

What a Heroine *Can* Do: Examining Literary Cultural Myths in Karen Joy Fowler's *Sister Noon*

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In her 1972 article “What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can’t Write” Joanna Russ discusses how the literary “myths” or “plot patterns” employed by writers of the Western European tradition simply are incompatible with female protagonists. She then goes on to delineate that women writers have for the most part been limited to writing the Love Story, which traditionally has been seen as less serious, or of less literary merit, than the male-centered myths that populate the canon. Using this article as a kind of framework, my aim in this project is to determine whether, or to what extent, the arguments of this 37-year-old article still hold true. I have chosen to construct a kind of case study examining the historical-fiction novel *Sister Noon* by Karen Joy Fowler to investigate whether it is able to break out of the cultural myths that Russ identifies as being the only ones available to women. My personal hope is that it will. By structuring my paper as a character study of the novel’s three central female characters-- Lizzie Hayes, Mary Ellen Pleasant and Teresa Bell-- I hope to discover what kind of story each woman is telling. I have chosen a case study instead of a survey or overview of stories that might prove my point, in order to look deeply into *how* the novel constructs a divergence from classical Western European literary myths, as well as how the author treats the social and gender issues that implicitly accompany such a story. In addition, as two of the three characters I am going to examine are based on historical figures, I will pull in historical, biographical research to compare and contrast what is based on truth and what is elaboration on the author’s part. In this way I hope to flesh out if or how the real life basis enables the author to break out of the classically female literary mold. The

significance of such a study, I hope, will be to illuminate a specific example of the overall stride female authors have taken in broadening the scope of literature to include stories and protagonists outside of the patriarchal paradigm.

I. Article Discussion

Russ begins “What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can’t Write” by listing brief descriptions of a series of well known works of literature, but with the sex of the protagonist reversed from male to female, with, “The result that these very familiar plots simply will not work” (Russ 80). This is, according to Russ, because culture is patriarchal, that is from the point of view of men, and so literature naturally has developed in such a way that is reflective of patriarchy. In explaining her conception of literary myths Russ states, “Now writers, as I have said, do not make up their stories out of whole cloth; they are pretty much restricted to the attitudes, the beliefs, the expectations, and above all, the plots that are ‘in the air’” (Russ 81). This means that authors, for the most part, cannot create a work that is entirely and purely original, that does not somehow borrow from the cultural, traditional tapestry that they have been socialized into. In this way the greatest works of literature are not deemed so because they are the most original or unseen-before plots, but because they somehow use these literary myths in a way that resonates with their audiences. The way Russ defines literary myths is that, “They are dramatic embodiments of what a culture believes to be true—or what it would like to be true—or what it is mortally afraid may be true” (Russ 81). So, then, if myths are born out of what a culture believes to be true, and cultural voice is given predominantly to men,

then, Russ argues, the women depicted in much of literature are not truly women at all. They are the “other,” lacking true subjectivity, lacking real, human motivations for their actions. Russ says, “The Other contains a mysterious *essence*, which causes it to behave as it does; in fact “it” is not a person at all, but a projected wish or fear” (Russ 82). In other words, these female minor characters exist only in relation to the male protagonist, his challenges, his desires, his story arc.

Therefore, in order to gain a fuller, truer picture of humanity it, at first, seems that it would be enough to have female protagonists created by female authors. To an extent this is true, as Russ identifies the classic model that female authors have used to frame their stories: the Love Story. The initial problem, however, that Russ sees is that this is only one literary myth. The wide variety of myths that make up the Western European literary tradition are still not available to women. Furthermore, “Successes within the Love Story (which is itself imagined out of genuine female experience) are not important because the Love Story is not important” (Russ 88). That is, that set alongside male myths the Love Story is not considered as serious or of as much literary merit. Russ also identifies *How She Went Mad* as an alternative to the Love Story, which springs directly from female repression, and so even further alienates itself from male literary myths. She then goes on to suggest lyrical structure, the detective novel and science fiction as viable options for female writers because they by definition go outside of what is considered reality, giving authors the perfect space to construct new realities.

In light of the discussion on literary myths and viable structures for novels with female protagonists, *Sister Noon* by Karen Joy Fowler stands out as a worthy candidate to test Russ’ argument. It is neither science fiction, nor a hard boiled detective work

(although there are plenty of elements of mystery), nor does the protagonist Lizzie go mad, nor is it lyric in form (there is plenty of plot action), and most unusual of all, there is a startling lack of the Love Story.

II. Lizzie Hayes

Lizzie Hayes is, at first glance, unremarkable as a heroine—rich but not beautiful, not old but past what could be considered youthful, and to all *appearances* a proper upper class woman. Yet it is her very unremarkableness (by traditional literary standards), coupled with a rich internal life that makes her a female protagonist not bound by the limits Russ delineates. She is a single, independent, professional forty-something-year-old woman at the turn of the Twentieth century in San Francisco.

