

Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature

Metamorphosis and the Emergence of the Feminine

A Motif of "Difference"
in Women's Writing

Paula Smith Allen

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PETER LANG

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Horst S. Daemmrich
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*For my parents
who loved us enough
to teach us to learn*

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Chapter I

Introduction

First she dies. Then she loves.

I am dead. There is an abyss. The leap. That Someone takes. Then a gestation of self—in itself, atrocious. When the flesh tears, writhes, rips apart, decomposes, revives, recognizes itself as a newly born woman, there is suffering that no text is gentle or powerful enough to accompany with a song. Which is why, while she's dying—then being born—silence.

—Hélène Cixous

The feminine quest has lately been identified and defined to some extent by feminist scholars who differentiate its elements from those of the quest of the masculine hero. This differentiation indicates that there is a true archetype of the questing hero(ine) that lurks behind the mythological figures previously identified in literature by structuralist scholars. The true archetype is one that would be equally relevant to both the male and female quest, neither a hero nor a heroine, but a figure in which the two are indistinguishable. It is true that such a figure cannot exist as long as culture so strongly identifies the nature of a human being with his sexual identification. Because roles are assigned by gender, the imagery of the male and female quests differ from one another. The part of each individual, a self, that is neither male nor female is, therefore, not acknowledged. The implication of the differentiation in roles in the images that represent archetypes is that the casting of the “type” is informed by a culture that fails to define a part of itself. The authors of the narratives examined in this volume create an image of the part of themselves that culture has suppressed. Because language is the clay that culture uses to create its forms, these stories are invariably reflexive. These authors borrow images and patterns familiar to western culture and re-invest them with meaning pertinent to the feminine consciousness. Their stories, then, are a re-creation of the human experience. The quest heroine’s return is determined by her ability to remake her world to sustain herself and those like her. It is this return

that is questioned most by feminist writers and critics of this century, and that deliberation is the organizing principle of this study.

In this century, many writers have coupled the theme of female development with a quest for the discovery of the feminine "voice." This integration of quest romance and *Bildungsroman* is an effective vehicle to convey the search and discovery of the feminine self. Not only must the female writer discover her true nature, she must also create language that appropriately packages her discovery for conveyance to the rest of the world. Since the presumed associations for a feminine identity are already wrought in iron in the external world, the search for the feminine self must begin inwardly.¹ The feminine quest narrative is self-referencing because of the necessity for self-examination, and it is reflexive because of the writer's desire to export the image she has of her own identity into the language field of her culture.

In the void of the feminine resulting from the lack of language, one hope of locating and manipulating an image of the feminine self is through archetypes. Nor Hall describes the relation of the archetypal to language: "Language evolves from the experience of being held by our actual and archetypal mothers: myth is the original mother tongue. . . . The language we await is feminine. It is not pure logos, but mytho-logos, or mythological" (29). The images most commonly associated with the archetypal female in western culture reflect women's roles inside a masculinized society. The image of Persephone is that of the forced subjugation of woman to man's control. Zeus encouraged Hades to rape Persephone and then enforced her marriage to Hades on the basis that she had eaten a seed while a prisoner in his world. The subjugation of the female on the basis of her response to the survival instinct represents male appropriation by fraudulent means. The seed that Persephone swallows may be interpreted as a forced dependency on male wealth simultaneous to the forced appropriation of her body that took place in her rape. The seed itself represents both her productive potential and the death of her autonomy. Women's ultimate historical compliance in such subjugation finds an image in Penelope, the patient, faithful wife to Odysseus who weaves a burial shroud for her husband's father. Ironically, the shroud serves as a metaphor for the quality of women's lives under the legacy of male domination, and so is just as suitable a metaphor for the quality of Penelope's life as it is literal for her father-in-law's death. Neither Persephone nor Penelope, however, are questing

characters in the myths in which they are involved. In both the myth of Persephone and patient Penelope myth, the female is the object of masculine domination, and, as such, is not representative of the search for self that modern feminist narratives seek to portray.

