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**ABDELHAMID IBN BADIS UNIVERSITY - MOSTAGANEM**  
**FACULTY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

**Unveiling Misogyny: A Critical Comparative Study of the Representation of Women  
in Avant-garde and Postmodern British Literature**

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Master Degree in Literature and  
Civilization

**Submitted by:**

BEKKOUCHE Fatima Zohra Batoul

**Board of Examiners:**

**Examiner:** Mrs. GHERNOUT

**Examiner:** Mrs. ABDELHADI

**Supervisor:** Mr. FETNACI

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## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my wonderful supporting family.

A big thank you goes to my hard working, loving parents, who had faith in me that I will be able to graduate this year and supported me by suggesting topics for my research.

I dedicate it also to my sister who lent me her laptop and paid for the internet, and my brothers who have worked hard to cheer me up when I was stressed and on the verge of giving up, to complete this humble work.

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## ABSTRACT

In the case of literature, grand narratives such as patriarchy, misogyny, and gender roles can influence the way male authors write female characters, while local narratives such as personal experience, cultural background, and empathy can provide opportunities for diverse and nuanced representations. This study investigates the causes of misogynistic and stereotypical depictions of female characters in avant-garde literature. It questions if male authors should be excused for writing sexist texts just because they are intellectuals or because of the time they lived in, and the mindset their society pushed on them. It also aims to see how post-modern female authors' such as Jeannette Winterson reacted to the distortion of women's image and value. For the accomplishment of this task, two avant-garde novels are closely read, *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert. L Stevenson and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde, along with Jeannette Winterson's postmodern novel, *The Passion*, while employing Jean-Francois Leotard's theory of meta-narrative as a framework. Drawing on feminist and literary theory, this study contributes to the ongoing discourse on misogyny, feminism, and gender roles.

**Key Words:** Avant-garde, Female Characters, Feminism, J. F. Leotard, J. Winterson, Gender Bias, Gender Roles Meta-narrative, Misogyny, O. Wilde, Petit-narratives, R.L. Stevenson, Sexism, Stereotypes.

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## General Introduction

Many male authors have been criticized for writing female characters in unrealistic, stereotypical, or objectifying ways. This can have a negative impact on how women and young girls feel when reading these texts, as they may feel misrepresented, devalued, or alienated by the authors' portrayals. Since these false narratives about women have been presented by very well-known and rounded intellectuals, these texts could be taken as a fact instead of just an opinion, therefore, it can affect how men view and treat women in real life, as they may internalize the harmful messages and attitudes that some male authors convey through their writing. Trisha Jenn Loehr, a writer and developmental editor based in Calgary, Canada, said: "Our Western culture is full of imagery and other content that is rampant with both misogynistic ideas that tell people that women are sexual objects to be used, silly and not as intelligent or strong as men, and not quite as valuable as men and thus who need to be guided by the men around them" (par. 7). She pointed out that male writers often fail to create realistic and rounded portrayals of women in their work due to internalized misogyny from living in such a deeply patriarchal society. We see this negative portrayal of women in works like Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the female characters are either almost written off existence or are only there to serve as a punching bag for male characters to use and abuse, there is neither middle ground nor proper representation of women in the mentioned works.

Some male authors in the avant-garde era wrote female characters in a misogynistic way due to their limited understanding and experience of the female perspective, as well as the societal and cultural biases that they have internalized. they often employ the Meta-narrative that "women are the inferior sex", they make the reader believe that the reason why women are emotional and sometimes behave hysterically is because they are weak, stupid, and illogical. Sadly, many people wholeheartedly believe these falsehoods as Loehr stated; "Many do not



think they do but have internalized a lot of these ideas. And thus, it often comes out in writing. Again, this can be intentional or unintentional" (par. 8). This apparent inability of many men to write female personalities who are complex and have solid backgrounds of their own is often regarded as lapses in the authors' judgment. Although this does not take away the fact of how damaging these far-fetched depictions can be. The superficial characters they create often lack depth and seem to be put into the story only to move it forward. Moreover, the way men write about a woman's body and appearance is often alarming. Females become reduced to their physical attributes in an objectifying and condescending manner.

The portrayal of women in literature was often one-sided, reflecting the male-dominated society's views of women. Derogatory terms such as "Chatter-mag", "Bearcat" and "Slackumtrance" were common in the avant-garde era, and women characters were often presented as passive, submissive, and emotional, lacking depth and complexity (11 Early 20th Century Insults). The questions asked here is, should male authors be given excuses for writing misogynistic texts because of the time period they lived in, and the mindset their society pushed on them, or because they are intellectuals and smart people they are expected to know better? How did postmodern female authors such as Jeanette Winterson write-back to male authors? And how did she redefine the meaning of the word "Woman" in her novel *The Passion*?

As the majority of writers were men, the portrayal of women in literature was inevitably skewed towards a male perspective, which could contribute to the misogynistic portrayal of female characters in literature. This results in negative stereotypes, objectification, and perpetuation of harmful gender norms in literature. Therefore, male authors writing female characters during this period likely reflected the prevailing societal attitudes towards women, including misogynistic beliefs that deemed women inferior to men. To test this hypothesis, this study analyses novels written in the avant-garde era, *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that show how society was functioning at that time, what ideologies were

prevalent, what people believed to be true and factual because religious and people of authority said so.

The objective of this study is to investigate the prevalence and causes of misogynistic and stereotypical depictions of female characters in literature written by Stevenson and Wilde. To achieve this objective, the study aims at, first, examining the historical and cultural context of male-authored literature and its portrayal of female characters. Second, analyzing literature written by male authors featuring female characters by scrutinizing the two novels *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and evaluating the quality of portrayal based on criteria such as accuracy, depth, complexity, and respectfulness by employing Jean-Francois Leotard's theory of Meta narrative and Petite narratives. Lastly, exploring the potential factors that contribute to the observed patterns of negative portrayal of female characters in literature, such as the author's gender, background, education, and personal biases. It also aims at seeing how postmodern female authors wrote back.

This study is relevant because it addresses a pressing issue in literature and society, the portrayal of female characters in literature, and the potential perpetuation of harmful gender norms and stereotypes. By analyzing male-authored literature featuring female characters, and evaluating the quality and diversity of portrayal, the study can shed light on the underlying factors that contribute to the observed patterns of negative representation of female characters.

This paper contains three chapters, the first chapter introduces the topic and explains key concepts such as the history of women which includes Feminism, its definition, and the waves. The second chapter analyzes the portrayal of female characters in novels written by Stevenson and Wilde, what role they play, how they are represented and treated in the stories by the male characters, how they were described. It also identifies the meta narratives presented in the novels by the authors and highlight the misogynistic quotes. The third chapter

sees how Winterson's novel *The Passion* restores the distorted image of Women by writing back not only to the avant-garde male authors and correcting their misunderstandings, but all the misrepresentations of what and how to be a woman, using postmodernist techniques and mindset that give new meaning and a new role for female characters. It demonstrates how she properly gives voice to women and sets them free from the archaic traditional ways, by giving space for petite narratives to rise and fight back against the meta narratives that were previously spread and perceived as facts in literature.

# **Chapter One: Women Throughout History and Their Misrepresentation in Literature**

## **1.1 Introduction**

Women throughout history have had diverse and complex experiences, depending on their culture, class, race, religion, and other factors. They have also faced various forms of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization by patriarchal and male-dominated societies. As a result, women's voices and perspectives have often been silenced, ignored, or misrepresented in literature and other forms of expression. Throughout history, they have been the backbone of many cultures, playing a vital role in the growth and development of civilizations. Women have been responsible for many of the world's most important inventions, discoveries (UN Women, par. 1). They have also been a driving force in the fields of politics, science, and business, leading the way for future generations of female leaders. Women are strong, resilient, and capable of achieving great things. They have the power to make a positive difference in the world, and their contributions should never be overlooked.

Women are an integral part of society and have been since the beginning of time. Sadly, their value was not always recognized let alone respected in society, because there was always the meta narrative that women are breeding machines, maids and sexual objects. For centuries they had no agency nor a body autonomy, they have been exploited, undervalued, and misrepresented in the records of history as well as literature. That is when Feminism appeared, and why many women embraced that ideology and used it to reclaim their position back in society, and forced Men to respect them, and to give them the recognition they deserve.

## 1.2 Definition of Feminism

Feminism is a social and political movement that has been around for centuries, it seeks to challenge and eliminate the systemic oppression of women and other marginalized genders and stereotypes that have been in place for centuries. It also seeks to challenge the systems of power and privilege that have created and maintained inequality between men and women. It is based on the belief that all genders should be treated equally and with respect, and that everyone should have the same rights, opportunities, and access to resources regardless of gender. Feminism works to address issues such as gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, unequal pay, and other forms of gender-based violence. It also works to promote gender equality in all areas of life, including education, healthcare, employment, and politics. but in the last few decades it has seen a resurgence in many parts of the world. It is a movement that has been embraced by people of all genders, backgrounds, and ages, and has been a powerful force for social change.