Lizzie’s age alone breaks her out of the traditional treatment of female characters. *Jane Eyre* was plain, but she was young (a virtue in itself according to traditional female protagonist-setting), and she managed a fairytale ending with a rich, landed man. In a literary tradition stretching back to the ancients (*The Epic of Gilgamesh* for example) in which one of the greatest myths that seizes the collective consciousness is the search for immortality, protagonists are on the whole more appealing in youth. Possibly, readers want to tap vicariously into the vigor and promise youth implies. The search for immortality has translated into a fear of aging. Tied to this myth is the emphasis on, or possibly demand for, feminine beauty, and a plain, middle-aged female protagonist might traditionally be considered doubly unappealing. This gendered double standard is not a new phenomenon; even in the ancient Greek *Lysistrata* the titular character explains to the men of Athens that aging is more difficult for women, socially speaking, because she loses the commodity of the beauty of youth. Therefore by dint of her age Lizzie as a leading lady already challenges female literary prescriptions.

In the descriptions of Lizzie, the narrator places great emphasis on the dichotomy between the “inner” and the “outer” woman. That is, to all appearances, in her professional and social life Lizzie is a proper society woman: working for an orphanage, frequenting afternoon tea socials and attending church on Sundays. Yet, “Just beneath this tractable surface lay romance and rebellion” (Fowler 26). She is quietly subversive; as a child she escaped into passionate novels, mentally acting out the adventures that she was not permitted to have. Over the years,

As she’d aged Lizzie’s inner and outer aspects grew increasingly ill-matched. Her breathless, romantic imagination, charming in a young woman, and delightful in a beautiful young woman, was entirely ridiculous in someone short, fat, and well past her middle age. Lizzie was sharp enough to know this, and since there was no way to keep the outer woman private, she generally kept the inner woman so (Fowler 28).

Instead of letting the travel into adulthood dull her secret sensibilities, Lizzie firmly holds on to who she is, and while she lets society dictate her public actions, it does not dictate her thoughts. Lizzie does not rail against society for curbing her voice or her range of acceptable behavior; instead, her very act of self concealment is a defiance: as long as others assume she thinks, feels, and believes the way they do, she is free inside her own mind. As an avid reader, these literary myths (the epitome of which are fairytales) are most definitely a part of Lizzie’s consciousness and capture a huge part of her imagination, yet she does not form her own life to reflect these formulae (feeling like a victim, waiting for a “prince charming” to complete her, etc). Instead, she chooses an independent life in service to others, making her fully realized and individuated.

III. Mary Ellen Pleasant

Mary Ellen Pleasant figures as a

prominent character in *Sister Noon*, both onstage and, possibly more intriguingly, behind the scenes. She seems to have her hands in every sector of the city: business, charity, politics. She is the most notorious woman in San Francisco of the time, a city run by sensationalistic journalism and rampant gossip. This could be because city life of the time was so fast paced and all parts of life heightened: business was booming, wealth was being created, then invested in more urban development, gender imbalance gave a special appeal to women and everyone looked for entertainment. More than a city-wide pastime, such speculation and insistence on being involved in other people’s lives through rumor seem to be a very part of the collective consciousness. As the narrator states,

Here are just a few of the things people said about Mary Ellen Pleasant: she’d buried three husbands before she turned forty, and in her sixties had still been the mistress of prominent and powerful men...She could restore the luster to pearls by wearing them. Although she worked as Thomas Bell’s housekeeper, she was as rich as a railroad magnate’s widow...She was an angel of charity...She was a voodoo queen...She would, for a price, make a man die of love...She trafficked in prostitution...She was the best cook in San Francisco (Fowler 21).

In this way, Mary Ellen Pleasant, as a figure that seizes the public imagination, seems to function in some way to explore the nature of truth. The real Mary Ellen Pleasant is elusive and difficult to see clearly, just as any truth in such a gossip-mongering society is elusive and dressed up in layers of gaudy distraction. By refusing to engage in any of the wild public speculation into her character she both fans the flame of her mystique and keeps her freedom to dabble where she will. Along the same lines Mary Ellen Pleasant also seems to manipulate truth to serve her ends, as when she brings little Jenny Ijub to Lizzie at the orphanage where she works,

insinuating by her personal interest (so Lizzie gathers) that the girl has some sort of wealthy and tragic past. This assumption, in part, prompts Lizzie to go on a wild goose chase to find Jenny's parents that ends in ambiguity and loose ends. Perhaps Mary Ellen Pleasant used her notoriety in the situation to gain a good home for a poor orphan; perhaps there was more to it. Lizzie finds it impossible to tell.