Psyche, on the other hand, is not only a female quest figure, but is transformed through her search for her soulmate. In the myth, Psyche is moved to look at her lover, Eros, whom she has only known in darkness. As she holds a lighted candle over him, he escapes her curious eyes. Nor Hall expresses Psyche's search in the terms of woman's intuitive sense of the existence of an "otherness," and her desire to possess it. Hall says:

In a flash, she had seen and lost and then began her exhaustive, nearly endless search for reunion. Psyche ventured out of the unlit realm of not knowing, an unconscious, all-embracing place, where fascination holds sway. Step by step she moved through the dark of loss. By error and by trial she came eventually face to face with her other half. She made the journey from earth to heaven, where finally welcomed by Aphrodite, she was reunited with Eros and gave birth to the child Bliss. Psyche divinized is consciousness raised. (21)

Psyche's search, as Hall points out, involves a motif that mirrors the quest of women to regain the feminine, her "self" that has been eclipsed to her awareness. The reunion with her soulmate, or *animus*, represents the completion of "herself." It is only by this fulfillment that she achieves "Bliss," the birth of the perfect creature that is the consummation of her quest. The word "psyche" means "butterfly." As her name implies, Psyche metamorphoses through a quest that takes her from being a mortal on earth to the heavens where she is reunited with Eros. Steven Shaviro describes metamorphosis as a process in which the being "is perpetually 'other than itself'" (2). In using the motif of metamorphosis as a metaphor for Psyche's search, then, the focus of the search becomes both internalized and transformational for the subject of the search. This study shows that women authors of this century in both North and South America have utilized a motif of metamorphosis expressed through images found in the natural world such as insect metamorphosis, seed plant germination, and images in nature related to the birth of a creature wholly autonomous from its immediate ancestor.

Insect metamorphosis as a motif suggesting Psyche's search has been identified by Sandra Gilbert as the organizing principle of *The Newly Born Woman*, Hélène Cixous' and Catherine Clément's monumental work on feminist theory. Gilbert says of the work: "For an American

feminist—at least for this American feminist—reading *The Newly Born Woman* is like going to sleep in one world and waking up in another . . .” (x). Gilbert’s remark itself suggests metamorphosis as a metaphor for “becoming” through progressive states of awareness. The dance of the tarentella, a ritual whose description is the interpretive center of *The Newly Born Woman*, is called a “festival of metamorphosis” (20) which takes the dancer through a series of responses to the role imposed on her by society. The stages of her emancipation and her eventual return to “the men’s world” (22) mimic the stages of insect metamorphosis in which the insect’s productive powers are usurped for the benefit of another. For example, the reproductive and transformational functions of the silkworm are farmed by humans so that the thread it spins for its cocoon can be harvested. Like the aberration that takes place in the life cycle of the silkworm, the metamorphosis that takes place in the dance of the tarentella is contrary to Psyche’s metamorphosis. The metamorphosis is curtailed before the dancer can escape from her imprisonment. Her awakening brings about the “tragic happiness” of the newly born woman, a creature who is complete in her being, but nonetheless entrapped for utilization in a man’s world.

Like the dance of the tarentella in *The Newly Born Woman*, the narratives examined in this study portray Psyche’s search as an interpretive tool through a motif of metamorphosis. The motif lends meaning to the quest conventions of the narrative because of the “radical becomings” (Shaviro 2) that take place in metamorphosis. Shaviro emphasizes that through metamorphosis the body of the insect is “broken down and completely rebuilt in the course of transmutation from the larval to the mature stage” (2). Thus, the implication of the motif when applied to feminist quest narratives is that the questing character is totally transformed through her search, a process by which the questor undergoes a continual “becoming.” The stage in feminine awareness that corresponds to the larval stage in insect metamorphosis is prehistorical: there is no conscious imprint of the old form on the new except in the unconscious. This perpetual “becoming” places the questing character in the continuous present until prompted to search for evidence of the existence of an earlier form. This form is *ahistorical* in terms of her own memory. Therefore, the prehistorical existence of the feminine corresponds to the *larval state* in metamorphosis.

