

*He's a Modern Woman: The Paradoxical Modern Woman*

Historically, feminine characteristics were considered incredibly prestigious to be attributed to a gentlewoman. Yet, to be labeled onto a man it was observed as a disgrace to his identity. As someone who works in 18th century feminist controversy, many of the novels in this course have characteristics of outliers and portray a more liberal agenda underneath the plot, given the time period in which they occur. While countless researchers study and define feminism and the way women can be encouraged to act as feminine or masculine as they please, research of men displaying traditionally feminine roles or acting as the “modern woman” is quite rare. *House of Mirth*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, *Blood Meridian*, and *Beloved* are all interested in themes of family, slavery, or violence. The concept that ties these novels together besides being American novels is gender, more specifically the concept of the “paradoxical modern woman” and how men struggling with toxic masculinity utilize this theory.

The modern woman, often referred to as the “new woman” is a term that was defined and created in the 19th century. This term normally encourages women to be liberated by doing as they please in regards to career, family, sexuality, and emotions. An advice piece from the well-known New York Post wrote:

A woman's magazine that printed the message ‘if you are wittier than you are pretty, avoid loud clubs’ would get some serious pushback for implying that any woman, anywhere, could be unattractive. The message of ‘be yourself’ is pushed to women much harder than to men and many take ‘be yourself’ to mean you're perfect as you are (Markowicz).

Interestingly, an article about being a modern woman points out that a men's magazine directed less attractive but comedic men to stay away from clubs, while observing that if a women's magazine published the same advice there would be an uproar. Today, much of feminist literature focuses on the ideals of a paralleled world that practices gender equity. While attempting to allow equity to women after generations of sexism is that men have been left behind emotionally.

Women are encouraged to work, to dress more liberally or unisexually, and to put career goals before familial pursuits. Men on the other hand, are being directed on how to avoid being perceived as creepy, how to seem most appealing, how to rid of (or attain) "dad bod", and are instructed to "step up" and be family men. In our pursuit of the modern woman being the social normal, countless men are searching for alternatives to practice and follow the same notion as modern women to flee the barrage of criticism and emotional suppression that accompanies toxic masculinity. The decay of masculinity alongside the rise of femininity has coerced men into finding independence and expression in an unidentified feminism: the "paradoxical modern woman". The "paradoxical modern woman", is not a woman. He a man who adheres to many characteristics of the "modern woman" such as independence, femininity, societal power struggles, and staying in contact with feminine emotionality. While *House of Mirth* has a female lead, it is Lawrence Selden that steals the focus.

Selden is a young lawyer who manages to be the only character in *House of Mirth* that transfers between high society and normal "middle class" citizens. He believes in a deeper world than the elite, one where love and happiness is worth much more than riches. As he is not rich himself, he sees the current marriage climate around him as ludicrous, people marrying for money, titles, and status. Lawrence Selden is entirely in love with Lily Bart. Lily refuses to succumb

to her mutual affection for him as she is determined to marry for high class and financial gain.

The modern woman carries a peculiar role,

In America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the New Woman came to occupy an important position in public life and imagination, evoked in visions— both positive and negative—of a new era associated with the emergence of new female roles and greater independence and educational opportunities for women (Elaman-Garner).

While this is true, the emergence of what I am labeling as the “paradoxical modern woman” also became increasingly important in the realm of emotions and expectations of men, despite the little attention it receives. Selden frequently follows the liberating tendencies of the modern woman. He follows his emotions and breaks social molds and gender expectations throughout the novel. He believes in living in entire honesty, allowing him to be one of Lily’s few genuine friends, acting faithfully towards her even as she refuses to marry him. An example of their love and Selden’s emotionally breaking tendencies is a moment between Lily and Selden,

‘The only way I can help you is by loving you,’ Selden said in a low voice. She made no reply, but her face turned to him with the soft motion of a flower. His own met it slowly, and their lips touched. She drew back and rose from her seat. Selden rose too, and they stood facing each other (Wharton 122).

