

## Gender in Postmodern Drama: Is Drama Written Differently by Men and Women?

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### Abstract

Postmodern male and female writers have played very important roles as far as the representation of their drama works are concerned. Each gender has added something unique to their writings and approaches that differentiate them from the opposite sex hence influencing his/her style of writing. This study investigates the role of gender in postmodern drama to show how men and women have written and represented drama differently.

**Key words:** Gender; Misconception; Roles; Stereotypes; Myth; Distinction

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### INTRODUCTION

Literature is a very powerful tool with which writers interact with their readers and audience by way of addressing various forms of issues in society and those around them (O'Neill, 2003, p.72). One important characteristic about literature and for that matter drama is that because they are often used to address specific issues of life, the context and content from which they are written continues to change with time (Hutcheon, 2008, p.110). For this reason, the approach to a piece of drama work that existed a century back will not be the same for a piece of drama written only a decade back. This situation has been described as the time elasticity of literature (Wall, 2003, p.32). But quite apart from the issue of

time, determining the changes to approach, perceptions and context of drama writing, O'Neill (2003, p.53) also associates with the persona of the hand behind the writing. With this, reference is made to the author in charge of the writing of the piece of artwork. It is often argued that writers have always ensemble their personalities into their writing (O'Neill, 2003, p.154). If this argument is true, then the gender of a writer can have great influence on the style of writing as male and female are known to embody different personalities, especially when it comes to their career (Olsen, 2006, p.43). This paper is thus being written with the purpose of investigating the role of gender in postmodern drama to see how men and women have written and represented drama differently in postmodern era.

### 1. OVERVIEW OF POSTMODERN DRAMA

The term postmodern has been described as both a periodic era and a philosophical era. This means that on one side of the argument, postmodern is seen merely as a time period in the mid-20th century onwards. On the other side of the coin, post-modern is seen as an era of new thinking towards the way literature and theatre in general was presented. For the sake of the purpose of this paper, the two ideologies will be combined into a common definition, where postmodern drama will be said to be the kind of drama that existed in the mid-20th century, making the beginning of a new line of thinking and approach to the industry of drama arts. Postmodern drama has been said to be born as a need to replace an existing era of theatric philosophy where truth was perceived to be a definite phenomenon (Phelps, 2006, p.64). Postmodern drama, which was born around 1950, was therefore seen as an emergence of theatric philosophy emphasizing the fallibility of definite truth (Hutcheon, 2008, p.53). Instead of withholding to the idea of absolute truth, postmodern

drama gives authority to audience to determine their own individual understanding on issues (Olsen, 2006, p.43).

As an entire system of writing, postmodern drama has been identified with a number of characteristics that are very unique to it. Indeed, having a better understanding of these characteristics will make it possible to have a better way of appreciating how people of the two genders approach postmodern drama using the key characteristics that the system of writing has. On the characteristics, Olsen (2006, p.93) noted that topics in postmodern drama are focused on the complex absurdity of contemporary life. This means that topics and issues including moral and philosophical relativism, loss of faith in political and moral authority, as well as alienation are all considered (Writers History, 2008). In terms of conception of content presentation, postmodern drama has also been known to embody concepts of black humor, parody, grotesque, absurdity and travesty (Writers History, 2008). Wall (2008, p.91) also pointed to how postmodern drama, as part of its ideology tries to erase the boundaries that exist between low and high culture, and thus focusing on the equality of humankind. Finally, the Writers History (2008) emphasize again that postmodernism is concerned with condemnation for commercialism, hedonism, mass production and economic globalism, while making attempts to make the reality clear through language and art.

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## 2. GENDER AS A THEME IN DRAMA WRITING

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Before going down to the specific details of how men and women postmodern writers embody the different characteristics of postmodern drama that has been revealed above, the generalized place of gender in drama writing is first reviewed. As noted, gender has been treated as a theme to serve a number of important purposes in writing (Tomlinson, 2005, p.81). For example, when gender is used as a theme for drama, writers often attempt to use the theme as advocacy tools to highlight very pertinent issues about the various gender that need addressing. Some of the most common issues that gender has been used to advocate include girl child education and avoiding child labor in male kids (Hutcheon, 2008, p.32). Gender has also been used as a theme to deal with most forms of myths, misconceptions and stereotype that concern members of the two genders. While doing this, characters in drama are used to play roles that have naturally not been thought of as roles for their gender. This way, the myth or misconception of impossibility created around the gender is corrected. On the whole, Cohn (2001, p.200) has said that when gender is centralized as themes, they help in correcting a lot of wrongs that have been associated with various genders. The question with this paper would thus be focused on how men and women have championed their gender in themes of their postmodern drama and how they have exhibited other forms of differences.