Women fought for the right to vote, to hold public office, to work, to earn a living wage or equal pay, to own property, to receive education, to equal rights in marriage, and to maternity leave. In addition to promoting physical autonomy and integrity. The rights of women have been fought for and are still fought for by feminist movements which started out by arguing and asserting the reality of women in four waves, each of which focused on a different part of the same feminist issues such as Women's suffrage and the right to vote, the women's liberation movement fought for legal and social equality. The first wave (Late 19th to early 20th century) concentrated on the advocacy of equal contract marriage, parenting, and property rights for women during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United Kingdom and the United States. This movement supported and spurred women's right to vote as citizens by the end of the nineteenth century. Suffrage was seen as a symbol of the fight against cultural and economic discrimination against women. Some authors agreed with the first wave's assertions, such as Virginia Woolf, who wrote in her novel, *A Room of One's Own*, which “describes how men

socially and psychically dominate women” which means that men always have the authority to dominate over women (93). Women were granted the right to vote in Britain after the Representation of the People Act was passed in 1918 (Women's suffrage timeline). The second wave (1960s to 1980s) focused on equal chances in education, jobs, and domestic violence, as well as reproductive rights and sexuality. The phrase ‘second wave’ was originally used by Marsh Lear in 1968 to refer to the rise of feminist political movements from the 1960s through the 1980s. The second wave battled political as well as social and cultural injustices. It urged women to see how highly politicized their personal lives are and how they reflect the power dynamics in sex. Some pro-feminist figures helped to fuel this wave, including Betty Friedan whose well-known book *The Feminine Mystique* explores women's roles, eventually came to be regarded as a key text in the modern women's movement.

The third wave (1990s to 2000s) or feminist revolution took place as technology gained popularity, was led by generation X. During this wave, feminists fought for the rights of women of color, people of other races, religions, and cultures. This enabled them to concentrate on the individual rather than the larger group. They fought using music and mainstream media to spread their ideas and fight for equality for individuals, their beliefs, and cultures. In this way, it was easier than fighting for a group, because one person could start different revolutions to combat emerging sexism within a community. The goal this movement achieved was progress within this wave and inclusion. The wave gained momentum and began to transform the world for women, but it was white women and society that benefited the most, this wave may have been inclusive, but it seems they accomplished nothing for people of color during this third wave of feminism (Sage, pars. 11-12). The fourth wave (2010s to present) focuses on justice, safety, and defying social constructs for women and marginalized groups of men, women, and those who do not identify. The movement is characterized by a focus on issues such as sexual harassment, body shaming, rape culture, female empowerment, sex-positive, trans-inclusive, and body-positive perspectives. A key component of this movement is the use of social media,

technology, and internet tools to collaborate, amplify, and address these concerns. Fourth wave feminists also aim to make the movement more inclusive and accessible to all, regardless of sexuality, race, class, or gender.

In the end, women have the right to claim their power and role in society, they have come a long way in terms of rights and recognition, but there is still much progress to be made. Women must continue to fight for equal rights and opportunities under the feminism movement wave after wave relentlessly, to demand respect and recognition for their contributions, they must also continue to support each other, and to stand together in solidarity against any form of discrimination or oppression. Only then can women truly claim their rightful place in society.

### **1.3 The Misrepresentation of Women in Literature**

In literature, female characters are often portrayed as overly emotional, passive, and dependent on men. This is an incredibly damaging stereotype, as it contributes to the idea that women are not capable of independent thought and action. It also perpetuates the notion that women should be dependent upon men, which can lead to a host of issues in relationships. Furthermore, female characters are often portrayed as overly sexual or promiscuous, which can be seen as objectifying women and reducing them to their physical appearance. While these representations may be entertaining, they are not reflective of reality and can be damaging to young female readers.

In some cases, female characters are written to be the ‘perfect’ woman: obedient, dutiful, and submissive objects or prizes for the male protagonist to pursue, rather than their own independent beings. This also has damaging implications for how women are seen in society, as it implies that women should only be valued for their beauty and their ability to ‘serve’ men. In many cases, they have no autonomy or self-worth beyond that. In many stories, these characters are presented as victims who are simply there to be rescued and be the hero's love interest. This

type of narrative objectifies and dampens the power of female characters, which sends a damaging message to readers. Moreover, female characters are also often portrayed as overly emotional, often crying, screaming, or otherwise acting in an overly dramatic manner, and their opinions and motivations are dismissed by their male counterparts. This is a way of perpetuating the idea that women are irrational and not to be taken seriously. It further encourages the idea that women are not capable of making their own decisions and are too easily swayed by their emotions. So instead, they rely on male characters to provide direction.

Finally, female characters are often presented as overly sexualized, with their appearance being more important than their character or their story. They are often written as too perfect. This means that they are too strong, smart, and powerful to be believable. They also tend to be more attractive than real women would be, which makes them seem like caricatures instead of real people. This objectifies women and reduces them to mere objects of desire, instead of giving them the respect and recognition they deserve as complex characters. It also perpetuates a harmful stereotype and prevents female characters from being seen as strong and independent, which is damaging to them (Wilks, par.11). It is important to challenge these stereotypes and instead create characters who are complex, dynamic, and unique, and just overall respect the woman experience.

## **1.4 Common Archetypes of Female Characters in Literature**

Female characters in literature can be classified into some harmful archetypes, which are patterns or models of personality traits that are based on stereotypes, prejudices, or biases. Harmful archetypes can limit the representation and diversity of women in literature and can also reinforce negative or oppressive messages about women's roles and expectations. Here are some of the harmful archetypes of female characters in literature, with some examples and descriptions:



First, we have the 'Femme Fatale' this archetype represents a woman who is attractive, sensual, mysterious, and dangerous. She is often aware of her sexuality and uses it to manipulate or entice others, especially men. She may have ulterior motives or hidden agendas and may cause trouble or harm for those who fall for her charms. She may also be unhappy or lonely and may seek love or redemption (Antone, et al, par. 29). This archetype portrays women as deceitful, manipulative, and destructive. It also implies that women's sexuality is something to be feared or controlled, and that women who use their sexuality are immoral or evil. It also reduces women to objects of male desire or fantasy, rather than complex and autonomous individuals. Second, there is the 'Damsel in Distress' this archetype represents a woman who is young, beautiful, pure, and helpless. She is often in need of rescue by a male hero, who may also be her love interest. She may be imprisoned, kidnapped, cursed, or threatened by a villain or a monster. She may also be passive, naive, or dependent on others for protection or guidance (par. 30). For example, almost every fairy tale ever written, Salma Hayek in *Wild West* and Robin Wright in *The Princess Bride*. This archetype portrays women as weak, powerless, and dependent on men. It also implies that women's value lies in their beauty or purity, and that they need a man to complete them or save them. It also reinforces the gender roles of men as active, strong, and heroic, and women as passive, fragile, and victims. Lastly, the 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl', this archetype represents a woman who is quirky, eccentric, free-spirited, and adventurous. She is often a love interest for a male protagonist who is bored, depressed, or stuck in a rut. She helps him to rediscover his passion for life, to break out of his comfort zone, or to achieve his dreams. She may also have a mysterious past or a hidden flaw that makes her more appealing like 'Summer' from *(500) Days of Summer* (par. 32). This archetype portrays women as accessories or catalysts for men's personal growth. It also implies that women exist to serve men's needs or fantasies, and that they have no goals or desires of their own. It also reduces women to stereotypes of being cute, funny, or whimsical, rather than realistic and multidimensional.

## 1.5 The Causes of Male Authors' Failure to Write Good Female Characters

First and foremost, it is important to recognize the challenges facing male authors when writing about the female experience. Here, an author's potentially limited understanding of a female character's behavior particularly among male authors from earlier eras such as Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy can result in on the page clichés of an idealized femininity or use of blatantly sexist themes. In this sense, male authors must consider the implications of their work on both the characters themselves and their contemporary readership.

The most common issue that male writers face when writing female characters is misogyny. Men are conditioned from birth by society to view women as inferior beings, and this narrative permeates throughout their lives. When men write female characters, they often see them through the lens of their own personal experiences with women and how they have been taught to view them by the world around them. This can result in a misogynistic worldview that views female characters as less than human or even non-existent, a worldview that can be difficult for readers of male authors to accept or identify with (Cosslett, par. 6).

There's no denying that it's harder for men to write female characters than women. Men tend to be physically stronger than women. And these differences can be problematic for writers who want to write realistic female characters that are more than just pretty or perfect. In fact, it's not uncommon for male writers to write unrealistic female characters. As a result, female characters written by male authors can be perceived as misogynistic and sexist.

