

Proposal for “Conforming or Reforming? A Feminist Reading of Popular versus Christian Romantic Fiction” by Jessie Dion

Researchers have worked with the topic of feminism through three (some say four) waves now, and continue to unearth new ways of facing the problem of patriarchy in society. In my research, one genre which is still lacking thorough investigation is the field of contemporary Christian fiction, specifically for literature read by college-aged adults. Christian and popular fiction have, in recent history, diverged in their openness to Christ, and their genre as they are categorized into “fiction” or “inspirational fiction.” The question remains, how do these two types of novels generally differ in the roles allotted to female characters, and how are these types of roles interpreted by postfeminist criticism?

The first object of my research is to ascertain which books adults between the ages of 19 and 30 are reading, as opposed to what they are expected to be reading. To do this, I have collected titles ranked by their sales using the *New York Times* Bestseller List, the *Publisher's Weekly* Bestseller Lists, the *Christian Book Expo* Bestseller Lists, as well as spreadsheet provided to me by an associate at Baker Bookhouse. From these four lists, I compiled a survey with books of both adult and young adult fiction in the field of both Christian and popular fiction that were popular between the years of 2015 and 2016. I then researched genre and summaries of each novel using a submission-based website called *Goodreads* to find books which are considered “romantic” by their readers. The survey I compose will ask college-aged students which books they have read all or part of, and ask them to list the last three book they have read, as well as their favorite fictional heroine. From this data, I hope to ascertain what young adults are reading in either popular or Christian fiction, and to some extent, what they look for in a heroine based on any correlations I find. I am hoping to receive at least 500 responses to the

survey from various campuses and libraries, both Christian and public. These responses will help dictate which books I read and analyze for the bulk of my project.

The rest of my research paper will be focused on using a theoretical system of literary criticism to read between eight and ten Christian and secular novels. I will compile notes on each character, male and female, and the traits authors give them, such as language, occupation, appearances, descriptors, social groups, and roles in the family, in dialogue, or in a romantic relationship unit. I will then choose four books which I deem to be representative of the population which I will analyze in detail for my paper. I will be looking for trends in the roles women have, the ways they are described, the ways in which they interact, who they interact with, and the activities in which they participate. I will be taking notice of the way that authors depict them in romantic settings, and the extent to which they are empowered versus oppressed by the roles they are given.

Without knowing which books I will be reading, I cannot give a reasonably educated guess as to what the differences will be between the two genres I will be studying, but I suspect it will be either one of two conclusions. The first is that Christian literature gives women stronger roles in their work and their family unit which are consistent with Christian pedagogy, giving them power in a more conservative sense, but also refraining from objectifying them in the way that some popular novels may be prone to do. The second expectation is a lack of difference between popular and Christian romantic fiction. While one set of novels will embrace Christ and clean fiction, the placement of women in the novels may be strikingly similar to that of popular fiction. Either observation will have profound implications.

I am personally interested in this research as a college-aged woman preparing to enter a life-long relationship with my significant other. Even passively, the media we intake warps our

definition of concepts such as sex, love, religion, and women. I am looking for the ways in which literature that was popular in the past couple years might be shaping young women in my age group, and if Christian authors are conforming to or reforming the sexualized culture we live in today. This study could show that the church continues to fight against a sexualized culture, creating novels in which women represent strong characters in independent roles, or it could show that Christianity has become like popular fiction, and falls prey to the same sexuality in marketing and book sales that has consumed readership in popular fiction. Although the popularity of reading dwindles, a cycle has developed of hit novels becoming movies, and the sales of those novels continuing to soar as readers 'read before (or after) they watch.' Literature media often pervades visual media, and books continue to be relevant in American culture. Because of this, we need to be watchful over what roles we are perpetuating for young women to follow, especially those who are preparing to enter lifelong relationships and start creating families. Is there a hidden beast lurking in our literature, or has Christian feminism succeeded in redefining the roles of women in romance?

