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# THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FEMINISM: TELLER AND TALE IN DINESEN'S "THE BLANK PAGE"

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**RESUMEN**

A pesar de que el femenismo, sin duda, se ha consolidado como un movimiento socio-político y como un enfoque crítico literario, aún existe bastante confusión en cuanto a lo que significa una posición feminista. En el análisis que sigue, el cuento corto de Isak Dinesen titulado "The Blank Page" ("La página en blanco") brinda una oportunidad muy fértil para introducir los conceptos básicos del feminismo y para ilustrar la aplicación de los mismos en la literatura.

**ABSTRACT**

Although feminism has unquestionably consolidated both as a socio-political movement and as a critical approach to literature, considerable confusion persists about what a feminist stance implies. In the following analysis, Isak Dinesen's classic story "The Blank Page" provides a fertile opportunity to discuss basic precepts of feminism and to illustrate their application.

Despite the fact that feminism has existed for centuries, and even feminist literary criticism has been "officially" present long enough to now be described as being in its "third wave," considerable confusion –often serious enough to be labelled misconception– persists in terms of its fundamental premises, concepts, issues, and objectives. This confusion is partly due to the very patriarchal socialization process which has concomitantly provoked the emergence of feminist ideas and actively struggled against any undermining of its own agenda, thus producing a convenient myopia in its vision of women. A second cause of the confusion surrounding feminism is also the source of its richness: the multiplicity of perspectives which invariably and necessarily reside, at times more comfortably than others, beneath this umbrella term. While this plurality has frequently been perceived –and criticized– as amorphousness, lack of substance, and even lack of direction, it is precisely feminism's insistence on inclusion rather than exclusion which constitutes its ideological crux. (The above, like the discussion which follows, unless otherwise noted, is a personal appreciation based on my readings of a tremendous variety of feminist texts and countless hours of working through to my own conclusions.) The fact that this attitude fundamentally opposes patriarchal foundations structured on power hierarchies leads to its being perceived as problematic, a logic which is understandable but no less reprehensible because of that. The purpose of the following

discussion is to clarify the fundamentals of feminism through analysis of Isak Dinesen's short story "The Blank Page," which is not only a classic text of feminist readership but also an extraordinarily powerful manifestation of basic feminist issues, ideas, and objectives.

While feminism has gone in many different directions, sometimes radically so, theorists and practitioners generally agree on certain essential premises. The first of these is that there is a crucial difference between sex and gender. Early feminist writers –such as Virginia Woolf, Germaine Greer, Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett– were among the first to create awareness that sex is a biological term refering to the physical characteristics which differentiate humans as female and male, while gender is a much more complex term refering to the psycho-social attributes which each culture ascribes to its members on the basis of their sex, as feminine and masculine. This leads these writers (and many others, such as Elizabeth Janeway, Mary Ellmann, Josephine Donovan, Judith Fetterley, Betty Friedan, and Gloria Steinem) to articulate and denounce the second basic premise of feminism, which is that we live in a patriarchal society, that is, a society which is structured by and for men. In other words, men are and have been the ones who have established the priorities, norms, roles, social institutions, values, and quite frankly, virtually everything else, according to their own needs, interests, and vision. Not surprisingly, this type of social organization necessarily privileges men and inevitably marginalizes women, which is the corollary from which feminism evolves. Feminism, in whichever form it is presented, is essentially an acknowledgement of this marginalization, a protest against it, and a call for a redefinition based on self-affirmation.

Because of this, feminism is "always political and always revisionist" (Guerin 1992: 185). If politics are understood as the power structures in a society, the politics of gender become immediately and painfully apparent. Differences abound in social roles and expectations, status and prestige, wages, education, and job opportunities, to name only a few key areas; it is crucial to specify, however, that these differences are significantly gender-based (although other factors may also make a difference, obviously). The catch-22 of this situation is the patriarchal assumption of male superiority, which perceives and propagates these differences as "natural," as opposed to culturally conditioned. This "nature-nurture" debate is at the crux of feminist rejection of patriarchal patterns, and it provides the explanation for feminism being necessarily revisionist, as well. At its most basic level, the issue appears deceptively simple: are men and women "the way we are" because it is our inherent nature to be so, or is it the result of a socialization process based on our particular cultural context? At the risk of oversimplifying, a patriarchal response claims that its definition of women is nature-based, while a feminist response asserts that cultural conditioning has molded women to be "that way" and that patriarchal definition and representation of women is both inaccurate and diminishing. Feminists not only reject all imposed definitions, but also claim the right to self-definition. Thus, feminism begins with awareness of patriarchal patterns and premises, develops into active resistance of those impositions and limitations on women, and culminates in what Adrienne Rich terms "re-vision," an alternative reading of women, in every sense, which is autochthonous rather than superimposed.