One reason for this issue is that many male writers do not understand how women think or feel about things. This can lead them to write their female characters in ways that are inappropriate for their feelings or thoughts about the situation at hand (such as when a man writes a woman who is afraid of spiders). Another reason why male authors often write female characters in a less than stellar way is because they do not understand the female perspective. Male authors often lack the experience to understand the nuances and complexities of women's

lives. This can lead to a lack of depth and realism in female characters. As women have different life experiences and perspectives than men, they are better equipped to create more complex and realistic female characters. Therefore, male authors may not be able to accurately portray the nuances of female characters, resulting in characters that are not as well-developed or complex as those written by female authors. This is partially due to the lack of female representation in the literary world, as well as the lack of literature available featuring strong female leads. As women make up only a small percentage of authors in the literary world, male authors are not exposed to stories that feature strong, varied female characters. As a result, they are more likely to rely on stereotypes and outdated ideals when writing female characters, resulting in characters that can be seen as one-dimensional and offensive. Male authors may also be influenced by societal norms and expectations of women in literature. Society often expects female characters to be passive and submissive, and male authors may subconsciously write female characters that fit this image. This can lead to characters that are seen as shallow and uninteresting, perpetuating outdated and harmful ideas about women in literature (Lorzano, par. 9).

All in all, there are many reasons why male authors may struggle. It is also possible that some male writers, consciously or unconsciously, may have a fear of writing a female character that is too strong, or too successful, or too independent, because they may feel threatened by the notion of a powerful, competent woman.

## **1.6 Misogyny in British Literature**

Misogyny is a deep-seated hatred of women that manifests itself in a variety of ways. It can be expressed through verbal and physical abuse, as well as through subtle forms of discrimination. It can be seen in the way women are treated in the workplace, in the home, and in society in general. Misogyny can also be seen in the way women are portrayed in media and popular culture, often as objects of ridicule or sexualization. Misogyny in the western world is a pervasive issue that has been present for centuries. It is rooted in the idea that men are superior

to women, and that women should be subservient to men. This idea has been reflected in many aspects of western culture, including religion, education, and the workplace. Misogyny has been used to justify the oppression of women, and to prevent them from achieving their full potential. It has also been used to justify violence against women, and to deny them basic rights and freedoms. The effects of misogyny are still felt today, and it is important to recognize and address this issue to create a more equitable and just society (Makayla, par. 1).

Misogyny is a pervasive issue in British literature and has been present in works from the Middle Ages to the present day (Malhi and Sunny, par. 1). It is a form of discrimination and prejudice against women and is often expressed through the portrayal of female characters as inferior to their male counterparts. The British literature of the past has often been criticized for its lack of positive representation of women. From the masculine characters of the Victorian era to the 'damsels in distress' of medieval romances, where women were often portrayed as being subservient to men, and in the Renaissance, where women were depicted as temptresses or objects of desire. Women have often been portrayed as weaker, inferior characters in comparison to their male counterparts. Unfortunately, this trend has been carried into modern literature, where women are often portrayed as little more than sexualized objects with no meaningful purpose. Misogyny in literature has been used to reinforce gender roles and to maintain the status quo of patriarchal power structures. In more recent works, misogyny is often used to critique the way society views and treats women, and to challenge the traditional gender roles that have been imposed on them.

This lack of a proper representation of women in literature reflects the gender inequality that invades our society. This bias has been reinforced by the lack of female writers, which has perpetuated the stereotype that literature is a “man’s world” (US group Vida, par. 6). This bias has impacted the way women are seen and portrayed in literature, leading to a lack of realistic female characters and a general devaluing of female stories.

## 1.7 The Psychology of Gender Roles

The psychology behind gender roles is a complex and controversial topic. Gender roles are defined as the behaviors, attitudes, and activities that a society considers to be socially appropriate for men and women. Although gender roles vary from culture to culture, society typically dictates that men should display greater levels of aggression and dominance, while women should show more passivity and nurturing.

In order to understand the psychology behind gender roles, one must examine the way in which gender roles are formed and maintained. It is generally believed that gender roles are formed and reinforced through a process of socialization. Socialization is the way in which children are taught to conform to gender-specific roles and expectations. From a young age, boys and girls are exposed to certain gender-specific messages and behaviors, which lead to the development of gender identities and roles. Boys learn to act in more dominant and authoritative ways while girls are more likely to engage in submissive and nurturing behaviors (Worthy et al, par. 4).

One of the most known consequences of such phenomenon is ‘inferiority complex’ which is a psychological condition in which an individual feels inadequate, incompetent, and unworthy. This condition is characterized by a persistent sense of self-doubt and a lack of self-confidence. It is often caused by early childhood experiences, such as being criticized or belittled by parents or peers. Individuals with an inferiority complex may engage in behaviors such as seeking constant approval, avoiding challenges, and comparing themselves unfavorably to others. Individuals of both sexes can experience a sense of inadequacy or inferiority in comparison to the other gender. This complex can manifest in various ways, such as feeling less capable or less intelligent than the opposite sex. There are many reasons why women may feel inferior to men. Some of these reasons include being devalued, being demeaned, being

assaulted in various ways, being blamed, discriminated against, objectified, oppressed, etc. This condition can have a significant impact on an individual's mental health and overall well-being. It can also lead to negative consequences such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and social isolation, and unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance abuse. It is important for individuals with an inferiority complex to seek professional help to overcome their negative self-perceptions and develop a more positive self-image (Alberts, par. 9).

Finally, the psychology behind gender roles is further complexified by the role of power dynamics. Studies have found that gender roles are determined in part by who holds the most power. For example, in patriarchal societies, men are typically seen as the most powerful, and so their gender roles are often more highly valued and enforced by society. Although there is much debate about gender roles, it is important for us to understand their psychological foundations so that we can be better equipped to challenge gender stereotypes and strive for gender equality.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

Literature has failed to properly represent women positively in the past centuries, and women have been fed up with this mistreatment, so they are raising through Feminism to fight these meta narratives and false ideas that have taken roots in our society about 'Who and What women are', their roles and value, their contribution to the human race and modern civilization. Women are uniting, using their voice to ask for better treatment, and equal opportunities and are aiming to correct the narrative about them especially in literature.

## Chapter Two: Common Misogynistic Meta-narratives in Literature

### 2.1 Introduction

Bad female characters and female stereotypes are often perpetuated by meta-narratives in literature. Meta-narratives are also called grand narratives or master narratives because they claim to offer a universal truth or a comprehensive account of historical events, experiences, or knowledge. Meta narratives have been criticized by some postmodern thinkers, such as Jean-François Lyotard, who argued that they are not credible or legitimate in the postmodern condition, which is characterized by skepticism. Lyotard proposed that meta narratives should be replaced by petit, local narratives that focus on the singular and the specific. Overarching stories or themes that are present throughout literature and culture, often reinforcing dominant ideologies and power structures. When these meta- narratives are gendered, they can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to the creation of bad female characters. For example, the damsel in distress trope positions women as helpless and in need of male rescue. These meta-narratives can also contribute to the marginalization and erasure of female voices in literature. When women's experiences and perspectives are not included in dominant narratives, they are often relegated to secondary roles or ignored altogether. This can lead to the creation of one-dimensional or stereotypical female characters, further perpetuating harmful gender norms and expectations (Race and Gender Stereotypes in Literature, par. 8).

### 2.2 *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* Synopsis

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a novella *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, which was first published in 1886. The narrative of a man who alternates between two egos is told in it. The story is about a Dr named Jekyll who invents a potion in his lab, that turns him into a completely diffident person that is Mr Hyde. The reason he did this was to unleash his dark, disgusting, and

horrible side of him through a different persona to avoid the blame. Whenever he had a craving of evil, he would drink the potion and become Mr Hyde; he goes out to the streets of London and wreak havoc on anyone he finds on his way, ultimately Mr Hyde takes over Dr Jekyll's body because the potion that turns him back to his “normal” self-stopped working, and Dr Jekyll knew that one day, Mr Hyde will take over him.

### **2.2.1 Women and Femininity in *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde***

The role of women in "*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*" is limited and often negative. According to a blog post by Shelby Lueders, the female characters in the novella are primarily maids or witnesses to violence. The post notes that "women do not grace the novella with much of a presence." Additionally, in an article titled "Femininity in The Strange Case of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*" Shuo Cao claims that the novel reinforces gender stereotypes, including the idea that women are weak and in need of protection from men. The article also argues that the novel portrays women as lacking in agency and as passive victims of male violence. As a result, the story is frequently viewed as misogynistic and is explored via a feminist viewpoint.

