Female Body, Captivity and the Prison-house

Paper abstract

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This paper investigates the strict bond between the female body and the house through the analysis and comparison of two well-known female characters of English literature: Miss Havisham, from Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations,* and Eveline, from the omonimous short story in *Dubliners* byJames Joyce. The research is structured as follows.

**Some general observations** and critiques on the roles of the house and of the women are reported and critically examined. The idea of the house as a body and as a prison of which the female inhabitant is a part and a prisoner will come under scrutiny. Alessandra Violi’s observations about the analogy between the human body and the house or the city (53) are reported and furtherly discussed. Some interesting considerations about the confinement of women within the domestic area conveyed by Alison Milbank (2, 3) are also analysed.

**The two selected and already mentioned literary examples** of female bodies trapped inside the house are introduced and analysed individually at first, focusing on the features of their houses and their familiar but inanimate and dusty objects that are preserved within them. Then, the condition of stillness and incapability of being part of the flux of life of Miss Havisham and Evelin are compared. It is explained that the differences between them concerns only the appearance of their bodies and dwellings - despite their different settings and times - and that they actually share the same condition of embodied objects and living-deads.

**The presence and image of dust** plays an important role in the description of the stillness of the characters’ condition. The dust of Eveline’s room and the dust in which Pip thinks Miss Havisham would transform if exposed to the sunlight are both meaningful images. In *Eveline* the dust is a clear reference to the eternal repetition of actions and to the unchangeable scenery of Eveline’s life - the constant return of the past. The mummified figure of Miss Havisham is still wearing her bridal dress, once white and now yellow because of the passage of time, and her shrunken body seems ready to conclude its decomposition process turning into dust. In both these representations, the presence of dust seems therefore to contain and express the impossibility of letting the past go and move forward with the two women’s lives.

**Unrealized marriages: the impossibility to go out of the paternal house and build a new life**. The role of marriage is defined by Margot Norris (64) as an “emotional emigration”, and since Miss Havisham and Eveline remain nubile, they can’t leave their houses - or emigrate. The unconcluded marriage of Miss Havisham leaves her with a broken heart and a strong sense of melancholy, which is also projected by every single object of her dressing room and by the house itself - the gothic environment is a suitable choice to communicate such a dreary atmosphere. Her fiancé’s rejection results in the lady’s seclusion and transformation into a living-dead, whose body won’t exit the house anymore. This dramatic choice of Miss Havisham leads her to reduce her world within the boundaries of her mansion. Her broken heart - namely her unmarried state - and her refusal of the outside living world are the chains that imprison her body inside Satis House.

Also in Eveline the protagonist’s marriage is not fulfilled, but in a very different way from Miss Havisham’s jilt. In Joyce’s short story the female protagonist is the one who abandons her suitor by not escaping with him. As Margot Norris discusses, Eveline shows no romantic interest in Frank, nor says that she loves him (63), but the sailor is maybe seen just “as a passport from her present life”(64). At the end of the short story, Eveline is unable to move and go away with Frank, namely with the only person who would have set her free through marriage. Her nubile condition therefore strengthens her state of imprisonment within her paternal house.

**The idea of the house as a connection with the past and as a tomb in disguise** is argued starting from the analysis of the two Greek words: *“oikos” and “oikesis”,* “home” and “tomb” respectively, discussed by Alison Milbank (123). It is then examined how Miss Havisham attempts, after having been abandoned by her fiancé, to protect herself from the outside world by withdrawing from others inside her manor - but that results, rather than in a preservation, in a self incarceration and burial (128). In *Eveline* the protagonist freezes before escaping and getting married abroad, remaining stuck in her state of conscious deprivation of life. She is aware and terrified by the fact that her destiny will be very similar to her mother’s one - stuck in the paralysis of Dublin and maybe demented - since keeping the promise to “*keep the home together”* implies being imprisoned inside it and sacrificing and spending her life within the walls of her father’s dwelling (Norris, 65). She cannot avoid remaining trapped in her domestic prison, which one day will probably become also her tomb.

**Conclusion**

The connection between the house and its female inhabitant, and the image of the dwelling as a body - rather than a mere building - inside which the woman is deeply embedded, are concepts that emerge from the study of the two investigated literary examples. Miss Havisham and Eveline’s seclusions within the domestic walls, and their state of still-lives bodies surrounded by the familiar and dusty objects of the house are an evidence of the cultural conceptualization of women as parts of the domestic environment, whose existence is meant to be spent inside the dwelling (A. Milbank, 2-3). The two female characters’ self-imprisonment interrupts their lives and is just an illusive refuge where they try to preserve their bodies, while that captivity is, on the contrary, preventing their life to continue or even begin. Therefore, the house embodies not only the penetration of the past into the present (Milbank, 4), but also the obstruction of the future, and it also forbids the female inhabitants, or rather its body parts, to escape its own perimeter.

**Bibliography**

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