Literature Review

The history of feminism and literary criticism is rich, but continues to be renewed as culture shifts and changes. The purpose of this review is to build a theoretical basis for feminism and criticism, and then to investigate a few of the ways in which modern feminist criticism

embeds itself in our culture today. I will discuss these themes in three general movements, starting with the foundation of feminist criticism, then moving into the maturation of feminist criticism due to cultural shifts, and finally investigating the ways in which postfeminism analyzes the altered sexuality of contemporary American culture.

The basis for literary criticism lies not with the individual schools of criticism, but with literary theory itself. In his book, *Literary Theory: A Brief Insight*, author Johnathan Culler explores the facets of literary theory and what constitutes a true “theory.” The different types of criticism, such as Marxist, feminist, reader response, and the like, are each set in their own context, but have certain commonalities between them. In analysis, there are advantages to talking about general theory as well as a single school’s interpretation of a work. Culler gives an example of what theory might entail when he cites an author by the name of Michel Foucault. Foucault was using a historical approach to analyze the change in the notion of sex from a collection of biological features into a complex factor of identity. While this work is written with the expressed intention of historical analysis, Culler dubs it a theory. He explains that “Foucault’s analysis is an example of an argument from the field of history that has become ‘theory’ because it has inspired and been taken up by people in other fields.... It claims to be an analysis of a particular historical development, but it clearly has broader implications” (9). While the shift in the use of “sex” from biology to identity has historical value, Foucault’s research has interest in fields of feminism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and even Marxism when considered in a broader economic sense. His work also meets the four points which Culler outlines as the four pillars of theory: that a theory must be “interdisciplinary... analytical and speculative... a critique of common sense... [and] reflexive, thinking about thinking... in literature and in other discursive practices” (19). Foucault’s work meets these theoretical pillars.

For its interest in other fields, such as psychoanalysis and feminism, he meets the interdisciplinary requirement. His work is also considered theory because it analyzes the use of the word “sex,” and speculates that the word has changed in a certain era of time. He critiques the dictionary definition of the word “sex,” exploring the cultural changes which have removed the concept from its original denotations. Finally, he analyzes the way in which sex has become associated with identity, and therefore changed the way we interpret the sex of others in our lives and in our literature.

Analyzing works according to their implications within literary theory is helpful, but to look more narrowly at a work is to draw from it a more concise perspective. These perspectives can include schools such as feminist, Marxist, or psycho-analytical, and often to lead to uncovering nuanced theoretical implications of a work. This feminist school of criticism is one strain of literary theory which Dr. Charles Bressler writes about in his book, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*. In his words, feminist criticism is “an umbrella term for a variety of approaches to culture and literature that are of particular interest to women” (167). Dr. Bressler makes the point that feminist criticism does not just involve an examination of the treatment of women, but also includes issues of male discrimination, persons of color, and even LGBTQ concerns. The central focus of feminism, therefore, is not the oppression of the female sex, but rather, the domination of the patriarchy due to phallogentrism. These two terms, patriarchy and phallogentrism, are central to Dr. Bressler’s analysis of feminist criticism. Patriarchy refers to the domination of the male over the household, church, and/or business institutions in culture. Throughout the globe and nearly all of history, the patriarchy has dominated societies. The men who are in power can be more specifically defined as white, heterosexual, and financially secure men. Due to this statistic, patriarchy sets itself against

women, people of color, people of differing sexual orientation, and in some cases, even other men. Phallocentrism refers to “the belief that identifies the phallus as the source of power in culture and in literature, with its accompanying male-centered and male-dominated patriarchal assumptions” (Bressler 168). Dr. Bressler uses this term to refer to the issue of power more specifically, which is a driving force for the patriarchy. The patriarchal system of power has been engrained in our society and in our ways of thinking, but critics continue to unearth new ways of noticing and fighting the phallocentric system of power. Feminism can be divided into categories, as Dr. Bressler says: sometimes there are four, and sometimes there are upwards of thirty. The main four categories of feminism are “Anglo-American feminisms... poststructuralist feminisms... materialist feminisms... and postmodern feminisms, usually dating from 1990 to the present” (180). Our current period of feminism has a focus on sexuality, both heterosexuality and homosexuality, and the empowerment of women through sexuality in modern culture.