Although women are not wholly absent from the text, in certain ways, they do play a minor role in the story, like the maid who witnesses Hyde's heinous murder. The hunt for Hyde would not have begun if the maid had not been watching, nor would Dr. Jekyll have been compelled to choose between his two sides. As Charles Campbell says, women are the “key to a reading of the novel as it concerns the suppression of sexuality” (310). He suggests that: “The men of the novel are the city incorporated as lawyers, doctors, scientists, and sadists; they are associated with fog, lights and interiors. The women are the city as sexuality, innocence, sentiment, and victims; they are associated with street life, the outside of buildings and doors” (316). And while this critique is true, he overlooks a larger theme throughout the essay. The maid was not required to be a maid. It could have been any passerby, male or female, but more likely male because women are constantly off performing their duties. This demonstrates that women in the book, despite appearing to have a part, are nonetheless unneeded.



A young girl looking for a doctor is one of the first women we meet in this novel. She is then trampled by Hyde, she is "not much the worse, more frightened," victimized, and portrayed as weak and helpless (Stevenson 3). Women were viewed as the weaker and more helpless of the two sexes at the time this story was written. They were not granted the same rights as men and were frequently regarded as second-class citizens, trailing only the first-class citizens, men. In the story, women are portrayed as inhabitants of the city who define it; they are the targets of Mr. Hyde's attacks, either directly or indirectly: the young girl who is run over by Hyde, which may have a sexual connotation as if it were alluding to child prostitution in London. Stevenson used this scene to show how women were helpless and needed many people to help them. The next woman we see is the maid who witnessed the Carew murder. After watching Mr. Hyde beat the man to death, she faints, waking up long after the murderer is gone. She is a passive spectator; the irate woman who accuses Hyde of harming the girl; the housekeeper and the maid at the window who witnesses the murder of Carew; These all serve to highlight the presence of women and the sexual repression they experienced throughout that time.

Stevenson was better able to concentrate on the central tension between man's good and evil sides by relegating women to weak, subordinate roles. Freudian concepts, the patriarchal society of the time, a system in which men have power and predominate roles in politics, moral authorities, social privilege, and control of property, are just a few of the theories offered for this absence of women. There is much speculation as to the reasons for the absence of females in the story; one particularly compelling argument is that women function as moral bedrocks in most Victorian novels. They are supposed to be beacons of good moral influence. In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, therefore, women may have unnecessarily complicated the story. They are meant to serve as moral role models.

By the same token, Robert Dale Parker, in *How to Interpret Literature* chapter on Feminism, discusses the term "the gaze" is used when talking about women's role in literature and movies. "The masculine subject gazes, and the feminine object is gazed at" (170); the only

use of women in a text, and on screen, is to be looked at, to be gazed at. Their sole purpose is to serve as an idealistic image for the protagonist, generally a man, to physically look at and that is that. This then turns erotic when: “Written literature often lingers over a narrator’s or a focalizer’s erotic gaze at a focalized character and often at a focalized woman” (172). This is perhaps why scholar Laura Mulvey claims that “This is what men do: they look, and they look in abusive ways; and this is what women do: they are looked at, and they remain passive” (173). Perhaps this is why there is such a strong push for female protagonist novels, particularly in the young adult genre, to be published, given that women have traditionally had a minor role in literary situations. Because women play a little role in Stevenson's book, it may be viewed as a perfect example of not objectifying women to the gaze. The gaze is still present, it is simply not directed at women.

In the first chapter, interestingly, the little girl, the first female we hear about, is rudely trampled, and although she comes to no great harm, she relies on other people for her defense. Mr. Enfield says:

.... for the man trampled calmly over the child's body and left her screaming on the ground. It sounds nothing to hear, but it was hellish to see... I gave a few halloa, took to my heels, collared my gentleman, and brought him back to where there was already quite a group about the screaming child... The people who had turned out were the girl's own family; and pretty soon, the doctor, for whom she had been sent put in his appearance. Well, the child was not much the worse, more frightened, according to the Sawbones.... (Stevenson3)

The way in which the little helpless girl was attacked is very detailed in the mentioned quote, it shows the brutality and monster like fury that drove Mr Hyde wild as he attacked the first thing that was on his way. The scene was full of gore and so scary that no passerby dared to intervene and help her out, it was only after Mr Hyde left that her family came running for her as well as the medical help she needed.

In the fourth chapter, the maid faints after witnessing a horrible crime as Stevenson writes “And next moment, with ape-like fury, he was trampling his victim under foot and hailing down a storm of blows, under which the bones were audibly shattered and the body jumped upon the roadway. At the horror of these sights and sounds, the maid fainted. It was two o'clock when she came to herself and called for the police” (17). She regains consciousness only once it is too late to apprehend the murderer. The maid is an idealist who is portrayed as a one-dimensional character, she is used to showcase the brutality of Mr Hyde and how his behavior can affect even the bystanders. It is commonly known that women are a lot gentler and kinder than men who are very gruff, rough, and always ready for a fight; seeing that horrific scene caused her to pass out because she not used to witness such things, after all she is just a maid. By the same token, describing the maid, Stevenson also points out: "She had an evil face, smoothed by hypocrisy; but her manners were excellent" (19). This might also imply that women are deceitful and superficial, and that their only virtue is their politeness, they have their master's favor so long as they are of service to them.

In the eighth chapter, although many characters are shocked and scared throughout the novel, “At the sight of Mr. Utterson, the housemaid broke into hysterical whimpering; and the cook, crying out "Bless God!" it's Mr. Utterson," ran forward as if to take him in her arms” (Stevenson 32). Ironically, it is only the female characters who are in hysterics. The maid was scarred and worried for her master, but it seems like she was the only one who expressed her emotions openly, which once again can be regarded as a weakness. Moreover, in another scene, Stevenson writes “Poole nodded. ‘Once,’ he said. ‘Once I heard it weeping!’ ‘Weeping? how that?’ said the lawyer, conscious of a sudden chill of horror. ‘Weeping like a woman or a lost soul...’ said the butler (37). It delineates images of what is commonly known as toxic masculinity in today's society which stands for a set of certain male behaviors associated with harm to society. Stereotypical aspects of traditional masculinity, such as social dominance, misogyny, can be considered toxic due in part to their promotion of violence, including sexual

assault and domestic violence. This concept of toxic masculinity does not condemn men or male attributes but rather emphasizes the harmful effects of conformity to certain traditional masculine ideal behaviors such as dominance, self-reliance, and competition. So, what can be deduced from the former quotes is that apparently crying is for women, and expressing human emotions and being vulnerable is something real and strong men do not do. In another passage, likewise, Stevenson pens: “Blank silence followed, no one protesting; only the maid lifted her voice and now wept loudly... ‘Hold your tongue!’” Poole said to her, with a ferocity of accent that testified to his own jangled nerves....” (32). It is apparent to see the demeaning way in which Poole has treated the maid, ordering her around, not caring for how and what she is feeling in that moment; he was only concerned with his own feelings and the well-being of his master.

In the tenth chapter, Stevenson claims that "With every day, and from both sides of my intelligence, the moral and the intellectual, I thus drew steadily nearer to the truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two" (49). This quote expresses Jekyll's realization of his dual nature. It implies that men are complex and rational beings, while women are simple and emotional. It also suggests that men have a higher moral and intellectual standard than women, who are not mentioned in Jekyll's account of his struggle, because all women did in this novella was cry hysterically, faint or call for help.

### **2.3 A Synopsis of *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a novel by Oscar Wilde in which a man's portrait ages rather than his body. Dorian Gray, our main protagonist is a beautiful young man, he meets with a lord named Henry Wotton at the studio of Basil Hallward, who is using him as a model for his latest painting. The painting comes out so beautiful and breathtaking that it makes Dorian too scared of growing old and having his beauty fade away, so he wishes desperately to

stay young forever, or the painting would age in his place, unbeknownst to Basil, the picture has somehow become enchanted, and it ages in Dorian's place. Free to sin without consequences, Dorian lives a life of debauchery and freedom. This mindset is only spurred on more by lord Henry Wotton who takes Dorian under his wing and wishes to teach him about the beauty of life, and what it has to offer of pleasure which saddens Mr. Basil because he is aware of what kind of a man lord Wotton is and is afraid he would corrupt the innocent young man; sadly Mr. Basil worst fears came true, because Dorian turned into a monster that led to his own demise.

