality that he has to lose his freedom *Och, never be tellin' the life he's led!/ Sure many's night that he'll wish himself dead,* (line 21 and 22, 6th stanza).

After Dennis has become a husband of a rich young woman, who is able to give him a lot of fortune, he loses his dignity. He becomes a dependent, feeble and obedient man since his wife 'owns' him. The word 'paid' (line 16, 4th stanza), is the evidence that his wife has become his 'master' after she is able to shower him with a lot of fortune, and he cannot do anything about it. As a matter of fact, Dennis has lost his spirit to live *Sure many's night that he'll wish himself dead,* (line 22, 6th stanza) since he cannot escape from the immense attraction of an attractive young woman named Nannie *For the sake o' two eyes in a pretty girl's head* (line 23, 6th stanza) as well as a sharp spoken wife *An' the tongue o' the woman that owns him.* (line 24, 6th stanza).

The Images of Women

In "The Grand Match" there are two female characters, namely Nannie and a rich young woman. Both of them are embodiments of a set of attributes which goes against the stereotypical profile of women. However, they are also described as having many differences in terms of physical appearances and personality.

Beautiful and Attractive

This poem uses Nannie as the example of a beautiful and attractive young woman. The physical appearance of Nannie is well described by the speaker of the poem in the 2nd stanza. Nannie is described as a beautiful young woman with grey eyes, tall body and a fair face *Nannie was grey-eyed an' Nannie was tall,/ Fair was the face hidin' under her shawl* (line 5 and 6, 2nd stanza). Line 6 also indicates that actually Nannie is a shy girl since she hides her face *under her shawl*. To make it even clearer, the speaker of the poem once more time mentions that Nannie is such a beautiful young woman by calling her 'pretty Nan' (line 17, 5th stanza). In fact, Nannie is successfully catches Dennis' attention with her physical appearance *Troth! An' he liked her the best o' them all,* (line 7, 2nd stanza).

Smart

Nannie is not only described as a beautiful young woman, but she also described as an attractive young woman, as a matter of fact, she has a beautiful smile and bright eyes *Wid a smile on her lip an' a spark in her eye,* (line 19, 5th stanza). The speaker also says that Nannie is such a smart young woman. It can be seen when finally she meets Dennis, a month after he has married with a rich young woman:

He met pretty Nan when a mont had gone by
An' he thought like a fool to get round her he'd try;
Wid a smile on her lip a' spark in her eye,
She said, 'How is the woman that owns ye?'
(line 17 20, 5th stanza)

The above stanza shows how smart Nannie is. She is able to raise a question that Dennis cannot answer. She has got him in a corner, and there is not much he could do. The way she smiles and the 'spark in her eye' also shows that she means the things she has said. It is her smart way to show that Dennis' attempts to conquer life by having a prosperous wife is a big mistake since he loses his freedom and dignity.

However, Nannie is not the only one who is described as a smart young woman because the speaker of the poem also explains that the rich young woman is also very smart. She is the one who can capture Dennis' heart by giving him a lot of things that could not (and would not be given) by Nannie:

She brought him her good-lookin' gold to admire,
She brought him her good-lookin' cows to his byre,
But far from good-lookin' she sat by his fire.
An' paid him that 'thrifle' he told her.
(line 13 16, 4th stanza)

This rich young woman knows her best that Dennis will marry her even though she is not as attractive as the other girl *But far from good-lookin' she sat by his fire.* - because she inherits her family's fortune. As a prosperous young woman she gives Dennis her 'gold' and 'cows to his byre'. This young woman's action also shows that she brings herself to be a woman of thought, autonomy, and initiative. She can think and act for herself and also being capable of making decision.

Forthright, Spontaneous and Sharp Spoken.

The way Nannie asks Dennis after they have not seen each other for a quite long time shows that Nannie is a forthright, spontaneous and sharp spoken young woman. She says exactly what is in her mind without even has to think twice for the consequences of uttering it. Instead of asking politely about the condition of Dennis' wife, she spontaneously says *How is the woman that owns ye?* (line 20, 5th stanza). The word 'owns' also stands as the evidence that actually this attractive young woman is a sharp spoken person.

The above fact clearly shows that Nannie has changed a lot. At first she is described as an attractive young woman with a (rather) modest personality (because of the fact she hides her beautiful face under her shawl line 6-), however, after Dennis leaves her for another woman, Nannie has transformed herself into a strong and confident young woman. This fact makes her able to re-capture Dennis' heart.

The Portrayal of O'Neill's "New Woman"

O'Neill, as one of Victorian woman poets, has clearly describes her two female characters in "The Grand Match" as powerful women who become a typical of "New Woman". It is obvious since she cannot let her "New Woman" heroines be emotionally dependent to men. In fact, through one of her female characters, O'Neill successfully portraying an attractive young woman named

Nannie as a young woman who is very much having a positive image of "New Woman". After Dennis (the fortune-seeker man) marrying the rich young woman, Nannie remains as a single young woman with a strong character. She is able to make Dennis hardly can forget her, even though she has, intentionally, attacked him with her sharp and spontaneous statement.

Basically, Nannie is not the only one who has an image of "New Woman". Based on the way O'Neill describes the rich young woman, who then becomes the wife of Dennis, this young woman is also can be seen as having a powerful image of "New Woman" since she is portrayed as a prosperous and independent wife who cannot make her husband assert power over her. As a matter of fact, her husband is forced to suffer the power of *the tongue o' the woman that owns him.* (line 24, 6th stanza).

The characterizations of the female characters of "The Grand Match" evidently point out that they are not typically women commonly found in a literary text during the era in which it was written. Unlike a traditionally stereotypical woman in general (affectionate, dreamy, sensitive, sentimental, obedient, and superstitious), they do not merely do what they are dictated to do. In many ways they position themselves as a complete break from the traditional stereotyping of woman. Thus, it is clear that O'Neill's female characters can be seen as the representation of "New Woman" since they possess some qualities that commonly found in the characteristic of "New Woman". Those qualities are attractive (both physically and mentally), smart, forthright, spontaneous and sharp spoken. In addition, interestingly, the way O'Neill describes the relationship between her two female heroines also shows that those two women are engaged in an open competition. On the other hand, the male character in O'Neill's poem is described as a character who has to face some changes because of his own decision. His personality changes from a young man with a robust, high confidence, adventurous, aggressive and dominant character into a dependent, feeble and obedient man. The above fact is the result of his compulsive and materialistic obsession to have a prosperous wife. Instead of having a happy marriage by marrying someone who he loves so much, this young man chooses to be married with a rich young woman who has a power over his life.

CONCLUSION

In the past literature had been largely men's territory. In the Victorian Age, though, women writers began to emerge with their concerns. Some of them represented many views attributed to what became known as the "New Woman". Moira O'Neill's *"The Grand Match"* has two female characters (Nannie and the rich young woman), and through those characters, the readers are exposed to the "New Women" along with their smart way of thinking and acting which is able to take hold on the men's mind. Based on this poem the readers also can see that the male character found in "The Grand Match" cannot avoid from the strong attraction of those two "New Women". He is unable to assert power over them and even he is forced to be an obedient man.

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