Our culture has evolved, and with it, so has sexuality. In an example similar to that of Foucault in Culler’s analysis, author Lisa K. Speer discusses the sexualization of culture in her article, “Paperback Pornography: Mass Market Novels and Censorship in Post-War America.” This article, mainly focused on exploring an artistic shift in the cover art used on paperback books, had broader implications for sexuality and eventually feminism. Speer gives background on the history of paperbacks, explaining that their invention caused an increase in the sales of literature. Publishers increased the amount of literature they were outputting, and experienced a time of booming enterprise in the form of these less expensive and much smaller “pocketbooks.” With the inevitable decrease of public interest in these pocketbooks, the publishing industry turned to another avenue of regaining lost sales. Speer describes this, saying “Publishers

desperate to boost sales resorted to using sex, or the suggestion of it, to attract the attention of readers. Cover art, and to some degree, content was reformulated to appeal to baser instincts” (Speer 154). Although Speer begins her discussion by blaming the publishers for their desire to increase sales in a dying market, she ends her article by saying that, “Two conflicting currents pulled at American society – a momentum towards sexual liberation and a backlash against such change... Paperback novels reflected rather than affected a society already in the throes of change” (Speer 156-158). While the government and the public were ready to raise their accusations to the publishing industry, they failed to see that publishers were not to blame. The goal of this industry was not to create a new sexuality in its readers, but merely to appeal to a growing interest in sexual liberation which would please consumers and produce a higher rate of sales. Their efforts were not a contortion, but a reflection of the desires which Speer says were already prominent in society.

In the current postfeminist wave of feminism, critics are locked in a debate over the new abundance of sexual material. Some argue that it empowers women and introduces them as sexual players without the guilt or shame which used to be attached to female sexuality, while others argue that the increase is a form of objectification which oppresses women. Author Rosalind Gill discusses the facets of postfeminism in her article, “Postfeminist Media Culture.” Using popular examples such as magazines, celebrity marriages, and literature such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, she depicts the postfeminist culture which is prominent in society today. Postfeminism, she says, “is understood best neither as an epistemological perspective nor as an historical shift, nor (simply) as a backlash in which its meanings are pre-specified. Rather, postfeminism should be conceived of as a sensibility. From this perspective postfeminist media culture should be our critical object... rather than an analytic perspective” (148). The reason for

Gill's analysis of postfeminist media culture as a critical object and a sensibility is the rift of feminism and antifeminism found in postfeminist conversation. Wide gaps exist between different critics as they investigate the nature of the female condition today and how it has changed to allow liberated sexuality in new ways. Gill outlines some major features of postfeminism, including "that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance... a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment... a makeover paradigm... the ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference" (149). These new concepts of discourse can be used as we analyze media such as magazines, movies, and literature to see the ways in which women are empowered to choose their own sexuality, but their identity has become focused in their physical bodies. Much like the shift which Foucault was noticing, sex has evolved from a physical property with biological connotations into a component of female identity which women choose to express or not express in their public lives.

The way in which sex has become publicized has changed the way popular culture consumes sex. In her book, *Feminist Theory and Pop Culture*, Adrienne Trier-Bieniek defines popular culture generally as, "the images, narratives, and ideas that circulate widely in contemporary culture. What makes something 'popular' is its general availability to the masses... it is usually something we can consume" (xiv). The shift in popular culture has changed music, media, and literature to include this nuanced view of sexuality. The publishing industry, in their advertising campaign, endorsed publicized sexuality much like the rest of media. To prove a similar point using a postfeminist argument, an author could look at album covers, advertisements, movies, music, and a multitude of other outlets which sexuality has