### **2.3.1 Women and Their Presence in *The Picture of Dorian Gray***

This is a philosophical novel that explores the themes of beauty, morality, and decadence in the fin de siècle London society. The novel has three main male characters: Dorian Gray, a young and handsome man who sells his soul for eternal youth; Lord Henry Wotton, a cynical and witty aristocrat who influences Dorian with his hedonistic views; and Basil Hallward, a painter who is obsessed with Dorian's beauty and creates his portrait. Women play a minor and often negative role in the novel, as they are seen as either decorative, naive, or immoral by the male characters. Lord Henry frequently criticizes women and marriage, saying that women are a "decorative sex" and that they have nothing to say (Wilde 69). He has a distant and unhappy marriage with Lady Victoria Wotton, who eventually leaves him. Dorian falls in love with an actress named Sibyl Vane, but he rejects her when she loses her acting talent because of her love for him. Sibyl commits suicide out of despair, she represents the innocence and purity that Dorian loses when he becomes obsessed with his own beauty and hedonism. Later, Dorian seduces and abandons many other women. Basil Hallward has no female presence in his life, as he devotes himself to his art and his admiration for Dorian. The novel reflects the gender relations and sexuality of the Victorian era, which were marked by strict moral codes and separate spheres for men and women. Men were expected to be rational, active, and dominant, while women were expected to be emotional, passive, and submissive (James, par. 1).

Therefore, women and their presence in Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* can be seen as a reflection of the hypocrisy and repression of the Victorian culture, the era in which this novel was written.

In an attempt to analyze the characters in relationship to the misrepresentation of women, Lord Henry might be the perfect prototype. He is a very present and vocal character who lives in the coolest circles and is well-educated, promoting his own brand of paradoxical, highly sophisticated ideas about art and life. He has a strong and frequently toxic influence on young Dorian. He is hedonistic man, to him pleasure comes first and morality much later, he cares about appearances, art, and wealth, he never wishes to associate with the lower class and always puts himself above others including his wife. He constantly criticizes women and marriage in his writings, and in his discourse, the era of Wilde's and Dorian Gray's London society comes to life for us. According to him, there are never more than a handful of women worth chatting to since they are a 'decorative sex'. We view his marriage to Lady Victoria Wotton as a totally separate relationship in which the two only occasionally crossed paths. Henry laments Victoria's departure and admits that he will miss her company. It certainly seems that many of the female characters offer the male characters necessary and entertaining company, and in fact, it is the hostesses who sometimes make it possible for the lifestyles of connection and fashion that men like Henry and Dorian boast of.

Sybil Vane, on the other hand, is a young actress who performs Shakespeare's heroines every night at a low-class theater and comes from an impoverished home. Dorian falls in love with her performances, but she feels that they pale in contrast to true love, and after becoming engaged to Dorian, her performing declines. When she loses her art, Dorian loses interest in her in turn. Sybil, a Juliet-like martyr for love, commits suicide after he abandons her, leaving her inconsolable. She represents an aesthetic ideal and is a metaphorical figure who is unadulterated in her love (The Downfall of Dorian Gray, Par. 3). Sibyl Vane is too good. Because of her

exquisite beauty, incredible talent, and complete innocence, she attracts Dorian who states: "... When I am with her, I regret all that you have taught me. I become different from what you have known me to be. I am changed, and the mere touch of Sibyl Vane's hand makes me forget you and all your wrong, fascinating, poisonous, delightful theories" (Wilde 114). Dorian sees Sybil as a breath of fresh air, she is talented, beautiful, so full of life and innocent, she is not poisoned by skepticism and cynical thinking like himself which is a direct effect of his connection to Lord Henry. He enjoys her company and loves the way she makes him feel loved and cared for.

Sibyl embodies everything Dorian recognizes in himself, but better because of her unadulterated purity. But because she lacks skepticism, she is unusually vulnerable to almost everything; as she admits, her only experience to date has been a sort of a half-life while she was on stage: "Dorian, Dorian, " she cried, "before I knew you, acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. [...] You came -- oh, my beautiful love! -- and you freed my soul from prison. You taught me what reality really is. [...] You had made me understand what love really is. My love! My love! Prince Charming! Prince of life! I have grown sick of shadows. You are more to me than all art can ever be. What have I to do with the puppets of a play?" (Wilde 127). The character Sybil is another version of Juliet (from Romeo and Juliet), hence why she plays her on stage, she is the best candidate for that role, she is beautiful, young, and innocent, a damsel in distress, she found her prince charming, and she felt secured and safe with him financially and emotionally. Dorian became her entire existence and when he rejected her affection after she stopped fulfilling the role, he wanted her to, she could not continue to live in a world where her prince charming was not by her side. her existence in the novel was very brief in the novel, she was only there to support the main character Dorian and to prove that Lord Henry was right in his cynical views about women, relationships, and marriage.

Sibyl's name symbolizes a woman in Greek mythology who was considered an oracle by the ancient Greeks. They were believed to prophesy under the influence of the inspiration of the

gods. Sibyl was a priestess, seer, and prophetess. They were often, if not always, very old, even ancient, and were believed to speak by the will of God and, thanks to divine intervention, their words would resound for millennia. In particular, the first Sibyl made prophecies in such respected places as Delphi, Delos, and Pesinos. In some myths, the Sybil were thought to be only instruments of the gods, and that the gods spoke through the mouths of these women (Why are There Sibyls).

In chapter eight, when Lord Henry tells Dorian of Sibyl's suicide, the latter says: "So I have murdered Sybil Vane," said Dorian Gray, half to himself, "murdered her as surely as if I had cut her little throat with a knife. Yet the roses are not less lovely for that..." (Wilde 146). When Dorian first heard about Sybil taking her own life, he was so enraged and upset that she dared to commit a suicide, mostly because he was to blame for abandoning her. He compares her suicide to his slitting her throat with a knife because he feels guilty. However, he does not appear to be plagued by regret and says that the roses continue to be stunning, he quickly moves on with his life, as if nothing happened because her death does not affect him deeply. Remarkably, only the portrait reveals Dorian's moral decline; everything else seems to be 'beautiful' on the surface. The phrase "her small throat" alludes to Sibyl's innocent youth. Dorian basically murdered his own innocence by treating her cruelly, setting himself on the path to corruption. "The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare's plays and left them lovelier for its presence, a reed through which Shakespeare's music sounded richer and more full of joy" (152- 3). Stevenson demonstrates this in a Shakespearean tragic atmosphere engulfed by ghosts-like, death, darkness, and emptiness. Additionally, it also shows Lord Henry's claim as Sibyl never fully lived because she merely appeared in plays, she lived vicariously through the characters she played in stage, her presence and existence were pointless and meaningless. She admitted to Dorian how she never knew love, she only played a lovesick woman when she was acting. By reducing the significance of her life to her career, Dorian and Lord Henry can detach themselves



from her passing. She passed away just as she was starting to live the life she had always desired, but she could not handle the first rejection she faced.

Sybil gave herself wholly to Dorian and devoted herself to him which affected her acting; for she could not have feelings for anyone else but him even if it was all acting, yet Dorian saw that as a sign to end his relationship with her because her acting was not superb anymore. Her acting is what attracted him to her in the first place, so when her value was reduced to her profession, and she no longer had a place in his life she took her own life away. The way Dorian dealt with her death was so typical of a shallow superficial man, he did not mourn her nor was he brokenhearted about it; her character was very disposable because she was regarded as an aesthetic object.

In the first chapter, Lord Henry says: "The one charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception absolutely necessary for both parties" (Wilde 6). He goes on to say: "... My wife is very good at it – much better, in fact, than I am. She never gets confused over her dates, and I always do. But when she does find me out, she makes no row at all. I sometimes wish she would; but she merely laughs at me."(ibid) .While Lord Henry undoubtedly does not love his wife, he most certainly does love himself!, and is quite pleased with the arrangement he has going with his wife regarding their marriage and personal lives, to him marriage is just a formality and it has absolutely nothing to do with love, Love ?! that's a bizarre concept to Lord Henry. "She is a peacock in everything but beauty" (Wilde 10) Lord Henry says. He is making reference to Lady Brandon, who Basil has just described as having a "curiously strident voice" and whom he met at a gathering. Henry goes on to say that she "treats her guests exactly as an auctioneer treats his goods" and "she tried to found a salon, and only succeeded in opening a restaurant" Henry, who is pessimistic, has a very negative opinion on women and the way they run their business, he is always looking down on them and criticizing their every move, since he is a know it all man, nothing impresses him especially if presented by a woman (11). He asserts

that “Women have no appreciation of good looks; at least, good women have not” (20). Attractiveness, for him, is not important to women who value passion, love and loyalty unlike men who overlook such qualities and are more interested in the beauty or attractiveness of their partners.

In the second chapter, Lord Henry says: “Always! That is a dreadful word. It makes me shudder when I hear it. Women are so fond of using it. They spoil every romance by trying to make it last forever...” (Wilde 35). He has strange ideas about marriage and women who, in his opinion, demand too much devotion. He says, in reference to women’s irrational idea that a romance should continue forever, “The only difference between a caprice and a life-long passion is that the caprice lasts a little longer” (ibid). In his opinion a piece of candy can last a lot longer than a passionate relationship, meaning relationships lose their value quickly, they are not considered a commitment to him, just something to entertain him from time to time like satisfying a craving for something sweet with a caprice.

