

**Fragmented personalities: Images of Women in Dos Passos's
*The 42nd Parallel***

Silvia Caporale Bizzini
Universidad de Alicante

Le donne sono un popolo nemico, come i Tedeschi.
Cesare Pavese

Los personajes que representan figuras femeninas en la literatura son la representación discursiva de sujetos históricos reales. Nuestro análisis tomará en consideración dicha representación partiendo del presupuesto que estos modelos llevan al lector a aceptar una visión de la mujer que se basa en un discurso esencialista, y en algunos casos misógino, de lo que se considera la 'verdadera' idea de mujer. En la novela de John Dos Passos los personajes masculinos representan la búsqueda, positiva, de la identidad, que se materializa en la lucha contra el sistema capitalista americano de los años 20 y 30. Por otro lado, los personajes femeninos de *The 42nd Parallel* no llevan a cabo una búsqueda interior real y la mayoría de ellos o representan la materialización discursiva de la mujer burguesa, o su búsqueda se limita al deseo de entrar en un mecanismo de vida burguesa.

The representation of women in literature is currently the target of a reinforced interest, as many scholars are devoting their efforts, from the point of view of both theory and literary criticism, to analyzing its construction and modes of operation. We foresee that the study of the representation of images of women in fiction can become a highly interesting field of research, especially if you are a woman and are intrigued with understanding what base some male authors use to represent you.

Do we recognize ourselves in the majority of all those feminine characters we meet everyday in our literature class or while simply reading a novel on the bus going to work, or do we just not think about it? The interest in studying images of women in fiction is quite a

challenge because as Mary Allen underlines, misogyny is considered to be an anti-social attitude in most circles nowadays, and literature can become an ideal medium of diffusion, as in it misogyny can act «subtly even subconsciously.» The main aspect of the whole question is that, in our opinion, feminine characters are the narrative representation of social subjects, that is to say the idea that a part of society has of women and, what is more important, the idea of women that the common reader, no matter what his/her sex, gets from consuming the novel.

Let's consider the idea that the image of woman in literature is a social construct; no matter whether the writer is a man or a woman, their characters will be created through the guide of «ideology» and we give this word an althusserian meaning: «... Ideology has been since then the system of ideas, of representations which control the spirit of a man or of a social group.»¹ According to the thought of the French philosopher, we are all the product of Ideology which acts through the Ideological State Apparatuses, represented by religion, family, justice, the unions, politics, the media and culture. We are formed as subjects according to the rules imposed by the dominant discourse which will use us, via the State Apparatuses, to transform all individuals into social subjects, and so on. Thus we all participate in the functioning of a mechanism that defines itself by « ... `transforming' concrete individuals into subjects.» The Cultural Apparatus has taken on in our case, a leading role in such a process, as Green and Khan remind us:

In their creation of Fiction, writers call upon the same signifying codes that pervade social interactions, re-presenting in fiction rituals and symbols that make up social practice. Literature itself is a `discursive practice' (Michel Foucault's term; Eagleton 1983, p. 205) whose conventions encode social conventions and are ideologically complicit. Moreover, since each invocation of a code is also its reinforcement or reinscription, literature does more than transmit ideology: it actually creates it—it is `a mediating moulding force in society.'²

If we agree with the central idea of this passage we will notice at once how useful trying to decode the writer's message can be, as his message is the one that the reader will get from the piece of literature she/he is reading. If we take this concept as a starting-point it is logical to think of the literary representation of women not as a real one but as the one suggested by the dominant ideology, whatever it may be. In her

Technologies of Gender, Teresa de Lauretis points out that gender is neither a property of bodies nor a quality immanent to human beings but it is a concept which has been built up through the work of Ideology, or as Michel Foucault would say «a complex political technology.» As he reminds us, discourse, like ideology, does not simply translate into words the system of domination but, on the contrary, it represents as well the medium through which power can be reached.

For this reason the study of feminine characters can be of great use in unmasking certain social constructs, first because the discourse exerts its power in a privileged way in the field of sexuality (Foucault) and then because the representation of gender is hidden in the history of the whole of western culture and such representation is, at the same time, its construction (de Lauretis). Characters depicting women in Fiction are the representation of existing historical subjects, so the two central points around which we will try to build our analysis will be the study of the characters and, at the same time, character as the literary representation of woman as real existing being. In short the mechanism of the construction of Gender.