Feminism is, then, a world view and a position which feminist literary critics employ as their basis for approaching a literary text, whether it be theory, criticism, or literature. The basic premise of feminist literary criticism is that gender is an issue both in life and in literature, a premise which can be developed in a myriad of significantly different directions.

There appears to be a consensus to the effect that feminist literary criticism has essentially followed the three basic stages listed above in its own development: "first wave" feminism concentrated on creating awareness, "second wave" criticism stressed recuperation and re-evaluation of women's writing and women's representation, while "third wave" feminism tends to emphasize women's identity and self-affirmation. In "What Do Feminist Critics Want? Or, A Postcard from the Volcano," critic and theorist Sandra Gilbert defines the goals of feminist criticism as follows: "to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psychosexual identity and cultural authority" (qtd. in Guerin 1992: 184). In so doing, Elaine Showalter has categorized feminist criticism into four basic areas of difference –biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, and cultural– which are useful in suggesting the gamut of possibilities offered by feminist criticism. In "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," she also analyzes the repercussions of her observation that "English feminist criticism, essentially Marxist, stresses oppression; French feminist criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses repression; American feminist criticism, essentially textual, stresses expression" (1985: 249). K. K. Ruthven categorizes feminist critics in terms of their primary theoretical alliance (social, psychological, ethnic, semiotic, etc.), while Toril Moi uses geography as a basis for differentiating between two major tendencies, French and Anglo-American feminist criticism. All of the above provide an indication of the "playful plurality," to use Annette Kolodny's phrase (1985: 161), of contemporary feminist literary criticism. For the purposes of this discussion, however, I would like to set these options aside and concentrate on those issues inscribed in "The Blank Page" which I consider basic to feminist criticism in general, while acknowledging that in so doing I will most probably step on some metaphoric theoretical toes, since feminist approaches emphasize different issues, occasionally employ certain concepts differently, and sometimes respond to different critical questions in significantly different ways.

"The Blank Page" is really two stories in one, at its most obvious level. The frame story introduces the old woman who tells stories for a living, who then narrates the "main" story of the blank page. The old woman's story tells of an order of Carmelite nuns in Portugal, who, because they make the finest linen in the land, have been given the honor of providing the bed linens for the wedding night rituals of all the royal princesses. As a "second privilege," on the next day they also receive "that central piece of the snow-white sheet which bore witness to the honor of a royal bride," which is then beautifully framed, identified, and hung in a special gallery at the convent as testimony. Her story ends rather cryptically with the anecdote of an ancient, highborn woman who visits the gallery and, like most of the women who go there, contemplates most intensely the one framed, anonymous square of pure white linen in the entire row, "the blank page." It immediately becomes apparent that there are many layers of stories here: the story of the nuns, the stories of the princesses, the story of the old maid-in-waiting, the stories of the linen, and the stories of the visitors, all interacting with the the author's story, the narrator's story of the old woman storyteller, and her stories of the stories of her mother, grandmother, storytellers in general, and most important, of stories themselves. All of these also combine with the stories of the listeners/readers: of the old woman as a little girl, of the "pretty lady and gentleman of the generous hearts" who have requested her story at the present time, of the narrator, and finally, of "you good people who want to hear stories told." The storytelling and the story, the written and the oral, the explicit

and the implicit, the articulated and the muted -all converge in the old woman's parallel between the silence of the "blank page" and the whiteness of the blank linen, as will be discussed shortly.