The period during which change in form begins—when the questing character is unconscious that she attains her identity from her form—corresponds to the *dormant state* in metamorphosis. The questor comes to recognize such unawareness as a state of life in death, but only after she becomes aware of a change in her perception in herself. It is because the feminine has been dormant throughout the building of western culture that the questor must return to this “larval” origin to retrieve the lost consciousness of itself. The quest to discover this past requires an inner regression—the journey must take place inside the confines of her existence just as metamorphosis takes place inside the cocoon. The internal nature of the quest may explain why many women writers place the quest of Psyche within the motif of metamorphosis. By doing so, they maintain that the voice of the feminine, constituted in the story they tell, must begin with an inner quest for the feminine.

The feminine is prehistoric to memory because its existence has not been retained in language. Therefore, the language of the outer world excludes the feminine. The journey of the questor (the author and her protagonist are on a dual quest in a reflexive quest narrative) takes place within a cocoon or seedcoat of language that shuts her out of the masculine economy of the outer world. The journey is initiated by some experience that activates within the questor an instinctual call from her unconscious. The questor regresses to a time that is primal to her existence, her larval state in terms of the motif. This *regression into the unconscious* is often mirrored in the narrative by the questor’s journey into a primitive setting—a “green world” environment or primitive world where events cannot be explained in accordance with her previous perception of herself. The encounter between her self-concept and her primal consciousness, arrived at through her regression, causes her to become disoriented.

The disorientation that takes place when the questor encounters her primal consciousness is *dissolution*, a final breakdown of form that must take place before the new form can be built from its remnants. This state in the questor’s self concept is equivalent to the state in metamorphosis when “the butterfly is one with the catapillar” (Shaviri 2). Through this meshing between her present and her past form, the questor is able to rebuild a conceptually different self as a product of an environment unshaped by masculine-based presumptions. This reconceptualization, when complete, is equivalent to the awakening of the insect to its new

form inside the cocoon: she has outgrown the cocoon that entraps her. The questor's *awakening* takes place when she comes to realize that she is no longer compatible with the terms of her former existence—that her self-conception is no longer compatible with the gender role forced upon her by society.

The metamorphosis motif defines the heroine's quest. If successful, it enables her to utilize the means and substance of her imprisonment, which is language, to escape the cocoon as a mature creature able to successfully propagate her own kind. For the authors whose works are examined in this study, the narrative itself is the means of escape for the feminine from the cocoon that entraps it. Because of the reflexive nature of the narrative, the author and the questor become one. Success for the author of the feminist quest narrative entails a *Promethean theft* of images and words from the stockpile developed by the masculinized culture to propagate its own institutions. The authors of the feminist narratives under study here use words and images from the old stockpile of language generated for and by a masculinized society in a new way to re-define for the outside world their sense of the feminine. If she is successful in that re-definition, she transforms the world from a hostile environment into one that accommodates her as the complete creature—the *newly born woman*. If the author is successful in her emergence and survival in the world outside the cocoon, she attempts, through the "voice" that she has attained, to "*procreate*" others like herself. Such proliferation is through the discipleship of other writers and thinkers who promote and extend the images that she has endowed with meaning pertinent to the feminine.

An examination of the works included in this study shows that the extent to which the metamorphosis is complete in the motif in any one narrative is a reflection of its author's sense of empowerment. Kai Mikkonen's article entitled "Theories of Metamorphosis" explores the multifaceted possibilities for self-reflective fiction that exist in the use of metamorphosis as a motif:

... as a representation of a striking alteration and somehow miraculous change, that it is also capable of playing with the distinction between the literal and the figurative. The paradoxical status of metamorphosis as a trope further complicates the problems concerning subjectivity and its depiction in a literary character as well as the relationship between knowledge and textuality." (310)