But what is a character? Many different scholars have answered this question. According to Propp, for instance, as he stated in his *Morphology of the Folktale* it is nothing more than a «function,» while the structuralist semiotician A. Greimas, who developed Propp's theory, transformed it into an «actant» or an «actor.»³ In the last few years a pragmatic dimension has been added to the study of the characters in literature and in 1987 Uri Margolin published an essay called «Introducing and Sustaining Characters in Literary Narrative: a Set of Conditions.» He writes: «... in current possible word semantics [...] character is viewed as signifying an individual ...»⁴ and constructs his theory basing it on the idea that:

The model object literary character as a nonactual individual, or individual existing in some hypothetical nonactual world, is radically different from a flesh and blood human being. It is a stipulated individual, an artificial construct, called into existence, introduced and sustained means of a set of semiotic procedures/operations.⁵

We will take into consideration and study this «artificial construct» while, at the same time, our task consists in decoding these

«semiotic procedures/operations,» because it is through them that ideology works in literature reproducing in a fictional «nonactual world» the same models proposed and imposed in the actual world. Such models permit society to survive and lead the reader to accept and recognize the given image of women as the depiction of the real feminine self. The information we need to read and understand character is in the character itself and for this reason: «Such entities are hence ontologically 'thin' and unlike actual individuals, are definitely not subject to an indefinite number of predications.»⁶ Having clarified this, we find it useful to underline the nature of that definite «number of predications» which will suggest to us what the character is supposed to represent and mean.

Some time ago a colleague asked me if I really thought that people were the protagonists of Dos Passos's novels. Most of his critics agree in declaring that the characters in his Trilogy (*The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen* and *The Big Money*) are the representation of American social and political history. They stand as the many micro-identities of the nation and end up forming the whole portrait of it as a mosaic, the complete/macro identity of the U.S.A.. What we want to stress is how all these small fragments, the microidentities, are not only individual puppets but represent imaginative constructs of real people, those people we have before defined as social subjects/constructs.

Once this had been clarified, what caught our attention was the different ways in which feminine and masculine microidentities can be depicted, and Dos Passos's different approaches to the construction of his characters' lives and desires. The character of Mac, for example, represents the positive search for identity, that is to say the fight against American capitalistic society. On the other hand none of the feminine characters of *The 42nd Parallel* show much interest in developing their inner selves and most of them are either related to the bourgeoisie or they seek a bourgeois way of life, like for example Annabelle, J.W. Moorehouse's first wife, with her uncontrolled lust, or Maisie, Mac's wife, and her obsession with money and with middle-class values. But the reason why I have chosen Eleanor and Janey is because they live a «nonactual life» of their own, while the other feminine characters would not be useful in this context as they exist in other people's lives.⁷

Eleanor Stoddard and Janey Williams present the same characteristics and the result is that they lose their individuality as

characters and transform themselves into stereotypes. In Dos Passos's works of these years we do not find the classical man/public woman/private dichotomy; all his characters move in the two spheres of action. His women work, smoke, decide not to marry so as not to lose their independence. So at first glance we might think that the tragedy that he describes is the tragedy of the human being, not only men's struggle and search for identity. But if we examine in detail his way of presenting the characters we can observe the subtle difference between the two sexes, or rather the different ways of representing them as sexual subjects/constructs.

Uri Margolin gives us four conditions which he calls «text-world aspect» to allow us to study characters in fiction. At the same time these conditions correspond to another five which are the «Corresponding reading operation» that we will leave aside because we do not share Margolin's opinion that «... the success or failure of a reader's operation is the function of textual conditions, not of the reader's psychology.»⁸ Though we do agree with the first statement we cannot with the second, as we think that the reader's cultural, social and anthropological background is fundamental in the operation of filling the gaps the text has left open. It is such an operation which leads to the understanding of the text. In this paper, anyway, we will leave the reader aside and will simply apply and put into operation three of the five conditions regarding the «text-world aspect.» The three conditions we have taken into consideration to develop our analysis are: «Uniqueness vs deindividuation,»⁹ «Paradigmatic unity of features,» answering the question, «What kind of individual is X?»¹⁰ and «Syntagmatic continuity» answering the question, «Is it still the same X?»¹¹ It is through them that we will try to show how in our opinion John Dos Passos's feminine characters lose their uniqueness and become the common representation of an incomplete woman, a woman to whom sex is denied. At the same time we think that the first and the second conditions are closely related, so we will examine them at the same time.¹²

