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The Femme Fatale in Text and Image: Analyzing Gender, Power, and Representation in Rudyard Kipling's "The Vampire" and Philip Burne-Jones's Painting

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Abstract

This paper examines the connection between Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Vampire" (1897) and Philip Burne-Jones's painting of the same title, focusing on their portrayal of femininity and the interaction between text and image. Kipling's poem, often viewed as a response to Burne-Jones's depiction of actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, presents a warning about the destructive allure of female beauty, highlighting themes of male disillusionment and betrayal. Burne-Jones's painting emphasizes the femme fatale figure, portraying a sexually dominant woman overpowering a helpless man. Both works suggest that beauty conceals danger, leading to male ruin. Using Foucauldian and feminist frameworks, the paper critiques the politics of representation, arguing that the portrayal of women often reflects patriarchal anxieties, reducing them to passive objects in male-dominated visual culture. Critics like Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock are cited to challenge these depictions. The paper concludes that the female vampire theme reflects cultural fantasies rather than truths about femininity, contributing to ongoing discussions on how art and literature shape gender perceptions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Firstly published in the Gallery catalogue, Rudyard Kipling's poem "The Vampire" (1897) is widely interpreted as a work inspired by Philip Burne-Jones's painting of the same title. Philip Burne-Jones, the son of the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones, created a significant visual impact with his portrait of the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell, titled *The Vampire* (see Figure 1). In his study of the connection between Philip Burne-Jones's painting and his unrequited love for Mrs. Patrick Campbell, Lycett (1999) observes that "Phil had long nurtured a passion for Beatrice Tanner, the beautiful Anglo-Italian actress who, as Mrs. Patrick Campbell, had been taken up by the Souls after her success in the London theatre. Phil plied her with jewellery, but she rejected him and took up with a fellow actor, Johnston Forbes-Robertson. In response, the jealous Phil painted a frenzied Gothic fantasy of a wasted youth, lying on a bed, straddled in a suggestively sexual manner by a wild-eyed woman with sharp teeth and dark long hair, and entered it for the tenth summer show at the New Gallery" (p. 295). This painting, likely Burne-Jones's most renowned work, provocatively depicts the actress in a sexually charged manner, aggressively straddling a young man who lies unconsciously and

powerlessly on a bed. According to Orel (1989), Kipling's poem "presumably means to acknowledge Woman in her most beneficent and most malignant aspects" (p. 25). Kipling appears to suggest that having her female beauty as a mask, the woman (the "fair lady") may hide something diabolical inside of her, thereby leaving the man with feelings of regret and disillusionment:

A fool there was and he made his prayer
(Even as you and I!)
To a rag and a bone and a hank of hair
(We called her the woman who did not care)
But the fool he called her his lady fair –
(Even as you and I!)

Oh, the years we waste and the tears we waste
And the work of our head and hand
Belong to the woman who did not know
(And now we know that she never could know)
And did not understand!

A fool there was and his good he spent
(Even as you and I!)
Honor and faith and a sure intent
(And it wasn't the least what the lady meant)
But a fool must follow his natural bent
(Even as you and I!)

Oh, the toil we lost and the spoil we lost
And the excellent things we planned
Belong to the woman who didn't know why
(And now we know that she never knew why)
And did not understand!

The fool was stropped to his foolish hide
(Even as you and I!)
Which she might have seen when she threw him aside –
(But it isn't on record the lady tried)
So some of him lived but the most of him died –
(Even as you and I!)

And it isn't the shame and it isn't the blamed
That stings like a white-hot brand –
It's coming to know that she never knew why
(Seeing, at last, she could never know why)
And never could understand!

Crushed by the experience and recognizing that he has been deceived, the man comes to understand that the lethal power of women is concealed and beyond his control. This realization is deeply significant as it destroys his faith, revealing that his devotion has been one-sided and that what he believed to be true was actually false. Acknowledging his own foolishness, he cautions others that any man can fall into the same trap ("even as you and I").