As this scene ends, Lawrence Selden stands watching as Lily rushes away. Selden, much like the “new woman”, is willing to work towards his career, put aside social expectations, wait on a woman (something rarely done, normally the roles were reversed), and see his emotions as more important than money or social class. While Selden tends to be an extremely rational thinker, his love for Lily exceeds rationality and she expresses recognizing this the morning after their kiss,

“It was so unlike him to yield to such an irrational impulse” (Wharton 123). While *House of Mirth* deals with a lawyer in love, *The Sun Also Rises* tells a story of a castrated man dealing with war trauma and love.

While the novel boasts a short haired, sexually liberated, divorced woman, the genuine victor when it comes to the idea of the new woman, or more specifically my concept of the paradoxical modern woman, is Robert Cohn. Robert Cohn is the only man in the friend group that did not fight in World War I. As a Jewish American writer, he becomes a target for harassment and unnecessary anger. Throughout the novel the characters grow increasingly tired and irritable with Cohn. In his pursuits of Lady Brett, the other men verbally attack him and relentlessly target him (even though all the men in the novel are pursuing her as well). In a novel where every character follows a postmodern way of thinking, Robert Cohn can not possibly survive with his traditional views. Cohn serves himself well outside of the social setting of his friend group as a wealthy writer who followed his dreams and gained success in the literary world. He previously took up boxing to help his insecure and anxious nature, and he believes it to have helped. It is possible Robert Cohn is not only a valid example of the suppressed man using his artistic skill (writing), breaking social expectations and obligations (is the only non veteran among the American men), and wanting an emotional bond with Brett (although it is only a sexual relationship), but also an example of how a harassed new woman may react. Cohn, a feminine character in the novel agrees with an observation in Kramp’s article, “Tara MacDonald draws particular attention to the cultural anxiety experienced by men” (Kramp). None of Robert’s friends know how to handle a man in touch with emotions, goals, and feminine qualities, especially when he has no similar masculine interests besides boxing. (Which he refuses to do outside of the gym.) When

Cohn snaps as a response to his abuses, he fought Romero, the bull-fighter, “Why he went in and found Brett and the bull-fighter chap in the bull-fighter’s room, and then he massacred the poor, bloody bull-fighter” (Hemingway 205). Robert Cohn primarily punched Jake, then bloodied Romero, asked to shake hands for forgiveness, and begged Lady Brett Ashley to leave with him. The rejected modern woman would inevitably lash out at abuse, as she would not stand for such mistreatment. Cohn broke his moral code and boxed outside the gym, fought those he felt most taunted by, and fled, never to be seen again in the book. A modern woman would not allow herself to be abused endlessly, the addition of being a mocked, disregarded man would only compress the issues of emotional liberation, therefore compacting the climax of anger. *Mucho Maas* is a less composed, more emotional portrayal of the “paradoxical modern woman”.

*Mucho Maas*, the disillusioned husband of the protagonist Oedipa Maas, is a man of innumerable emotions. He is depicted as pathetic for his emotions and insecurity, something that a new woman would not experience, as she would be encouraged to pursue her dreams and embrace her insecurities. Patricia A. Bergh writes in her article, “Because Oedipa’s identity has been defined by the reflected light of the males surrounding her, their disappearances force her to choose between fading away herself or to somehow originate her own source of illumination” (Bergh). While this may be true, her husband *Mucho* is also a reflection of his wife. Much of his identity is invested in being her husband, the one thing that doesn’t seem to upset or bother him. *Mucho Maas* is an illustration of the result of a man trying to follow the advice given to a modern woman. The advice generally consists of “follow your dreams”, “choose a career that makes you happy”, and “express yourself emotionally”. When *Mucho* complains of his shame for working in a car dealership and explains he feels unhappy and tormented, he is

written as blubbering and helpless and described as “sensitive” and “thin skinned”. (Pynchon 4) Even his name is a mockery of his masculinity, creating commentary on how he is not large and not powerful. When he becomes a disc jockey at KCUF (the word backwards is symbolic of his future accusations), he is praised by many young women for his astonishingly sexual voice, and Oedipa uses this knowledge to make the guilt of her infidelity subside. If a woman worked in a job and utilized her sexual qualities to lure men and gain fame she would be praised. Countless historically famous women embraced their sexuality, while, if men do it they can not be anything besides disturbing and pathetic. Ultimately, Mucho Maas is driven to insanity by the societal pressures he fought and lost to, becoming dependent and strung out on LSD. He is disregarded so much so that in his last scene, after Oedipa leaves she decides to not contact him again to question him about the stamp on his letter. The end of Mucho Maas is a drug fueled, oblivious, lonely man who was guilted and shamed into such deep suppression only drugs would calm his nightmares and fears. While Mucho Maas suffers from various fears, Glanton himself is made of terrors.