As I have said above, according to «possible world semantics,» a character is composed of a series of physical, social and psychological traits which, together with her/his proper name, help us to distinguish her/him from others in the novel. These traits compose what Margolin calls their «paradigmatic unity of features» which gives shape to the uniqueness. As we will see later such uniqueness, which is the right to

represent two different ways of being and feeling, is denied to Eleanor and Janey. They were born in two different cities, Chicago and Washington, but their lives flow in parallel. They end up in the same city, New York, and share the same feeling for the same man, J.W. Moorehouse. Their psychological characteristics are very much alike, so alike that they do not belong to one or the other but become common ground. This is the way in which their «uniqueness» is transformed into «deindividuation.» They no longer represent two different women but the same woman, or rather a stereotyped feminine character.

Our two characters show a series of patterns which contribute to creating the global frame of their nonactual being. The ones I have taken into consideration are those of family, work/place of their own, love, sex. It is through them that we will get to the configuration of the ontological dimension of the character, showing how it is not only «thin,» but almost non-existent. Eleanor and Janey do not feel at ease with their families and desire a «room of their own.» Eleanor left home when she was eighteen, the day of her mother's funeral, and went to live alone: «After the funeral she went home and packed her belongings and moved to Moody House. She hardly even went to see her father. He sometimes called her up on the phone, but whenever she could she avoided answering. She wanted to forget all about him.»¹³

Janey made the same choice, even though in a less dramatic way: «That was the chance Janey had been waiting for so long to get a place of her own and she and Alice got a room in a house on Massachusetts Avenue near the Carnegie Library, with cooking privileges.»¹⁴ Eleanor hates her father, Janey feels uneasy when she goes back home, as, for example, at her sister's wedding:

In June Janey went to her sister Ellen's wedding. It was funny to be in Washington again. Going on the train Janey looked forward a whole lot of seeing Alice, but when she saw her they couldn't seem to find much to talk about. She felt out of place at her mother's [...] Janey was glad when it was time for her to go down to the station and take the train to New York.¹⁵

Up to now the two girls seem to have shared the pattern of the relation with the family and that of independence. They also share that of friendship, love and sex. They both have a close friend who is

incapable of reaching the top, or what they consider to be the top, as they did. Alice, Janey's friend, remains in Washington, while Evelin, who is Eleanor's friend, gives up the business in New York and ends up teaching children in Santa Fe where she lives with her family.

The sets of love and sex are in our case quite closely related. Eleanor and Janey 's vision of man is quite similar as well. Eleanor: «When she was sixteen in highschool she and a girl named Isabelle swore together that if a boy ever touched them they'd kill themselves,»¹⁶ and Janey after Alec's death: « Janey whispered that she'd never be able to love anybody else and Alice said she didn't think she could ever love a man anyway, they all drank and smoked and talked dirty among themselves and had only one idea.»¹⁷ They keep the same attitude all the time, so that they cannot be considered to be dynamic characters but rather the representation of crystallized nonactual beings. Eleanor is now living in New York, she has her own business and goes out with J.W. Moorehouse but her vision of a relation between a man and a woman is always the same:

J.W. began getting interested in art, and Eleanor loved going around with him because he had such a romantic manner about everything and he used to tell her she was his inspiration and that he always got good ideas when he'd been talking to her. They often talked about how silly people were who said that a man and a woman couldn't have a platonic friendship.¹⁸

After being depicted as independent women they share another characteristic: the incapacity of relating sexually to men. The only time that Janey thinks in sexual terms of a man he does not react and after a while dies in a motorbike accident:«It made Janey's throat tremble to watch Alec's back and the bulging muscles of his arm as he puddled, made her feel happy and scared [...] The smell of sweat and riverwater and the warm boysmell of Alec's hair and shoulders made her dizzy.»¹⁹

From this point on, Janey will never again think of men as sexual subjects in a positive way. She rejects all the proposals of marriage and lives in the platonic adoration of her boss, J.W. Moorehouse. Eleanor keeps on stressing how little understanding people have for her relation with Moorehouse, which as she repeats more than once is a platonic one. Their lives start in two different cities but as we have seen move in

parallel and end up having the same «object of love,» which will not become an object of (sexual) desire.