Kipling's "The Vampire" illustrates a vivid portrayal of femininity dramatized as an object of male desire or hatred. Kipling's poem, which tells the story of a man confronting an illusion he has mistakenly created or misunderstood about a woman, along with Philip Burne-Jones's painting, serves as a fitting example to explore the theme of female representation and the complex relationship between text and image when female visual syntax is translated into written language.

This paper aims to discuss the question of representation itself. Demanding new ways of examining the visual representation of women, over the last few years, many critics have devoted themselves to examining art and reconsidering art history, providing valuable documentation for art criticism, which has brought new perspectives from which to read art critically, opening up access to the understanding of art in a theoretical and political manner, and shaping the framework within which the debate on issues such as power and domination has been formulated.

2. IMAGERY AND SEMIOTICS

All themes, forms, and genres in art are inherently purposeful. What is depicted within the visual space of an artwork is inseparable from the social and cultural context in which it is situated. As Cheeke (2008) explains, "[a]ll paintings, whether they are narrative paintings or…domestic genre scenes, tell the story of a context and a culture, and are therefore open to moral interpretation and evaluation. They are not innocent or disinterested, even though they may present themselves as such" (p. 35). However, while recognizing the value of art shaped by its cultural context, the persistent focus on the representation of female images raises questions and holds particular significance for modern readers.

To study the representation of female images in visual arts, one should consider the interaction between imagery and semiotics, as emphasized in the subjective experience of interpreting art. Bal (1996) argues that visual arts should be viewed "not as a fixed collection of enshrined objects, but as an ongoing, live process" (p. 40). Interpreting a painting, much like writing, is a form of thinking that can transcend and expand beyond the boundaries of the artwork itself. This process is intricately connected with both historical and contemporary issues and resonates with the importance of personal subjectivity. Bal asserts:

> To put it strongly, if provocatively: "reading" art is a subjective act, but it is not idiosyncratic. Instead, the image becomes a meeting ground where cultural processes can, precisely, become *inter*subjective. It is an act that requires the present tense to interact with the past tense. It is an act that declares the image and even its tiniest elements to be saturated with meaning, its semantic density constituting its social, and cultural relevance (p. 39).

In other words, each interpretation of a painting can be seen as a new translation, influenced by various readings and the painter's intentions, and can be analyzed through the lens of social and cultural contexts. While the value and meaning of an image can be understood in historical and cultural terms, it can also be examined from unique personal viewpoints, interpreted through multiple perspectives, and processed through various complex interpretative methods in a subjective act. However, the evaluation of an image is never definitive; it does not establish a fixed relationship between image and meaning. Instead, it remains open and dynamic, evolving through an ongoing process of interpretation where each reading involves a shifting perspective within the context of the present moment.

3. FOUCAULDIAN & FEMINIST DISCOURSES

Foucault (1970) is acutely aware of the complex relationship between text and image, which he explores in depth in *The Order of Things*. Foucault discusses the profound disconnect between language and painting, emphasizing the inherent gap that arises in all forms of representation—whether through "images," "metaphors," or "similes." He argues that this gap exists within an infinite space, making it impossible to fully articulate what we see through language. No matter how we try, words can never completely capture the essence of what we perceive. As Foucault explains:

> But the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are imperfect, or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes, what we are saying; the space where they achieve their splendour is not that deployed by our eyes but that defined by the sequential elements of syntax. And the proper name, in this particular context, is merely an artifice: it gives us a finger to point with, in other words, to pass surreptitiously from the space where one speaks to the space where one looks; in other words, to fold one over the other as though they were equivalents (pp. 9-10).

In other words, when understood as a text influenced by a particular perspective, an image that originates from language becomes embedded with meanings and endowed with its own elements of visual syntax. The essence of any form of representation lies in its artifice.