The narratives in this study are grouped in chapters according to the stages of metamorphosis into which the quest of the character extends. Generally, but not always, feminist writers from the early third of this century are pessimistic concerning emergence of the feminine from the cocoon of male domination. In proof of Mikkonnen's statement, the metamorphosis that take place in these works is, at once, both linguistic and literary, as well as sociologically literal. These works, under study in "Chapter II, Durable Fires," challenge the validity of the "naming" that takes place in the images of women. This challenge expresses the loss of self-conceptualization that was a product of educational opportunities for women at the end of the nineteenth century. The Gothic novel suggests that society, especially women readers and writers, was tuned to a lurking "otherness," an instinctual awareness of the presence of the feminine that contradicted the gender roles assigned to women in nineteenth and early twentieth-century society. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" not only attempts to define that "otherness" as the repressed feminine, but suggests that patriarchal control is the basis for such repression. Stein's "Melanctha" is allegorical to her own dictum on reification, "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." As such, "Melanctha" suggests that definition is entrapment by language. The implication of the work is that the re-casting of the feminine image is dependent on an escape from the current socially constructed image. Such escape from form constitutes dissolution. It is significant that, in these narratives, the mother is present but is unavailable to the questing character. She may be hidden or dead during most of the quest, as in the Gothic novel; she may be (presumably) kept away, as in "The Yellow Wallpaper"; or she may simply be ignored, as in "Melanctha." In any case, these narratives seem to suggest that there is no discoverable legacy through the matriarchal line that will assist the protagonist in her search. Though the questing female characters in these works awaken to a sense of "otherness" and recognize their entrapment, they fail to establish a means of permanent escape from it.

In the narratives in "Chapter III, Naming," the questors not only become aware of their entrapment, but they attempt to define their existence in it by synesthetic association. Djuna Barnes in *Nightwood* uses bird imagery to show how her society entraps its members in a role through stigmatization. She proposes an escape through redefinition in the final chapter of the work. María Luisa Bombal names the feminine

experience in *La última niebla* through association with the Psyche myth. Bombal's narrator's ultimate reunion with her *animus* is foiled, however, leaving her aware of self but still trapped in a traditional role of womanhood. Clarice Lispector, in her collection *Family Ties*, uses animal imagery to convey the sense of primordial essence of dissolution. She then births the primordial woman in language derived from the associations made through the animal imagery. Helena María Viramontes in "The Moths" proposes through a combined motif of insect and seedplant metamorphosis that the feminine must be translated from ritual into words through the maternal line in order for the feminine to escape masculine appropriation of female resources. Mothers play no significant role in the questor's development in these stories. They are either absent from the story altogether, or else they align themselves with the patriarchal stance against their children. "The Moths" is the only story included in Chapter III in which there is a surrogate mother. It is significant that the matriarchal legacy in that story is enabling to that questor, thus setting a pattern for matriarchal legacy to make a crucial difference in the story groupings in the subsequent chapters of this study. In the narratives included in this chapter, however, the author shows only a rudimentary attempt at "naming" the feminine experience. The attempt at naming in each work shows the author's/questor's attempt at definition—a "feeling out" of one's form within the darkness of the cocoon—but no successful attempt at re-definition.

The three narratives grouped in "Chapter IV, The Promethean Theft/Emergence" exhibit the escape of woman as a new, aware, and resourceful adult creature from the confinement of a masculine-imposed imprisonment. In her short story "The Youngest Doll," Rosario Ferré portrays the dormant state of the feminine as a result of marriage, an institution that maintains and promotes the interests of the patriarchy. Ferré proposes, through her story, an escape from dormancy and domination through the use of a decoy to attract the parasitical male. The Promethean theft is exacted when the male finds that it is his own treachery with which he has been repaid. Margaret Atwood, in *Surfacing*, uses the motif of insect metamorphosis to portray the narrator's growing resistance to language as a tool for societal entrapment. The narrator is reborn as she plots to reshape the language to conform to the rudiments of meaning. Sandra Cisneros, in her short story "Never Marry a Mexican," uses the metamorphosis motif to