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## **A Gynocentric Exploration of the Pulitzer Prize Plays *Harvey* and *Look Homeward, Angel***

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### **Abstract**

Throughout the world, the patriarchy positions women as second class citizens, wherein they have been sidelined, marginalized and suppressed. Nevertheless several potent women challenge the patriarchy by ascertaining their rights through the written word. Accordingly, this article takes up two mid-century Pulitzer Prize winning women playwrights who have indeed carved a niche by breaking the tradition and moved towards newer terrains through the gynocentric depiction of women in their prize plays. The characters and plays taken for study are Veta and Elwood in Mary Chase's *Harvey* (1945) and Eliza and Eugene in Frings's *Look Homeward, Angel* (1958). Although both of these plays revolve around a male protagonist, they portray a woman who is either manipulative or too much concerned over the male protagonist(s) and luring them according to their whims and fancies. To sum up, women characters (also) serve as catalytic agents in the male characters' lives, thereby resulting the plays as gynocentric.

**Keywords**

Pulitzer Prize for Drama; Gynocentric; Breaking the Tradition; Male Protagonists; Mary Chase; and Ketti Frings.

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“The speaking of women’s words in public, as well as the invention and public presentation of male characters, who were created from and who reflect a female viewpoint, ... is an act which challenges [the] age-old, one-sided notion of the universal, an act which calls into question the very foundation and structure of civilization and power.” – Rachel Koenig, *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights*.

Ever since their childhood, both men and women are made to see in different hues the world around them, especially based on their societal roles. For a man, he is informed and instructed to emerge as the breadwinner of the household, while on the other hand, a woman is indoctrinated to become docile and must be a nurturer of goodness. In other words, the women are relegated to be second-class citizens and are confined to within the domestic sphere in the patriarchal framework, whereby they occupy the fringes striving to emerge at the centerfold. Nevertheless, every now and then several potent women do question radically their stand by ascertaining their rights and choices through the written word and recasting their long-existing roles.

Although drama as a genre existed since two thousand years ago, it was only in the twentieth century it opened doors for numerous women to use this public medium to showcase their worldview overtly to their onlookers. At the same time, the feminist movement ameliorated a fresh tradition of examining the works written by both men and women in a newer dimension. Accordingly, this developed into a distinct literary subculture, as elaborated by the renowned Anglo-American feminist critic - Elaine Showalter as thus: “Women themselves have constituted a subculture within the framework of a larger

society, and have been unified by values, conventions, experiences, and behaviors impinging on each individual” (11). This literary subculture ultimately paved way for the term “gynocritics”, which is seen as a breakaway mode of analysis of texts.

This concept of Showalter’s woman-centric approach of textual analysis was propounded in her critical essay, “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1978), wherein she divided feminist criticism into two distinct varieties. The first variety is “Woman as reader” in which “Woman as the consumer of male-produced literature” (Showalter “Towards” 128). This concept of analysis is labeled as “feminist critique”. Its diverse subjects include the following:

... the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions of and misconceptions about women in literature, and the fissures in male constructed literary history. It is also concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience, especially in popular culture and film; and with the analysis of women-as-sign in semiotic systems. (“Towards” 128)

On the other hand, the second category is *woman as writer* for which, she adapted the French term “*la gynocritique*” - “gynocritics”. This mode was seen as a breakaway mode of analysis from the pre-existing modes of male models of criticism. In short, Showalter staunchly propounded for a woman-centric framework for the analysis of women’s literature.

...Woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of the female creativity; trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history and, of course, studies of particular writers and works. (“Towards” 128)

This article takes up Veta and Elwood in Mary Chase’s *Harvey* (1945), and Eliza and Eugene in Frings’s *Look Homeward, Angel* (1958) Accordingly,

this paper attempts to explore the above characters and plays in a gynocentric way i.e., these plays in spite of having a male protagonist, he is manipulated by a female character and luring them to their whims and fancies. In other words, these female characters serve as catalytic agents in the male characters' lives, thereby resulting into a gynocentric one, which is contrary to the prevailing androcentric notion. The female characters range from an over-protective sister to a scheming mother, wherein they wield a tremendous force over the male characters. At the same time, there is a constant clash between idealism and realism, which results the play to end on either a tragic or a near-tragic situation.

The first play taken for analysis is Mary Chase's *Harvey*. Winner of the 1945 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the play was produced by Brock Pemberton and staged by Antoinette Perry. It premiered at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre on November 1, 1944. *Harvey*, a play of three acts, revolves around a forty-seven year old, an eccentric but an amicable drunkard, Elwood P. Dowd and his best friend, a six-foot tall, white, invisible rabbit, named Harvey. Wherever Elwood went he introduced his pooka-pal which thoroughly agitated his doting sister Veta Louise Simmons, who felt awkward and desperately wanted to cure her brother at the sanitarium. It is to be noted that Chase took utmost care in depicting Veta as an over-protective, deeply loving and caring portrait of a woman. Throughout the play, Veta wittingly "avoids the realities of life" (Holmes n. pag.), as she lives in a world of fantasy and false sophistication, which is evident through several episodes like her Wednesday Forum episode and her explanation of the portrait at the mantel. Nevertheless, she showers spontaneous love towards her daughter and chastises her when she flirtatiously talks with Wilson, the sanitarium attendant.