In the fourth chapter, Lord Henry says to Dorian when discussing the latter’s interest in the actress Sibyl Vane: “My dear boy, no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly. Women represent the triumph of matter over mind, just as men represent the triumph of mind over morals” (Wilde 69). He has been informed by Dorian that he loves the actress and thinks she is brilliant. Henry displays his dismissive attitude about women. He also seems to imply that men are fundamentally morally corrupt. “As long as a woman can look ten years younger than her daughter, she is perfectly satisfied” (70). Lord Henry keeps churning out caustic epigrams in what seems like an endless stream. This time, when he is enlightening Dorian with his research of women, the topic is a woman's vanity and obsession with her appearance. By the same token, he states that “Men marry because they are tired; women, because they are curious: both are disappointed.” (69). In the light of this, he explains his recommendation for Dorian to never get married. He does not

think there has ever been a happy marriage between a man and a woman. Why he himself got married and is still married is a mystery. He goes on to say: “As for conversation, there are only five women in London worth talking to, and two of these can’t be admitted into decent society” (70). Lord Henry is not particularly pleased by the verbal abilities of ladies in London when giving tips on dating to the recently in love Dorian. He obviously believes that they are primarily used for decoration.

In the seventh chapter, Wilde writes: “Besides, women were better suited to bear sorrow than men. They lived on their emotions. They only thought of their emotions. When they took lovers, it was merely to have someone with whom they could have scenes. Lord Henry had told him that, and Lord Henry knew what women were” (135). In this manner, Dorian refers to Lord Henry's ideas on women to explain and defend his cruel rejection of Sibyl, she would not cause him any trouble, to him, she was nothing. He believes that women are better at handling grief than men, thrive from their emotions, and choose partners mostly for their ability to have sexual encounters. Here, Dorian is clearly under Henry's sway. Dorian is on the path to becoming a replica of Lord Henry. In the eighth chapter, Lord Henry says: “The only way a woman can ever reform a man is by boring him so completely that he loses all possible interest in life” (147). After Dorian argues that Sibyl, if she had lived, would have kept him on the straight and narrow, Lord Henry says this to Dorian “If you had married this girl, you would have been wretched” then he continues, “.....but I assure you that in any case the whole thing would have been an absolute failure.”(ibid). Lord Henry’s way of calming and reassuring Dorian about Sybil’s death, so he would not feel guilty after Dorian said “She had no right to kill herself. It was selfish of her” (ibid). It is just so cruel of them to disrespect her even when she is dead, Dorian simply did not want to be the cause behind her death, he wanted no responsibility or accountability knowing her brother will come for him. Henry argues that he is afraid “that women appreciate cruelty, downright cruelty, more than anything else. They have wonderfully primitive instincts. We have emancipated them, but they remain slaves looking for

their masters, all the same. They love being dominated” (152). No woman could ever agree with Lord Henry's extremely misogynistic beliefs and offensive remarks about women, but he continues to have a negative influence on Dorian.

## **2.4 The Consequences of Badly Written Female Characters**

The misogynistic views of male writers when writing female characters have been an issue for centuries. While the problem is not unique to any particular time or place, it seems to be particularly prevalent in Western society. As of late, there has been an increasing amount of attention paid to these issues, both in terms of what is being written about women and how it is being written about them. All of this can have alarmingly dire consequences. When the number of male authors falling for this pattern exponentially increases, other men (and even young boys) can begin buying into these unrealistic portrayals of the opposite sex (Men Writing Women, par. 10).

Writer Loehr agreed with this line of thinking "If all they read is books where women are used as fodder for a man's progression up the social or career ladder, then that is what they will see the purpose of the women around them as." If the representation of female characters in video games was sexist, according to equity theory it would suggest that the gamers who play these games should also behave in a similar fashion. It is disappointing that even in this modern era, female characters are too often portrayed as victims and not powerful enough to be the subject of their own stories.

The negative impacts of badly written female characters in literature on our society and readers are numerous. First, poorly written female characters can lead to gender bias. This is because if a woman is not well-written, it may cause people to think that women are not capable of doing certain things. For example, if a writer creates a woman who is weak, dependent, and submissive, it will often lead readers to believe that all women should be like this. This can create an environment where women feel less empowered than men do and thus may become more complacent about their own powerlessness. It also encourages readers to view women as

less competent than men are when it comes to leadership roles or any other type of professional activity. Second, poorly written female characters can lead to stereotypes. This is because if a woman is not well-written, it may cause readers to believe that women are all alike even though they are different people with their own unique personalities and backgrounds. Third, poorly written female characters can cause readers to be less empathetic towards other people's struggles or problems because they do not see themselves in these problems or struggles. And the last one, poorly written female characters may cause readers to feel uncomfortable about reading about their experiences in life as these characters are often portrayed as unintelligent or weak in some way which makes them seem like less than human beings in comparison to the rest of us who understand this concept better than them. The problem with this portrayal of women does not stop there; it can even affect how women view themselves. This perpetuates the idea that women are inferior to men and that their opinions, decisions, and actions are less valid. When women and young teenage girls read stories that contain badly written female characters, they can feel frustrated, disappointed, and even insulted. Poorly developed female characters can feel like a missed opportunity for representation and meaningful storytelling. Seeing women portrayed as one-dimensional, stereotypical, or weak characters can be particularly harmful, as it can reinforce harmful gender norms and expectations, leading to the perpetuation of gender inequality and discrimination against women. Furthermore, young teenage girls who consume media with negative female portrayals may internalize these messages and believe that they are limited by their gender. This can lead to a lack of self-confidence and may discourage them from pursuing their goals and aspirations (Miribel, par. 6).

## **2.5 Conclusion**

To conclude, this is a damaging and outdated mindset, and it is important for male writers to take the time to accurately portray female characters with the same depth and complexity with which they would write a male character. Doing so will help to create a more equitable and balanced representation of women in literature and media. By challenging these stereotypes and

writing female characters that are strong, independent, and capable of making their own decisions that leads to positive and accurate representation of women in literature.

## **Chapter Three: Winterson's *The Passion* as a Postmodern Petit-narrative**

### **Representing Women in Literature**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

Jean-Francois Leotard's 'little narratives' or 'petite-narratives' is small stories that challenge or contradict the dominant or grand narratives of a culture or a discipline; a way of expressing the experiences and voices of ordinary people, especially those who are marginalized or oppressed by the grand narratives. Some examples of petite narratives are those stories of women writers who faced discrimination and censorship in the literary world. This study aims to use the concept of petite -narrative and apply it to *The Passion* to observe how Winterson, from a post-modern standpoint, wrote-back, to misrepresentations of women in the past literature.

#### **3.2.1 Synopsis of Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion***

Winterson's novel *The Passion* is a historical fiction that takes place during the Napoleonic Wars in Europe. The novel follows the story of Henri, a young Frenchman who is sent to Venice to guard the city's treasures. Henri is a dreamer who longs for something more than the life of a soldier. He becomes infatuated with a beautiful woman named Villanelle and begins a passionate affair with her. Villanelle is a skilled musician who is known for her ability to play the mandolin. She is attracted to women also a free spirit who refuses to conform to the expectations of society.

Throughout the novel, the characters are shaped by the political and social context of the

time. Napoleon is waging war throughout Europe, and his influence is felt throughout the novel. The characters are also affected by the rigid gender roles and expectations of that period. *The Passion* is a complex and multifaceted novel that challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. It portrays women as strong and capable individuals who are not defined by their relationships with men. The novel also explores themes of love, desire, and the search for meaning and purpose in life. Overall, the characters in *The Passion* are complex and multifaceted, with their own desires, motivations, and agency.

*The Passion* can be viewed as a feminist novel. Jeanette Winterson not only describes the patriarchal structure of society, but also introduces a female character who defies it. Winterson examines this "indefinite" identity of women in her novel. *The Passion* is an inspiring story of a woman who refuses to be defined by the expectations of society and instead follows her own path. Through Winterson's deft use of gender roles, and patriarchal antagonism as embodied by the main character Villanelle. Her identity has a significant role in how feminism is depicted by Winterson throughout the book. On the other hand, Henri is a compassionate man who is not afraid to express his emotions, while Villanelle is a brave and daring woman who is not afraid to take risks. Both characters are not bound by the traditional gender roles that society has placed upon them, and instead choose to live their lives in a way that is true to themselves. The novel ultimately shows that gender roles are not something that should be forced upon people, but instead something that should be embraced and celebrated.