The first feminist issue to consider is the patriarchal nature of this Portuguese society. Substantiation of this is found mainly in the way the women of the story are represented. They very clearly fall into the two classic stereotypes of patriarchal encoding for women: the "angel" and the "demon," or to use Leslie Fiedler's terminology, the "lily" and the "rose." As the labels denote, these are juxtaposed "types" and traditionally the only two possibilities for inscribing women in literary texts in ways which parallel their inscription within patriarchal society. The "angel" or "lily" is that idealized woman who serves as a model for all others, a direct descendent of the Virgin Mary in her purity, innocence, submissiveness, and nurturing, self-sacrificing nature. The nuns are the most obvious representatives of this category; however, the royal princesses whose blood is spilled upon the bridal sheets also fall into this group, since they have successfully complied with patriarchal expectations that a woman should be a virgin until her wedding night. (Notice, of course, that no references are made to any such expectations for their husbands.) It is significant that the women's honor is perceived in terms of this single physical characteristic, and their worth in terms of the "great dowries" which were provided as enticement and/or proof of their value. The fact that their value is described in terms of physical functions and monetary gain is ample evidence that these women are construed as objects rather than as humans.

This is confirmed on the morning after the wedding, and "before the morning gift had yet been handed over," when the Chamberlain or High Steward "would hang out the sheet of the night and would solemnly proclaim: '*Virginem eam tenemus* –we declare her to have been a virgin'" (Dinesen: 102-3). The association of women with their biological function of mother is further reinforced by the detailed description of the "air-blue" color of the flax flowers, which is not only the blue traditionally connected with the Virgin Mary, but also "the very color of the apron which the blessed virgin put on to go out to collect eggs within St. Anne's poultry yard, the moment before the Archangel Gabriel in mighty wing-strokes lowered himself onto the threshold of the house" (Dinesen 1975: 101). The suggestion of fertility in the eggs, of sexual intercourse in the Archangel Gabriel's rhythmic strokes while lowering himself, and of the vaginal "threshold" combine to provide a ready analogy for the role the young princesses are to play on their wedding nights, and thereafter as well. They are to submit -docilely, obediently, and ideally, productively! Because the nuns are forbidden any acknowledgment of sexuality, however, their lifegiving potential is channeled into the growing of the flax: "the seed is skillfully sown out by labor-hardened virginal hands," a task they "joyfully" perform. (Ironically, those hands also have "mold under the nails," suggesting a lifetime of obedient repression of their sexuality, at best, a degenerative waste of their female biology, at worst.) This flax seed, besides substituting male "seed," is also associated with the patriarchy in the sense that "the very first linseed was brought home from the Holy Land itself by a crusader" (surely male), once again connecting biology and religion by positing fertility as a kind of sacred trust literally implanted from generation to generation. It does not come as a surprise, then, that the former maid-of-honor who visits the convent at the end is, despite her age, described as a "very old highborn spinster," just as it is now quite clear why the "old princesses of Portugal" are portrayed as "worldly wise, dutiful, long-suffering queens, wives

and mothers." The designation of the former as a "spinster" demonstrates that a woman's marital status never ceases to be a key issue of identity, while the labelling of the others in terms of their relationships to the men in their lives (queens, wives) or their biological role of mothers equally annuls their individuality. The trio of adjectives which describe them quite explicitly affirms that those who wish to avoid the stigma of spinsterhood need to both understand and conform to the fact that their lot in life is to suffer.

In contrast to these human "angels" who so willingly submit to patriarchal norms and expectations, the "rose" or "demon" naturally does exactly the opposite: to earn such a label, the woman must willfully refuse to cooperate, audaciously question, or in some other way contradict or subvert those same norms and expectations. Quite clearly, the anonymous princess of the blank linen square qualifies. Although no explanation is provided for the lack of a bloodstain on the linen, and although the cause could reasonably be ascribable to the bridegroom, it is assumed by Portuguese society and the reader alike that responsibility somehow lies with the bride. As the storyteller affirms, "Each separate canvas. . . has a story to tell," and "once, from the markings on the canvas, omens were drawn" (Dinesen 1975: 104); the blank canvas appears as mute testimony to the consequences of an unknown rebelliousness which seems to have annihilated the very identity of this particular princess, since her nameplate is blank. The repercussions of deviance from the patriarchal norm are as far-reaching as they are inevitable. There are clues that other princesses may have been tempted to rebel, as well, or at least are sorry that they submitted, not only in the description of the old princesses, but also in the description of how the markings on the canvas may be interpreted as "pictures from their own world of ideas: a rose, a heart, a sword —or even a heart pierced through with a sword." This is no Cupid's arrow gently engaging sweet sentiments, but a violent, destructive duel between nonequals. Be that as it may, the "rose" is definitely an exception to patriarchal norms. In either case, whether the women are represented as "rose" or "lily," their individuality is annulled by automatic placement into the patriarchal stereotypes for defining women. These women are unquestionably perceived in terms of their utility to men, marginalized as "others" whose function is defined in terms of the male "center" in this society.