In addition, it could be argued that presenting an image does not necessarily equate to giving a voice to the character in the portrait, whose individual rights of expression may be neglected, as his or her identity is shaped by the painter's use of paints or crayons. As the character becomes the focal point of interpretation in a portrait, understanding the character's image is closely tied to issues of power. The way power is wielded can significantly influence the construction of an image. The painter's power is exercised in a meticulously controlled way, which, as Foucault notes, "the onlookers have no power of evading":

> From the eyes of the painter to what he is observing there runs a compelling line that we, the onlookers, have no power of evading: it runs through the real picture and emerges from its surface... (p. 4).

For Foucault, power assumes an extraordinarily dominant role in the shaping of an image. In a portrait, the power of the painter is encapsulated, determining how the character's image is framed, regardless of the subject's preference. The intent of the painter governs the portrayal, and this reflects what Foucault describes as the "micro-physics of power" (p. 26)—a form of power that continues to assert itself even in the absence of the painter. This power extends beyond the painted surface, influencing the effect and impression the image leaves on the viewer.

Yet, when it comes to reading aesthetic images of women, many cultural critics have remarked on the sexual politics of seeing. Feminist critics in particular have become more sophisticated at analyzing specifically the spectacle of femininity, protesting that such a visual representation has too often reduced women to the passive object of gaze. For instance, Linda Nochlin (1988) criticizes the lack of women's point of view in the visual realm of erotic representation, reading the imagery of woman as "a woman cut to the very pattern of [the artist-creator's] desires" (p. 143). Pointing to "the politics of representation" as "the encounters between constructed images and constructing eyes", Catherine King (1992) reacts negatively to the consumption of images of women, and argues that there are "no innocent eyes", just as there are "no innocent images" (p. 132). Griselda Pollock (2001) claims that "there is a cultural politics of sexuality in visual form and space itself, as well as in the practices of looking" (p. 80). When the image of femininity becomes the object of aesthetic feelings, especially when visual pleasure is to be derived from a woman's body, most feminist debates are grounded on the notion that aesthetic pleasure is closely related to consumption, rebuking male artists' objectification of women's bodies.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the fascination with representing femininity within the realms of text and image. It could be argued that patriarchal cultures consistently seek to create an image of femininity that is both enigmatic and powerful, serving to captivate and motivate men to engage in a quest to uncover the truth or secrets of women. Jacques Derrida might have concurred with this notion, as Moore (1994) observes in *Spurs*, where Derrida "introduces the figure of the philosopher-knight to illustrate how, in the history of Western philosophy, the pursuit of knowledge and truth is inherently tied to the desire to master the truth of woman" (p. 77). Derrida (1979) states, "There is no such thing as the truth of woman, but it is because of that abyssal divergence of the truth because that untruth is <<truth.>> Woman is but one name for that untruth of truth" (p. 51). Acknowledging that the concept of truth is frequently intertwined with the concept of woman in Western culture, and drawing inspiration from Nietzsche's texts, Derrida (1979) suggests:

> Women (truth) will not be pinned down. In truth woman, truth will not be pinned down. That which will not be pinned down by truth is, in truth – *feminine*. This should not, however, be hastily mistaken for a woman's femininity, for female sexuality, or for any other of those essentializing fetishes which might still tantalize the dogmatic philosopher, the impotent artist or the inexperienced seducer who has not yet escaped his foolish hopes of capture (p. 55).

In line with Derrida's mode of thinking, one might argue that there is no inherent mysterious or threatening power in the figure of the female vampire that Kipling illustrates. Instead, these ideas are products of men's desires, imaginative fantasies, or patriarchal impulses that create meaning where there may be none. Also, regardless of previous critical interpretations, it is the relationship between the viewed object and its current spectator in moments of contemplation that truly matters, as it contributes to the ongoing representation. Consequently, the ritual of interpretation is never complete; it remains open-ended, continuously transforming through the dynamic interaction between the viewed object and its new beholder.

Figure 1 The Vampire (1897)[1]

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