invaded. Trier-Bieniek argues that, “popular cultural texts are great places to look if we want to understand the material and rhetorical situations in which women find themselves. These texts help us see, through cultural representations, the myriad of material practices that women engage in today and the meaning given to these practices both by the women themselves and by others outside of them” (104). Formal literary criticism, involving texts which are accepted and chosen from the literary canon, can provide a wealth of history and philosophy. For modern culture, by contrast, Trier-Bieniek sees value in analyzing the texts consumed by popular culture, including books like *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which have no place in the literary canon. In order to ascertain which books are considered part of popular culture, we should start with what is being consumed. A method of gathering that data quantifiably is to look specifically at those books with the all-important sticker on the front which reads “*New York Times* Bestseller.”

Research on the phenomenon of bestseller lists largely illuminates the ways in which these lists are skewed, affect their readership, and even diminish product variety in books. One author, Alan Sorensen, investigates the *New York Times* Bestseller List in depth. He begins by discussing the skewedness of the list as regards the top books versus the bottom. He says that the top 1% of novels on the list account for 25% of sales in six months, and the top 3.5% account for 50%. The very top book will sell more in its first month than “the bottom 368 books in their first six months combined” (724). The bestseller list heavily encourages sales for authors at the top, and concentrates those sales to the first few weeks of a book’s release. Comparatively, the books on the list receive massive amounts of book sales and media attention, making the bestseller list one of the most effective forms of advertising for authors. He finishes his article by stating that books atop the bestseller list affect sales of books of a similar kind, so when John Grisham’s newest legal thriller breaches the top, for example, sales of other legal thrillers

increase, affecting the product variety of books published and sold (Sorensen 738). The effectiveness of the bestseller list at cataloguing the state of the book market and swaying the public interest make it a reliable tool for researching the titles which are considered part of popular culture.

Modern popular culture in its nature seems to clash with Christianity, but Christianity searches for ways to embed itself in, and even redeem popular culture. Author Donna Freitas investigates this notion in her article, "Acts of Reconciliation." As popular culture seeks to entice readers using sex and sensationalism, Christianity utilizes other tactics. Bright covers, bold titles, intense scenery, and strong language all describe tactics used by Christian publishers to reach the millions of souls ensnared by popular fiction. Freitas says that "Publishers aim to reach this crowd of some odd 32 million 'by deliberately seeking Christian authors that engage culture instead of run from, isolate, or fight it... faith not only needs to intersect with the world, but it needs to make the world a better place. Faith has to make a difference'" (S3). Rather than pushing back against popular culture, Christianity is looking to join it, but with a conscious effort toward redemption. Authors use terms such as 'sin' and 'gospel' to sell more titles; simultaneously, those words lose the strength of their meaning. In fighting to join the popular culture, Christianity seems to be diluted by it. Freitas notes that, "Though the trend is toward Christian categories such as 'gospel' and 'sin,' often these terms are emptied of Christian meaning long before they reach the bookstore. There, 'gospel' typically means nothing more than world-view" (S4). Like the debate for postfeminism, this new use of religion in the publication marketplace is both progressive and a regressive for Christian authors. While more readers are picking up Christian books and reading them, those books are often filled with popular fictive motifs and slogans, and the Christian vocabulary which was meant to redeem

popular culture is eventually controlled by it. When we analyze Christian fiction, we need to take popular culture into account. Changes in one will likely create changes in the other.

Today, culture continues to grow and change generationally. As culture changes, researchers need to pay attention to the effects on popular culture which signal a change in the way we define concepts such as sex, sin, or gospel. Although literary theory is generally reserved for books in the canon, applying the ideas of theory to popular culture is a method by which we can reflect on how culture is changing. Postfeminism gives us a new way to argue for the changing sexuality of our culture, which is signaled by the popular fiction which rises in our bestseller lists. By investigating these titles in both popular fiction and Christian fiction, we can ascertain what changes are being made in popular culture, and the roles which women are placed in throughout literature. These reflections give researchers insight into what it means to be a woman today.

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