

Embracing Complex Femininity: A Comparative Analysis of the Representation of Female Sexuality in John Webster and William Faulkner

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Abstract : Representations and interpretations of womanhood and female sexualities bring forth various questions regarding gender norms, and the implications of these norms, which are permeating and repetitive within various societies. Literature is one form of media which provides the space to represent and interpret women, their bodies, and sexualities, and also reveals the power of language as an affective and affected force. As literature allows an opportunity to explore history and the representations of gender, power dynamics, and sexuality through historical contexts, this paper uses engaged theory through a comparative analysis of two work of literature, *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Wester, and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner. These novels span across space and time, which lends to the theory that repetitive tropes of womanhood and female sexuality in literature are influenced by and have an influence on the hegemonic social order throughout history. It analyzes how the representation of the dichotomy of male chivalry and honor, and female purity are disputed and questioned when a woman is portrayed as sexually emancipated, and explores the historical context in which these works were written to examine how socioeconomic events challenged the hegemonic social order. The analysis looks at how stereotypical ideals of womanhood and manhood have damaging implications on women, as the structure of society provides more privilege and power to men than to women, thus creating a double standard for men and women in regards to sexuality, sexual expression, and rights to sexual desire. This comparative analysis reveals how strict gender norms are permeating and have negative consequences. However, re-reading stories through a critical lens can provide an opportunity to challenge the repetitive tropes of female sexuality, and thus lead to the embrace of the complexity of female sexuality and expression.

Keywords : femininity, literature, representation, sexuality

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