

Victorian Women Writers

By Cindy Venema

People believe that writing is a way to free the soul; to communicate on paper what is hard to communicate in speech. Novels, therefore, are their creator's subconscious desires and fears. Not necessarily, many writers will argue that their novels are purely written as entertainment or as criticism not as representations of their inner feelings.

Patricia Srebrnik, an associate professor at the University of Calgary inaugurated the Women's Studies speakers series at UPEI. On November 21 she delivered an essay entitled "Women's Writing and Symptomatic Reading in Victorian England", which discussed how Victorian women writers were victims to a new type of psychoanalysis: an analysis of their psyches through their literature.

Women's texts were treated as books of symptoms. This type of examination is termed by Srebrnik as "Symptomatic Reading". Victorian women were uncomfortable with the symptomatic readership. They preferred to be read sympathetically, where the reader regards the work with sympathetic relief because there are others with the same problems as themselves.

"Many women novelists stopped writing" Srebrnik explained, because after completing one or two novels they could not handle the personal evaluations contrived from their literature.

Srebrnik used case studies of several Victorian female writers as evidence to the existence of symptomatic reading. Her primary example was Margaret Oliphant.

Oliphant lived from 1828 to 1897. Her husband died of consumption, leaving her with three children to raise alone. She supported her fam-

ily by publishing many writings. She wrote fiction, biographies and reviews, and eventually became the author of over more than 100 works (The Bloomsbury Guide to Woman's Literature).

Oliphant was a professional writer; she had to write fiction; she had to write literature that would sell. She was an author, mother, and a Christian. Because she had to write to support herself, she was compelled to write scores of popular romances.

She had a great fear of symptomatic reading; therefore, Oliphant struggled not to write anything about her own life.

Oliphant was a modest woman, but when all her children died prematurely, she struggled with her views of christianity. Finally, she felt obligated to write an autobiography, an autobiography of confessions. But she would not publish her work until one third of the text was deleted, mostly her thoughts on God. "She unconsciously defended herself from the symptomatic reader and at another level God" Srebrnik explained.

For a long time women had been writing to a female audience, they never expected male readership. Men read women's writing differently than how women read their fellow sex's literature. The male criticism of a woman's work was similar to how a doctor would examine a female patient for oppressed desires, alluding to the 1880's hysteria where most female patients were treated for hysteria.

Women writers were victims to condescending reviews. One review claimed, "Women should write clearly and artlessly".

A group of women known as "new women" responded to the dangers of symptomatic reading. They

abandoned obscurity, and consequently were constantly under attack, as one reviewer stated, "New women writers are insane", and another review of new women described their writing to be filled with "discontent and disillusionment without any concealment".

Victorian men respected George Eliot's writings. Her writings show objectivity, rationality and education; therefore, men were able to regard her literature as masterful. Oliphant, however, was disappointed with Eliot's writings. She saw them as "hidden behind a male voice".

Like Eliot, many women resorted to assuming masculine styles, publishing their essays anonymously, and thereby avoiding symptomatic reading and gaining respected reading.

Women Victorian writers were left with two choices: write in the female, in truth, and then accept symptomatic criticisms; or write in the masculine, in semi-truth, and avoid symptomatic criticisms.

Professor Patricia Srebrnik presented an informative lecture on Women's writing in the Victorian period. She showed how women were read as case studies, and how they had to overcome this critical obstacle to gain respect and the freedom to write in truth.

Srebrnik is currently on sabbatical and is spending her year on Prince Edward Island. Dr. Irene Gammel, English professor at UPEI, stated "Patricia Srebrnik is one of Canada's top Victorianists, and we are happy to have her on the Island".



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