By insisting on telling their stories, both the princess and the old storyteller are infringing upon male authority, an authority manifested linguistically through appropriation and control of language, which closely relates to the feminist concept of voice. Voice may be understood as a manifestation of selfhood, a form of self-acknowledgment and affirmation through expression of individual uniqueness; "silencing" or "mutedness" refers to the literal and metaphorical limitations imposed upon women's "voice" in a patriarchal society. The issue of voice in this story is related to the religious intertext; the religious undertones of the main story connect it to a Biblical tradition which has not only condoned, but also fomented the silencing of women. This heritage dates back to the well-known verse (John I:1): "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This invests language with authority, identifies authority as male, and establishes the primacy of that male authority, according to Christian convention. The age-old tradition of silencing women has been examined by feminist critics in terms of its effect on a female literary tradition as well as in terms of its repercussions in the daily lives of women. Simply stated, feminists see patriarchies as "muting" women both literally–by restricting their access to and exploitation of language –and metaphorically– by denying them equal opportunity for growth, self-fulfillment, and

self-expression. Sandra Gubar has suggested that "The Blank Page" posits a "revisionary theology" (1985: 308) in which women's sowing of the seed and sewing of the linen are metaphors for female creativity and primacy, as well as rituals of female power, whose effects are that of "sanctifying . . . female divinity." In creating, the nuns and the storyteller challenge patriarchal impositions by reappropriating "the Word" and exercising "voice."

The issue of silence goes beyond the concept of muting, however. Silence speaks, as the old storyteller confirms. According to her, one of the fundamental rules of storytelling is to be loyal to the story, a condition closely related to the role of silence in communication: "Be eternally and unswervingly loyal to the story . . . . Where the story-teller is loyal, . . . in the end, silence will speak. Where the story has been betrayed, silence is but emptiness. But we, the faithful, when we have spoken our last word, will hear the voice of silence" (Dinesen 1975: 100). The storyteller makes a crucial distinction between those silences which communicate and those which do not. Silence may be no more than the lack of presence of speech, in which case it is the "emptiness" she warns about, a silence which is passive and unproductive, as opposed to a silence which "speaks." Silence can be employed as a means for communicating compliance, indifference, acceptance, acquiescence, resignation, or even denial, but when deliberately appropriated by women as an active means of communication, it usually projects confrontation, rejection, resistance, and even subversion of another's speech, in this case, the patriarchal one which strives to dominate. So powerful is the impact of this positive silence that the storyteller asserts that silence "tells a finer tale than any of us" (Dinesen 1975: 100):

> And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page. When a royal and gallant pen, in the moment of its highest inspiration, has written down its tale with the rarest ink of all—where, then, may one read a still deeper, sweeter, merrier, and more cruel tale that that? Upon the blank page.

Through these declarations, the storyteller firmly insists that silence is a more potent form of communication than telling, whether in written form or verbal, while making it clear that some things are better left unsaid. Surely this is the case of women in a patriarchal society who must find alternative ways to exercise their voice if they want to be "heard."

Somewhat paradoxically, the storyteller then appears to make light of her own impassioned comments on silence by claiming that "we . . . old women who tell stories. . . are somewhat averse to telling [the story of the blank page] for it might well, among the uninitiated, weaken our own credit" (Dinesen 1975: 100). However, this is more likely to be a measure to safeguard women's secret knowledge than an attempt to ingratiate herself with her listeners or a disclaimer for potentially problematic interpretations. The "uninitiated" does not merely refer to those who do not know about the art of storytelling, but rather, in classic double-voiced discourse, also refers to those who follow patriarchal premises and therefore will not perceive the significance of this discursive strategy. Double-voiced discourse is the name given to those communicative situations where an utterance opens itself to two (often radically) different interpretations, each responding to a separate world view; in this case, the patriarchal perspective would most probably associate meaning with the "art of storytelling" only, while an alternative feminist reading imbues the word with connotations of women's solidarity in the face of patriarchal oppression. Storytelling is one of the few socially sanctioned instances where women are not only "allowed" but also encouraged to speak, an

opportunity which is not lost on this old storyteller. The "loyalty" of which she speaks so highly may easily be related not only to the art of storytelling itself, but to the tremendous importance of keeping women's story(ies), in every sense of the word, alive at all costs and the solidarity implicit in so doing.