In terms of writing, male and females have been represented in different ways and with different identities. Giving vivid analysis of postmodern playwrights, Davy (2006, p.65) noted that there is a very obvious distinction between males and females when it comes to their representation as postmodern playwrights and this distinction is that males dominate in number while females are the most visible even as the minority. By implication, there are more male postmodern playwrights than there are female writers. Kennedy assigned a reason to the imbalance, stating that the 1950s where postmodernism started was a period that issues with stereotype against female education was very high in most part of the world, including Europe and America. Even in areas where females had equal right to education, they were greatly suppressed when it came to professional practice. For this reason, the male gender had a giant step ahead in dominating in the profession of writing. With time, as the numbers of women became impressive; and even still acting as the minority, the females won much sympathy with the public and media, giving them all the attention and popularity (Cohn, 2001, p.22). Female playwrights and for that matter postmodern feminism then became a popular culture, making representation of women as postmodern playwrights more visible.

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## 3. POSTMODERN FEMINISM

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Postmodern feminism is one of the concepts that were born as a result of repeated female visibility in postmodernism and postmodern drama for that matter. Postmodern feminism has been explained to be an approach rather than a concept that shows the way for how the feminist theory should be approached (Phelps, 2006, p.32). Appignanesi and Garratt (1995) actually explained that in dealing with the feminist theory, postmodern feminism brings together postmodern and post-structuralist theories and therefore creates a new paradigm that moves beyond polarities of liberal feminism and radical feminism. In essence, the exemplification of postmodern feminism is seen in practice as writers create a shared interest that explores the implications of social practices and multiple voices (Ermath, 1992). In terms of social practice, postmodern feminism is seen as a branch of feminism that highlights the place of sex or gender, identifying it as a concept that is constructed through language (Wall, 2008, p.202). Kennedy has however touched on the biases presented with postmodern feminism when it is used to depict the construction of gender, stating that postmodern feminism has only showed how feminism is constructed through language and not gender as a whole. For the purpose of this paper however, the aspect of postmodern feminism that generalizes the idea that gender is constructed through language will be taken to explain how men and women have constructed gender through the language of drama.

#### 4. REFLECTION OF TEXTUAL GENDER IN POSTMODERN DRAMA AUTHORSHIP

Bigsby (2001, p.6) made a critical study of the differences that exists in how male and female writers represent their gender when they write. From a male and female perspective therefore, an analysis is made of some of the key findings made. According to the findings of Bigsby (2001, p.74), when males are writing about the male gender, they try to be as general with the characterization of males as possible. This means that the male is seen as a very neutral character that does not have any superior competences, strengths or abilities. Rather, these males have a sense of belief in what they are capable of doing and so always strive to be the best and be on top of their game. Todd and Derek (2004, p.128) actually lament that it is at the point where male characters in the drama of most postmodern playwrights take up the challenge to face life till they make it that male writers have been criticized as being biased in their portrayal of male powers or superiority. On the other side of the coin, male writers have been seen to reflect female characters in their writing as complements of nature, whose nature and self is expected to bring a shine and satisfaction into the life of males. While doing this, the male writers are seen to add so much passion to the expression of the uniqueness of females using symbolisms of love, beauty, perfection and holiness. It is not surprising therefore that the female character has often been the protagonist of most romance drama written by postmodern male writers (Cohn, 2001, p.212). Bigsby (2001, p.75) has however criticized how most men have represented women as sex symbols in their drama.

From a female perspective, Davy (2006, p.222) saw female playwrights representing the contextual characters of males and females in a way that is totally different from what men do. This is because it was opined that female writers have always taken a defensive stand against males, trying to be judgmental on males for showing off supremacy and superiority. Unlike the men who depict male characters as ordinary members of society trying to believe in themselves and thus rising to the top, women use their writing to actually bring the men down to the level of ordinary by using defenses such as gender equality. When writing about females, women writers are seen as being very defensive of the interest and will of the female, championing the need for the female to be given attention, support, and reasoned with. Woolf (2009, p.194) has emphasized that the only reason postmodern female writers have done this is because of the history behind the female gender as a suppressed and abused one. With the platform of writing, the female writers see themselves as opinion leaders who must use the opportunity they have had to defensively fight for the interest and will of their colleagues. But with this said, Todd and Derek (2004, p.201) have given a sharp rebuttal the validity of taking

this same approach by female writers in representing females in their text. This is because it is argued that the female is better off today than five decades back and so the approach to representing females in contextual writing must be changed. Indeed, taking a new contextual position that makes females know that their positions are better today will give them much urge to push for more.

Apart from the way they represent their own gender and the other opposite gender, male and female writers in the postmodern drama era have been found to exhibit some key differences in their writing, which have been expounded below.

The approach to postmodern drama writing by females is one that has been described by Phelps (2006, p.13) as "passion and emotion filled". This is generally because female writers have been identified to approach writing from a perspective that aims at addressing key postmodern issues in society, whether these issues have the theme of gender or not. An instance is cited with Afua Sunderland who has constantly taken up issues of society in her plays such as terrorism, global warming and immigration. Because these themes address specific social dilemmas, these females who have addressed them have thus been passionate and emotional in their approach. On the part of men, they have been seen as those who approach writing from the lighter side of life, expanding on the need for people to be taken away from the worries of the current world through comical and fantasizing pieces of drama works (Ermath, 2002, p.84). It therefore comes as no surprise that most works of drama that August Wilson worked on in the postmodern era that were of fantasy and humor genres were produced by males. In short, females approach writing as a problem-solving tool while males approach it as a problem-relieving tool.