Mary Ellen Pleasant is a character with a refrain that serves to expose the heart of who she is. During tea she tells Lizzie, "You don't have to be the same person your whole life," a line she repeats throughout the novel (Fowler 50). Self creation is what drives Pleasant's life; in this way she can be taken as a powerful example of a female character breaking out of the limitations Russ delineates. It is said that she was born into slavery, taken to a convent school in New Orleans, then bonded to Nantucket as a slave to a Quaker family, then wed to a prominent businessman there. After he dies she comes to San Francisco and becomes Ellen Smith, a housekeeper. She spends a brief time thereafter as a White society woman but abruptly and publicly announces her Black heritage. As to why she has had so many aliases, Pleasant gives some insight when she states, "'Its been my pattern...Life is loss'" (Fowler 9). She literally begins with nothing, with a mother telling her to go stand out on the street so that she will catch someone's fancy and they'll take her away, and from then on through her travels has to form herself to every new situation (Fowler 7). In this way as a means of survival Pleasant learns to re-create herself to be whatever she wants or needs to be. Passing as White is a radical form of self creation for Pleasant, born out of necessity for survival in a new city, yet the intriguing part is that she then chooses to reveal to these society people the truth of her ethnicity. Of course, she never lied to them; most assumed her beauty to be "darkly

Medeterranean" or Spanish (Fowler 8). By taking everyone off guard, in one of the few moments in which she straightforwardly exposed truth, she shatters their perceptions of her. And so (ironically) begins her notoriety. In some sense Pleasant parallels Lizzie in that a dichotomy exists between the inner woman and outer woman. The important difference however is that the outer woman, after her reveal, is created not by Mary Ellen Pleasant to fit into society but by society, which creates the outer woman to fit her into itself. Others do not know what to do with a woman who unabashedly creates and re-creates herself with only her own agendas in mind.

IV. Teresa Bell

As with Mary Ellen Pleasant, Teresa Bell also has a refrain that points to the focus or heart of her character. She is the wife of the wealthy Thomas Bell, mistress (in name) of the House of Mystery on Octavia Street. Yet like nothing is simple in that house, in fact the relationship dynamics among Mr. Bell, Mrs. Bell and Mary Ellen Pleasant are anything but simple. In order to gain a hold on Teresa Bell and understand what kind of story she is telling, one must look at her refrain. She states, "When I was three months old my mother stripped me to the skin and set me on a windowsill in a thunderstorm" (Fowler 45). Tragic and confessional as this statement may seem, Mrs. Bell tells it to Lizzie on their very first meeting, making the reveal a bit too personal to be appropriate. Mrs. Bell then goes on to say of her mother, "'I refuse to think on her much,'" yet she repeats the statement several more times, and on more than one occasion when Lizzie meets with her (Fowler 45). This repetition would suggest far more than a painful memory (or memory of hearing such a story): Mrs. Bell is possessed by her thoughts of the episode and with her dead mother. Such an act of rejection committed by the person in her life who was supposed most to love and protect her unconditionally, and so early in her life,

seems to have caused Mrs. Bell irreparable psychological damage.

The narrator reveals later that Mrs. Bell's mother, Elmina Harris, suffered so greatly over the loss of her first two children that by the time her third, Teresa, was born she could not bear to take care of her (Fowler 106). While this might in part suggest why Mrs. Bell's mother would commit such a horrible action, clearly she was deeply disturbed. This fact is later reinforced when Elmina, in a visit to Teresa (who is being raised in the relative safety of a nearby family), comes close to drowning her in a creek on pretext of showing her a crawdad in the water. This episode, coupled with Mrs. Bell's refrain would suggest that water has great symbolic meaning for the character. Both times that her mother tries to kill her, it has been through water: first in a thunderstorm and then in a creek. Water then, for Teresa Bell seems to be a destructive, consuming force in her life, imposed by her mother. In this way water could signify the unconscious, the deep dark places of the mind twisted into madness that Mrs. Bell inherits from her mother. Even during the attempted drowning scene little Teresa tells her mother, "I hear voices in the wind," pointing to an already developing madness (Fowler 107).

Thus in light of these observations Mrs. Bell aligns most closely with the How She Went Mad myth that Russ suggests, but with one key difference. It is through abuse by her insane birth mother, along with any genetic

predisposition for mental instability that she might have inherited from her, as well as through mistreatment by her alcoholic, physically abusive foster mother, and her cold-hearted foster sisters that Mrs. Bell becomes who she is. This source of abuse tips the focus (that Russ presents) away from *How She Went Mad* as a feminist protest of the repressed woman, to a darker, more psychological, look at how damaging bad mothering can be.

In this preliminary study, based on the evidence provided by the three main female characters, Lizzie Hayes, Mary Ellen Pleasant and Teresa Bell, it seems clear that *Sister Noon* is not in fact tied down by the limitations Russ sets out in "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write." None of these women are defined by male characters; none centers her life on a Love Story. The strength of *Sister Noon* is its believability, its almost deceptive normalcy. Fowler has no need to travel into the speculative realms of science fiction or the detective novel as Russ suggests; she sets her story in this very country and in a time when women had less freedom than they do now. Neither did she feel the need to write outside of plot (Lyricism) to subvert traditional literary constrictions. The novel contains plenty of ambiguity, and much is left open to interpretation, especially in evaluation of the characters, but it is clear that *Sister Noon* effectively transcends Russ' conception of female literary limitations.

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