Issues of identity and subjectivity are closely related to this fundamental sharing. Feminist critics within the general tendencies of French feminism are prone to see these aspects as intertwined with the female body. According to Ann Rosalind Jones in "Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of *l'Ecriture Féminine*," Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Monique Wittig, major French feminists, agree on the fundamental oppressive phallogocentrism of Western culture, although their responses differ (1991: 357). The forms of discourse, as envisioned by these critics, which release women from patriarchal oppression (linguistic and otherwise) and concomitant repression and permit them to discursively express their own sexuality are usually refered to as "l'ècriture féminine," or "writing the body," which always includes *jouissance*, "the reexperience of the physical pleasure of infancy and of later sexuality" (Jones 1991: 358). While their affirmation of significant female difference (and "*différence*," in a Derridian sense) is theoretically shared by all feminists, their insistence on a physiological foundation for articulation and validation of women's selfhood (perceived here as essence) is not consensual. Nevertheless, in "The Blank Page," the fact that not only the plot of the story but also its import develop around physical questions of virginity and women's bleeding, which are obviously basic to female sexuality, opens space for consideration of the above concerns of radical feminism also.

All types of feminism, however, emphasize identity in one way or another, and this concept of identity is always perceived (although not necessarily exclusively) in gendered terms. Without going into the many different manners in which human subjectivity has been understood as "subjected," suffice it to say, for the purposes of this essay, that feminists tend to understand identity in terms of selfhood, and selfhood in terms of agency and autonomy. In other words, mainstream feminists today are not so concerned with the question "what is woman" so much as with the question "what must and can a woman do to achieve a state of autonomous self-definition and self-fulfillment within their patriarchal societies." The answers to this question vary substantially, of course, depending upon the personal situation of she-who-questions, and are necessarily influenced by ethnic, religious, economic, political, and social factors, among others. In "The Blank Page," the blank canvas hanging in the convent gallery is indeed an answer, but both the teller and the tale are conveniently ambiguous. Among the tellings identified as belonging to "Donna Christina, Donna Ines, Donna Jacintha Lenora, Donna Maria," this particular story, which certainly belongs to "someone," also belongs to everyone. Perhaps this explains why the former "Princesses of Portugal, who were now queens or queen dowagers of foreign countries, Archduchesses, or Electresses" used to go to the convent "on a pilgrimage which was by nature both sacred and secretly gay" (Dinesen 195: 103). Again the double-voicing enriches the possible significance of these processions; on a patriarchal level, they may be understood as a celebration of the "sacred" societies of wifehood and motherhood, but an alternative reading suggests quite the contrary, a shared rejoicing in the courage of one young princess in refusing to surrender to patriarchal demands and thus, one can speculate, in insisting on forging her own life path.

This significance is reinforced by the fact that it is the "empty" canvas which has most strongly commanded the presence of not only the princesses of Portugal and their "noble old playmates, bridesmaids and maids-of-honor," but also of "old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself" (Dinesen 1975: 105). In other words, the other women of this society, from the most "privileged" to the most pious, render "silent" tribute to the choice made by this anonymous princess by "hearing" the message inscribed within this "blank page." And this message is nothing less than a declaration of independence, of autonomy, of self-definition. It is the movement from "object" to "subject," from passive resignation to action, from margin to center, from silence to voice. It is, in a delightfully ironic way, an authentic "initiation" into womanhood, not in its narrow patriarchal definition of fulfillment of one's socially determined role, but rather in terms of this woman's reappropriation of her human potential, which is finally liberated to construct her own life, her own meaning, her own sense of self.

The storyteller herself calls upon the readers and listeners to "look at this page, and recognize the wisdom," the wisdom of the blank canvas which speaks so poignantly. In so doing, she is reminding us that our lives are filled with multiple options, multiple voices, multiple ways of knowing; it is up to each of us to learn to discern them and to respect them, to recognize the voice(s) which most faithfully speak for us, and to be true to it. These are precisely the tasks of feminism: to generate awareness of multiplicity by refusing hegemonic narrow-mindedness (primarily, but certainly not limited to, patriarchal patterns), to open space for a dialogue of gendered voices, and to foment construction(s) of a sense of self by women, an identity which is collective in its womanhood but personal in the rendition each woman hones. Like the storyteller in "The Blank Page," feminism summons us to hear and encourages us to accept the wisdom of the teller(s) and the tale(s).

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