Moreover, at Chumley's Rest, the sanitarium where Elwood is to be treated for his supposed mental ailment, Veta's frenzied behaviour puzzles the medicos, who also go to the extent of even admitting her to treat. Later, while

narrating her predicament that happened at the sanitarium, she wants to sue the folks for making her as a butt of ridicule. At the same time, Veta sees the psychiatrists to be indifferent to their professions as they seem to be confused in “ordering their own private lives [by] succumbing to [some] psychotic hallucinations” (Firestone 70) of their own patients whom they are treating. Although Elwood is seen to be either as “the biggest screwball in the town” (*Harvey* 3) or “the biggest headache” (*Harvey* 4), Veta fondly loves her dear brother wholeheartedly. She also accepts her brother spending his time drinking at some cheap bars; however, she is unable to stand the presence of his pooka-pal Harvey, which thoroughly irritates her. Considering all things, she makes up her mind to commit her brother at the sanitarium and consents to recommend the “shock formula number 977” (*Harvey* 60), which would prevent him not at all to see the rabbit again.

When Elwood was about to be given the injection, a sudden realization dawns within Veta through a cab driver’s words, as he sees Elwood to be more courteous than most men he has ever met. Without any second thought, Veta comes to the conclusion of not giving that agonizing shot to her loving brother and orders Elwood to leave the place. As usual the ever-obliging Elwood simply accepts his loving sister’s words, leaves from Chumley’s Rest along with his pooka-pal, Harvey. Although Elwood is a grown-up man, he completely obliges to the words of his loving sister, Veta, whereby Chase has indeed trodden into a newer tradition by having a female-figure at the centre and pushing the male character into the margin.

The image shifts from an over-protective sister to that of a greedy and ambitious mother in Ketti Frings’s *Look Homeward Angel*, winner of the 1958 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Based on the autobiographical novel *Look Homeward, Angel* written by Tom Wolfe, the dramatic adaptation was produced by Kermit Bloomgarden and Theater 200, Inc., and premiered at the Ethyl Barrymore Theatre on November 28, 1957. In this play, Frings portrays Eliza Gant as an

embodiment of destruction who severs the fraternal bonding of her own sons – Ben and Eugene in order to make a quick buck. Earlier in the play, she is described in the stage direction by Frings as a “mercurial” woman, who possesses “a dauntless energy, greed and love” (*Look Homeward, Angel* hereafter as *LHA* 18). Moreover, it is interesting to note that her manipulative characteristics resemble to that of Regina Giddens of Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes*.

Married to a drunkard husband and a mother of four children, Eliza stands tall as a matriarch, is financially independent as she runs the Dixieland boarding house and some real-estate deals with her good-for-nothing, lousy brother – Will. She is characterized as a loudmouthed, gross and wants to strike gold in whatever she ventures into. Moreover, she is equally infamous not only among her family members but also among the boarders, who too grumble on her capricious nature. In her critical essay titled, “Three Faces of Love”, Sara Sheldon opines that Eliza is a “strong-minded and practical [person], who tries to keep things under her thumb” (8), thereby curbing everyone’s freedom.

Even though being the head of the family, Mr. O. Gant takes refuge in drinking and spending his time at his marble yard by forsaking his family as he is unable to tame his astute wife. The picky nature of Eliza caused her eldest son, Luke, to become a naval soldier, thereby making him the first to flee from his scheming mother. Her only daughter – Helen is tortured to do the cooking for the boarders, the journalist son – Ben, is often reprimanded by Eliza for whiling away his time and flirting with Mrs. Pert, one of the boarders. However, it is the youngest son – Eugene, who receives the maximum taunts from his greedy mother. He even hides his literary scribbling from his vicious mother and is chided every now and then when he enquires about his educational prospects. Nevertheless, he spreads out his wings by soaring high leaving Dixieland. Towards the end of the play, Eliza’s second son – Ben dies and Eugene flees from the clutches of his ill-tempered mother. These events

ultimately make Eliza to ruin her senses who frantically breaks down the place, driving away all the boarders, thereby shaking her obstinate nature. To sum up, it is apt to remark Abe Laufe's words that Frings's depiction of Eliza tremendous helped the play "to achieve a long run" (317) and ultimately earned her the coveted drama Pulitzer.

Although Veta is extremely concerned about her baby brother, Elwood, she timely prevents him from taking that shot. However, on the contrary, Eliza in *Look Homeward, Angel* has avaricious greed which ultimately disintegrates her family as a motley assortment. By depicting a pseudo-mother within Veta and a tyrannizing mother through Eliza, these female characters have indeed been transferred from the focus from an androcentric to a gynocentric one, thereby breaking barriers in the realm of dramatic characters. To sum up, the Pulitzer playwrights Chase and Frings had the real nerve to show these women in a different and distorted perspective than their dramatic predecessors.

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