

Mechanisms of Control:

Literary Findings on the Ways Patriarchy Maintains Intellectual Power

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Abstract: One of the fundamental elements behind the success of patriarchal societies being able to control women is the stifling of intellectual freedom. This control did not emerge suddenly but developed over time in a methodical way, evolving to assure that the oppression of women existed as a cultural norm. There is indeed a process by which men have stifled the voices of otherwise creative or imaginative women. First, patriarchy dictates the social narrative, allowing it to set the gendered binary system in place. Next, men establish and enforce gendered roles that are expected to be acted out. Finally, phallogocentric society creates a promise of violence for women who deviate from those expectations. It is an old process by this point, one that has been repeated with great frequency, enabling women writers to accurately point out this process through their literary works. By taking three pieces from the world of women's literature, one can construct the three-part systematic control of the mental freedom of women. In Amy Lowell's "The Sisters," readers can see how the few female voices in the literary canon leave few role models from which women writers can draw inspiration. Then, in Gertrude Stein's "The Gentle Lena," the writer shows how the gendered expectations society has of women can destroy the life of free-thinking women. Finally, in "Sweat," Zora Neale Hurston gives her audience a vivid story of how violence is directed at women who violate these gendered expectations. By addressing the pattern of devaluation represented in women's lives and work, these three stories show the machinery behind the patriarchy's oppressive control of women's intellect.

Theoretical Framework: The theoretical framework used to analyze these works is feminist with a gynocritical focus (a feminist understanding and analysis of women's literature that is free from phallogocentric perceptions.).

Research Questions: This project asked if themes of control and coercion by a phallogocentric society could be measured through the writing of women authors and if these experiences of oppression revealed themselves as canonical themes. The author of the initial project found that not only were there layers of describing patriarchal control within the works of women writers but that they could be easily identified and expressed by a simple reading of texts.

Process: Research for this project was done between August and November of 2020. Research materials correspond with course materials assigned in the IUPUC course ENG-L 207 (Women and Literature), taught by Dr. Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick and were further explored outside of course requirements and after the semester's end. This course asked participants to read 42 literary works from women writers along with works from 14 feminist theorists, along with other works. The original paper itself is written in MLA format and grounds itself in literary exegesis.

Findings: After analyzing these texts with a gynocritical lens, these works of women's literature reveal the mechanisms of the patriarchal control over intellectual freedom. When using this sort of analytical approach to literature, these themes begin to reveal themselves throughout the works of the female literary counter-canon. This shows that there is indeed a shared experience of women throughout history of having their intellectual freedom stifled. With this kind of analysis, not only can literary experts and researchers use this commonly shared experience to justify the inclusion of works into the traditional literary canon, but we can begin to visualize a way to get past these regressive forms of oppression.

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