### **3.2.2 *The Passion* Characters Analysis**

Villanelle is a complex and fascinating character who defies the norms and expectations of her society. She is adventurous, independent, cunning, and passionate, also gender-fluid. She is an androgynous beauty from Venice, who inherits the webbed feet that run in her family, being the first girl to do so, a feature specific to male Venetians. Villanelle's possession of a male physical trait is a sign that she will not adhere to the common gender standards. She

becomes a pickpocket and a gambler. When working at the casino, Villanelle also wears a boy's uniform because, as it is said "it was part of the game, trying to decide which sex was masked under tight breeches and elaborate face-paste" (Winterson 54). Villanelle is a female authority figure who sets the rules of the "game" by determining what gender to adopt, the idea that she made her identity rather than having it thrust upon her is strongly related to the feminist idea that women are created, not born. It becomes impossible to define "woman" in a single way, and the idea of a single "female" or "woman" is arbitrary since there are "women of every kind and not all of them are women" (58). When Villanelle says that she cannot be considered a woman because only men in Venice have webbed feet, she tends to be in favor of this model. Villanelle's refusal to fit into gender stereotypes inspires a strong feminist interpretation of this book.

Henri is a young Frenchman who joins the military and becomes Bonaparte's personal cook. He and many others worship their leader and are willing to die for his honor. After fleeing the grand Napoleon's army in Russia, Henri observes as he explores Europe with Villanelle that the people he has been taught to regard as monsters are everyday citizens. His contempt towards Napoleon grows "I had been taught to look for monsters and devils and I found ordinary people" (Winterson 105). Winterson challenged gender roles in Henri's character by giving him a gentle nature, he is an innocent, impressionable young man; "... Eight years of battle and the worst he'd done was to kill more chickens than he could count. He was no coward though, he'd risked his own life over and over again to get a man off the field" (147). Patrick, Henri's friend, told Villanelle about what kind of a man Henri is and warned her not to overlook him, and just because he is a gentle man does not mean he would not use force if he deemed it necessary, in fact later in the story he kills Villanelle's abusive husband when they are trying to flee from him.

Henri fell for Napoleon Bonaparte's charm and strength, he was his cook instead of a



soldier, he was obedient and followed orders, he was flattered and touched when Napoleon chose him as his personal cook and praised him for his cooking skills. His profession is typically given to women instead of men, yet he played that part very well. Henri idolizes Bonaparte, his object of desire, which causes him to minimize the horrors of war that he will have to confront. “He used to say he loved Bonaparte and I believe him. Bonaparte, larger than life, sweeping him off to Paris, spreading his hand at the Channel and making Henri and those simple soldiers feel as if England belonged to them” (Winterson 146-147). In this quote Villanelle talks about the time Henri told her about his infatuation with Bonaparte and how that feeling has led him to follow his leader blindly “Why would a people who love the grape and the sun die in the zero winter for one man? Why did I? Because I loved him. He was my passion and when we go to war, we feel we are not a lukewarm people anymore” (108). Here, interestingly, is the moment in which Henri opened his eyes and saw the horrors of the war and the devastation it was causing to innocent people, he argues that his feeling for Bonaparte caused him to participate in the war in the name of serving his leader without taking into account its consequences.

### **3.2.3 The Significance of Jeannette Winterson’s *The Passion***

Winterson's novel, *The Passion*, is a significant work of literature for several reasons. It is a powerful exploration of feminist themes. Through the story of Villanelle, a young woman who embarks on a journey of self-discovery, Winterson offers a unique perspective on the female experience. The novel is filled with strong female characters who are determined to carve out their own paths and defy traditional gender roles. Villanelle’s story is one of resilience and courage, as she navigates the complexities of love, loss, and identity. The novel also highlights the importance of female solidarity and the strength of female friendships. Villanelle meets a number of other female characters, including the Countess, a powerful woman who is a patron of the arts; Fosca, a mysterious creature who helps Villanelle on her journey; and the Marquesa, a woman who helps Villanelle to understand her own identity. All these characters contribute to

Villanelle's journey, helping her to discover her true self and her own passions.

There are other reasons that give this novel its significance such as: Exploration of Love and Desire: The novel explores the themes of love and desire in a unique and unconventional way. Through the characters of Henri and Villanelle, Winterson challenges traditional notions of gender and sexuality, showing that love and desire are complex and multifaceted emotions that cannot be easily categorized or controlled. She also used the Critique of Patriarchy: *The Passion* is a powerful critique of patriarchy and its impact on women's lives. Throughout the novel, Winterson highlights the ways in which women are oppressed and marginalized in a male-dominated society. The character of Villanelle's mother, in particular, serves as a symbol of the rigid gender roles that were enforced during the time period in which the novel is set. *The Passion* is also significant as a work of postmodern literature. Winterson employs a range of postmodern techniques, such as fragmented narration and intertextuality, to challenge traditional narrative structures and question the authority of dominant cultural narratives. She experimented with gender, identity, and form while incorporating postmodernism into her work to highlight how cultural forms and media representation are based on specific ideologies. For example, she rejected essentialism, philosophy, and universal truths in favor of embracing the differences that exist among women to show that not all women are the same (Kaya 93). Overall, Winterson's *The Passion* is a significant work of literature that challenges traditional notions of love, gender, and power. Its poetic style, postmodern techniques, and historical context make it a unique and memorable reading experience.

### **3.2.4 Positive Representations of Women and The Female Experience in *The Passion***

*The Passion* offers a complex and nuanced representation of women and the female experience. Among the ways in which the novel presents positive representations of women is using complex female characters, the two main female characters, Villanelle and Henri's wife,

are complex and multifaceted. They are not simply defined by their relationships with men, but rather have their own desires, motivations, and agency. Winterson's portrayal of these characters challenges traditional gender roles and expectations. There is also *Female Friendship*, the novel also portrays a positive representation of female friendship. Villanelle and Henri's wife form a deep connection and support each other through difficult times. Their relationship is not based on competition or jealousy, but rather on a genuine desire to connect with another human being. Not to mention Winterson's use of *Resistance to Oppression*, the female characters in the novel also resist oppression in various ways. Villanelle refuses to conform to her mother's expectations and instead pursues her own desires. Henri's wife challenges traditional notions of sexuality and refuses to be defined by her relationship with her husband. And last but not least, the use of *Empathy and Compassion*, the novel also emphasizes the importance of empathy and compassion in human relationships. The characters, both male and female, are shown to be capable of experiencing these emotions, which allow for deeper connections and understanding between people.

*The Passion* by Jeanette Winterson is a novel that celebrates women and their agency, creativity, and resilience. The novel features many positive, empowering, and uplifting quotes about women and their roles, desires, and struggles in a patriarchal society. In the Opening line of the novel, Villanelle says: "I'm telling you stories. Trust me" (Winterson 3). This quote sets the tone for the rest of the story. Villanelle is a storyteller who uses her imagination and creativity to survive and escape from the constraints of her gender and class. She also challenges the reader to question the reliability and truthfulness of her narration. "She was a woman with a man's name. She had been christened Henri, but she had changed it to Villanelle because she liked the sound of it and because she was a gambler" (49). Villanelle's name has a significance. She chose a name that reflects her personality and her occupation. She also rejected the name that was given to her by her father, who wanted a son instead of a daughter. This shows that Villanelle is a woman who have full agency ad control of her life unlike most

women of her society. "She had no skin between herself and the world" (85). There is a contrast between Villanelle's lack of boundaries with Henri's rigid sense of self. Villanelle is open to the world and its possibilities. She does not have a fixed or stable identity. She can adapt and change according to her circumstances and desires. She is also vulnerable and exposed to the world and its dangers. She uses her webbed feet as a symbol of her uniqueness and her connection to water, which is a recurring motif in the novel. Water represents fluidity, and mystery, which is a source of life and freedom for her.

Villanelle recognizes that men have more power and privilege than women in her society and that women often suffer from violence, oppression, and betrayal at the hands of men, and how men can abuse and exploit women for their own gain. By saying "I am not afraid of men, but I am afraid for women", she feels a solidarity and empathy with other women who suffer from the same fate (Winterson 63). She is not intimidated by men, but she is cautious and wary of them. She also implies that she has experienced some form of abuse or trauma in her past that has made her wary of men. Villanelle sees freedom as the ability to love and be loved, "I think now that being free is not being powerful or rich or well-regarded or without obligation but being able to love. To love someone else enough to forget about yourself even for one moment is to be free" (182). She believes that love is the ultimate source of happiness and fulfillment in life. She also believes that love requires selflessness and sacrifice, which are qualities that she admires and practices. Henri speaks about a man in the village who lost his wife, and how devastated and lost he looked because she was an obedient wife, did all her chores, raised six kids and made his bed "She had made him possible. In that sense she was his god. Like God, she was neglected" (Winterson 28). He took her for granted, however, interestingly, only after she passed, he realized the important role she played. This shows Henry how significant the role of women can play not just in men's life but how the entire society is built on their backs.