The conclusion we reach is that these two characters suggest the portrait of a subject who is denied the possibility of developing and expressing her sexual identity. A condition which prevents her from recovering the wholeness necessary to overcome her status of fragmented self because as Kaja Silvermann writes:

Lacan tells us that the only way the subject can compensate for its fragmentary condition is by fulfilling its biological destiny—by living out in the most complete sense its own «maleness» or «femaleness,» and by forming new sexual unions with members of the opposite sex. It is by means of such unions that the subject comes closest to recovering its lost wholeness.²⁰

The result is that a deep dichotomy exists in their representation and we end up associating autonomous women with incompleteness and frigidity. This is a good point in reinforcing the dominant discourse based on the double western thought whose masculine/feminine dichotomy is just one more among the many which help to create gender. Western epistemology supports a system of ideas, an ideology, which punishes the subjects which do not fit or are considered dangerous for its schema. As we have underlined above, discourse exerts its power especially in the field of sexuality and of its representation—the Cultural Apparatus—so one of the ways of controlling women and their attempt to deconstruct the dominant discourse may involve the representation of their sexuality/identity.

In my opinion this result leads us to a more interesting question. How can we study the feminine characters in literature and take into consideration the fact that their representation is the product of the dominant ideology and their representation of the dominant discourse? We think that the answer to such a question can become a powerful reason to consider the classical theories on the study of characters incapable of fulfilling our expectations and to argue in favour of the study of gender and the mechanisms of its construction and representation.

NOTAS

1. Louis Althusser, «Ideología y Aparatos Ideológicos del Estado (Notas para una investigación)» in *Posiciones*, (Barcelona, Anagrama, 1977).
2. G. Greene y C. Khan, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (New York, Routledge, 1985), p. 4-5.
3. The bibliography on the theory of character is too wide to be cited exhaustively. A few essential references could be: Ducrot-Todorov, *Diccionario enciclopédico de las ciencias del lenguaje* (Madrid, Siglo XXI, 1983); Mieke Bal, «The Theory and the Focalizing: a Theory of the Agents in Narrative,» *Style*, 17, 2 (1983): 234-269; James Garvey, «Characterization in Narrative,» *Poetics*, 7 (1978): 63-78; Seymour Chatman, «● on the Formalist-Structuralist Theory of Character,» *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 1 (1972): 57-79, this paper is useful in following the development of the theory of character since its beginnings; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca-London, Cornell University Press, 1983).
4. Uri Margolin, «Introducing and Sustaining Literaty Characters in Literary Narrative: a Set of Conditions,» *Style*, 21, 1: 108.
5. *Id.*
6. *Id.*
7. There are other feminine characters in the novel but I do not think they represent an interesting field of study for the task we have in mind. They appear in the life of J. W. Moorehouse; they are his first wife, Annabelle, and his second one, Mrs. Moorehouse. As I have already said they do not have a life of their own, but belong to another person's life. Eveline and Alice as well are not sufficiently developed for us to try an analysis of their characteristics. In the second novel of the U.S.A. trilogy, Eveline will be one of the protagonists while Eleanor will appear only in the background, little but enough to reinforce the image we get of her from *The 42nd Parallel*.
8. Uri Margolin, *art. cit.*, p. 110.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
12. We are taking into consideration only some characters of *The 42nd Parallel*, without attempting the analysis of the other two novels of the trilogy: *Nineteen Nineteen* and *The Pig Money*, in which we see as protagonists characters that in *The 42nd Parallel* only appear in other people's lives, such as Janey's brother Joe or, as I said before, Eveline.