Blood Meridian is possibly the bleakest novel in existence, and Glanton is no exception. He is the leader of the gang, abhors authority, and is ruthlessly violent. However, we see much more humanity in him than in Judge Holden. Glanton, a man cruel enough to kill a goat, cat, and multiple birds in the “testing” of a revolver not only dislikes to be challenged, but vehemently hates feeling out of control. (McCarthy 86-7) When the gang comes into contact with the juggler and fortune teller, the fortune teller seeks Glanton out. When his fortune begins to be told, he furiously says “Shut her up” (McCarthy 100). While he is okay with murdering people and animals, is abusive to women, and has a power complex, he is the most feminine adult in the novel

riddle with evil men. Countless times he defends his gang and diffuses arguments. Towards the end he expresses sorrow and regret over his actions that possibly resulted in the death of the only humans he ever cared about, “That night Glanton stared long into the embers of the fire. All about him his men were sleeping but much was changed. So many gone, defected or dead. The Delawares all slain” (McCarthy 254). Throughout the novel he shows independence, pursuit of his goals, abandons motherly duties as a leader, and ultimately, the thoughts and emotionality of his internal confession of guilt as he succumbs to nothingness. Ultimately, Glanton dies in a shameful way, as did the men that died before him in his gang. While Glanton may have been a hardened, rugged version of the “paradoxical modern woman”, Paul D is his complete antithesis.

Paul D was previously a slave on the Sweet Home plantation with Sethe, one of the main characters in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. While Paul D suffered horrible traumas such as the shame of wearing the bit, his friend burning alive, being a slave on a plantation and chain gang, and finding out the woman he loved committed infanticide to protect her child from slavery. (Morrison 84) While he talks frequently about being unable to speak about his traumas and compares his heart to a tin, narrating, “He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (Morrison 86). His coldness and suppression of his past is not a lack of empathy, love, or emotion. Rather, Paul D suffers from having an enormous heart and not taking his own advice to not “love things too much”. Paul D has a hopeful ending with Sethe, as he sits by her bed and tells her, “You your best thing, Sethe. You are” (Morrison 322). This ending is not only a hopeful positive, but as David Ikard wrote, “Though Morrison does not tell us how Paul D has been able to move past his feelings of self-hatred and emasculation, his encouraging words to Sethe clearly indicate that he is capable of

evolving” (Ikard). This article clarifies not only that Paul D is overcoming his issues utilizing the “paradoxical modern woman”, but is accepting Sethe as a modern woman as well. While using the “paradoxical modern woman” created a positive ending to Paul D, it does not end this way for all of the men.

The “new” or “modern” woman is neither a good nor a bad lifestyle to be lived. The same thing applies to the “paradoxical modern woman”. Selden Lawrence and Paul D both have endings of happiness and hope, a telling of a life well lived and set free through the liberation of emotion, expectations, and sexuality. Robert Cohn has a mysterious and neutral ending as the reader never finds out what he made of himself after fleeing. Mucho Maas and Glanton both suffer inexplicable pain, one addiction and loneliness, and the other a cruel death. The “paradoxical modern woman” carries the characteristics of the “modern woman” while dealing with the negative side affects of toxic masculinity and emotional suppression. While it is easy for feminism to study and cheer on women in a “male dominated” world, men are left confused and cornered into duties and expectations that are outdated and no longer carry the benefits they once did. As Billy Joel once said,

She looks sleek and she seems so professional

She's got a lot of confidence, it's easy to see

You want to make a move

But you feel so inferior

Cause under that exterior

Is someone who's free (Joel)

*He's a modern woman.*



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