Villanelle is a woman who can defend and look after herself as Winterson writes: "I'll keep my job because I'm good at it and clients like you come through the door every day. He hit me then. Not hard but I was shocked. I'd never been hit before. I hit him back. Hard" (64). She would do anything to stay safe and protected including fighting men and giving twice as much if anyone put their hands on her, she was not one to be messed with. This is Villanelle's way of taking control of her life and living by her own rules. Likewise, she says: "I took to working double shifts at the Casino, dressing as a woman in the afternoon and a young man in the evenings. I ate when food was put in front of me and slept when my body was throbbing with exhaustion" (62). This quote shows that she goes on about life in a carefree manner, at her own pace, she does, says and wears what comforts her and what works best for her. Moreover, Villanelle's father is also supportive of her as she admits:

Usually, I go straight home and meet my stepfather on his way to the bakery. He slaps me about the shoulder and makes some joke about how much money I'm making. He's a curious man; a slap of the shoulders and a wink and that's him. He's never thought it odd that his daughter cross-dresses for a living and sells second-hand purses on the side. But then, he's never thought it odd that his daughter was born with webbed feet. "There are stranger things", he said. (61)

He cares about her and never tries to make her feel about her webbed feet or her working at the casino and cross dressing, he loves her because she is his daughter, he never tries to change her and always let her be herself while receiving her with open arms.

Villanelle has the ability to detach herself from any situation or person that does not suit her. She has her own free will, "She had always been able to walk away from anything" (Winterson 51). She is not bound by any loyalty or attachment. She values her independence and autonomy above all else. She also has a sense of wanderlust and curiosity that drives her to explore new places and experiences. This shows that Villanelle as a very well written and complex female character with a solid personality and nothing tradition or conventional about

her as a woman, this proves the postmodernist theory that there are many ways to be a woman.

### **3.3 Conclusion**

Winterson managed to write a story centered around a woman's journey of self-discovery and self-love, Villanelle is not the stereotypical woman we often read about, there is almost nothing traditional about her. Winterson deconstructed the archaic viewpoint that many people had about women and what it means to be one, she restored that image and corrected it. Overall, *The Passion* offers a positive representation of women and the female experience. The novel challenges traditional gender roles and expectations, portrays complex and multifaceted female characters, and emphasizes the importance of empathy, compassion, and resistance to oppression.

## General Conclusion

The portrayal of women in the late 19th century literature is often criticized for being misogynistic. The novels *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Stevenson and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Wilde, both published in 1890, have been criticized for their negative portrayal of women. In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, female characters are largely absent and those that do appear are portrayed as weak and passive. For example, the character of Millicent Carew is described as "a helpless, pretty thing" who is ultimately brutalized by Mr. Hyde. Similarly, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, female characters are either idealized or vilified, with little complexity or nuance. For example, the character of Sibyl Vane is described as a "poor, little, beautiful, useless thing" who ultimately kills herself after being rejected by the central character, Dorian.

The reasons for the negative portrayal of women in these novels are complex and likely reflect the prevailing attitudes towards women at that time. In the late 19th century, women were expected to be submissive and obedient, and their roles were largely limited to the domestic sphere. The portrayal of women in literature reflected and reinforced these societal norms. Therefore, these male authors must be held accountable for their portrayal of female characters, regardless of the time period they lived in. While it is true that societal norms and gender roles were vastly different in the past, it does not excuse the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and the objectification of women in literature. As intellectuals and artists, male authors have a responsibility to challenge societal norms and push boundaries, rather than simply conforming to them. By perpetuating harmful stereotypes and limiting the agency of female characters, male authors contribute to the larger systemic issues of sexism and misogyny. As a matter of fact, it is important to acknowledge the context in which these authors were writing and to understand the societal pressures they faced. However, this should not excuse or justify their actions. Instead, it should encourage readers to critically examine the larger cultural and historical context in which

these works were produced, and to use this knowledge to push for more progressive and inclusive representation in literature.

Winterson is a feminist writer who is constantly pushing the envelope and breaking stereotypes about women in her novel *The Passion* by creating complex and unconventional female characters who challenge the norms of their society and their gender roles. For example, Villanelle the cross-dressing casino dealer who has webbed feet, a sign of her connection to the water and her fluid identity. She is adventurous, independent, and cunning, and does not conform to the expectations of marriage or motherhood. She also suffers from the violence and oppression of men, such as her abusive husband and Napoleon's soldiers. Another example is the Queen of Spades, Villanelle's lover, who is a married noblewoman with a passion for gambling and cards. She defies the conventions of her class and gender by having an affair with Villanelle and by being skilled at a game that is dominated by men. She also represents the ambiguity and risk of love and desire. Winterson's novel challenges the binary oppositions of male/female, masculine/feminine by showing the fluidity and diversity of human identity and desire.

Winterson, in *The Passion*, writes-back against the meta-narratives that distorted the image of women, as in the previously mentioned novels, by inserting petit-narratives that challenge and correct the dominant discourses of history, religion, and gender. For example, she rewrites the history of the Napoleonic Wars from the perspectives of Henri and Villanelle, two marginalized characters who witness the horrors and absurdities of war and empire. She also uses elements of magical realism, such as Villanelle's webbed feet and Henri's heart in a jar, to create a fantastical and alternative version of reality that questions the authority and objectivity of historical facts. She also critiques the oppressive role of religion, especially Christianity, in shaping women's lives and limiting their choices. For instance, she contrasts the rigid and dogmatic faith of Henri's village with the carnival and playful spirit of Venice. She also exposes the hypocrisy and corruption of the church, such as Patrick's spying on naked



women and Domino's selling of relics. For example, she portrays Villanelle as a cross-dressing, woman who defies the norms of marriage and motherhood and resists the violence and oppression of men. She also explores the fluidity and diversity of human identity and desire through Villanelle's webbed feet, a symbol of her connection to the water and her ambiguous gender.

Writing female characters can be a difficult task for male writers, but it is possible to do it well if approached with an open mind and a desire to learn. Male authors can improve their writing and create good female characters by, first, do research and listen to women's voices, male authors should read books written by women and seek out diverse perspectives and experiences. They should also engage with women in their lives and listen to their stories and perspectives. This can help male authors to create more authentic and nuanced female characters. Second, avoid stereotypes and tropes, male authors should actively work to avoid harmful gender stereotypes and tropes when creating female characters. This means avoiding one-dimensional portrayals and instead creating complex and multifaceted characters. Third, focus on character development, male authors should prioritize character development over physical appearance and other superficial traits. This means creating female characters who have their own goals, motivations, and backstories, rather than simply serving as plot devices or love interests, additionally, be sure to give female characters full agency and autonomy in the story and create characters who are believable and relatable. By doing this, male writers can better understand and write female characters in a way that is both accurate and respectful. Fourth, seek feedback and critique, male authors should seek out feedback and critique from women and other marginalized groups. This can help them to identify blind spots and biases in their writing and create more authentic and inclusive portrayals of female characters. And last, embrace intersectionality which is an analytical framework for understanding how a person's various social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. It identifies multiple factors of advantage and disadvantage such as gender, caste,

sex, race, ethnicity, class and more. The term highlights how race, gender, class, and other factors are interconnected. It was originally coined by American scholar and lawyer Kimberle Crenshaw who drew inspiration from Black feminist movements in the US. By taking these steps, male authors can work towards creating more inclusive and authentic portrayals of female characters in their writing.

Loehr was kind enough to lend struggling male authors a helping hand and offered suggestions on how they could become better at building female characters. "Read books by women authors. Read books by non-binary authors. Read books that center on female characters. Read books in your genre and outside of your genre." She went on to say "Think deeply about every female character you include in your stories: Do they have a character arc? Do they have dialogue on the page that is not about the male characters? Are they full-rounded characters with a backstory, goals, etc.?" She also advised men to find female beta readers to get feedback on their characters: "Listen to what they tell you, thank them, and pay them for their time and expertise."

To recap, men writing women badly in their novels is a serious issue that affects both female and male readers. It can harm women's self-esteem, identity, and empowerment, as well as men's respect, empathy, and understanding of women. It can also perpetuate sexist and misogynistic stereotypes and norms in society. Therefore, male authors should strive to write female characters in more realistic, respectful, and diverse ways, by learning from women's perspectives, avoiding common pitfalls, and creating well-rounded and dynamic female characters who have their own goals, motivations, and personalities. By doing so, male authors can not only improve their writing skills and craft, but also contribute to a more inclusive and equitable literary culture and society.

Misrepresentation of women in any field is no longer tolerable. Women can demand

respect and recognition in today's society in a variety of ways. They can speak up for themselves and their rights. They can also seek out supportive networks of other women and allies who will help amplify their message and support their efforts. Additionally, women can take action and get involved in their local communities, as well as in larger movements and organizations that are working to advance women's rights. Finally, women can use their platforms, whether it be through social media, writing, or other forms of media, to spread awareness about issues that are important to them and to advocate for the causes they care about. By taking these steps, women can work to create a society in which they are respected and recognized for their contributions.

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