The differences in approach have also affected the style of writing. By style, reference is made to elements of writing including the selection of literary devices, arrangement of plot, choice of sentence construction, length of writing, and general use of language (Baker, 2000, p.43). In this, Todd and Derek (2004, p.41) noted that once a person wants to use writing to tackle or solve a problem, it is expected that the person will try to be as defensive and thorough as possible. Because of this, the writing style of women has been found to be very formal, official and intensive. They have been said to hardly use informal and soft standing language but preferred the use of serious and formal wording patterns. When selecting literary devices, females have been identified to be more comfortable with those that provoke thoughtful thinking such as the use of irony and idiomatic expressions. On their part, male writers in the postmodern era have generally preferred the use of semi-formal to informal styles of writing. In one instance, it was stated that the attempt by most males to be informal has given them the chance to be as innovative and stylish in their

writing as possible, and representing the true identity of postmodernism, which makes the audience the best judge of issues.

Yet again, the tone used in writing by males and females are also directly related to their approach and style to writing. An interesting observation on the use of tone by male and female writers is that when writing, females become the actual males we know at home, while the males become the actual females we know at home (Davy, 2006, p.12). What this means is that unlike the normal perception of males as being harsh in a typical family situation, it is females who get harsh with their tone when writing. Unlike how they have naturally been harsh in their tone at home, male writers also tend to be very soft with their tone when writing. Pulsipher (2004, p.3) tried to explain the reason this is so and noted that male and females by nature envy the natural characteristics of the opposite sex. This means that men naturally envy the natural state and nature of women and vice versa. It went on to explain that it is for this reason that the two sexes are compatible to each other. But getting no other means or platform to be the opposite sex, these two people easily choose their medium of writing. It is for this reason that men have been noted to be very good romance writers in the postmodern era, exemplifying their abilities to be soft and lovely if nature permitted them to be (Woolf, 2009, p.91).

Moreover, the choice of themes between males and females differ. According to Ermath (2002, p.64), talk about themes that relate to abstract representation of concepts and you will find that several lists can be made for male writers. This is because in their bid to be informal, free flowing and open minded in their approach, most postmodern male playwrights had the personal freedom to delve into issues that would have otherwise been considered as too abstract to be made real. Baker (2000, p.97) said that this is not a manifestation of a deep thinking talent that men have over women but it is the effect of the approach to their writing. Because of this, most men have used themes that demand sequential following of their plots to be able to understand. In a related development, it was mentioned that it is common to find several men combining more than one theme in a single drama because they would actually want to carry out the spirit of postmodernism by making their audience think through options to make judgments forthcoming (Pulsipher, 2004, p.82). When reference is made to women, the opposite is true. This is because most female postmodern writers have tried to select very simple and straightforward themes that can easily be understood by all. In relation to the approach they take to addressing specific issues of society, this reaction to themes would be found to be appropriate because it makes room for the messages and issues they attempt to tackle to be easily understood by all so that collective efforts can be taken towards dealing with them.

## 5. CASE STUDY OF SPECIFIC MALE AND FEMALE WRITERS

This section tries to use specific writers as case studies for the various arguments and differences that have theoretically been established between male and female postmodern drama writers. This approach is necessary in making the paper as empirical with eventual facts as possible.

• **Carly Churchill** For playwright like Marius Von Mayerburg, Carly Churchill is a true representation of the fact that when it comes to postmodern drama, gender is not an issue that determines ability. This is because in the opinion of Marius, Churchill is one female who has “changed the language of theatre and very few playwrights do that” (Angelis). By implication, the need for not treating this paper along the lines of abilities of male and female writers but along the lines of their natural exhibition of art is a step in the right direction. Like most of the characteristics listed out about female writers, Churchill is the type who tries to use her writing to tackle specific issues that can have their roots easily identified (Tomlinson, 2005, p.67). Some of these are seen in her drama such as *Top Girls*, *Cloud Nine*, *Serious Money*, *A Number*, and *Far Away* where different people centered themes such as gender, love for money and occupation were critically tackled.

• **Tom Stoppard** The contents, themes and style of writing of Tom Stoppard’s postmodern dramas including *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1978), *The Real Thing* (1982) and *Rock ‘n’ Roll* (2006) easily brings out the ideal male in him as a writer as discussed in this paper. This is because these works, which are among some of the most popular Stoppard has written have all taken very soft tones, informal styles and problem relieving themes, seeking to bring some level of freedom to the tight minded person (Woolf, 2009, p.42). It has actually been debated that the reason Stoppard’s works have often gained global recognition is because of how open the works are, making them easier to be accepted by all (Pulsipher, 2004, p.103). It would therefore not be surprising that Stoppard has actually fitted into almost every corner of the postmodern drama trade including radio, television, film and stage. His Academy Award winning screenplay of *Shakespeare in Love* is another exemplification of the manly approach Stoppard takes to writing as per the discussions of this paper.

• **Susan Lori Parks** The achievements of Susan are a clear indication that when describing difference between male and female writers, issues of race cannot be barriers to the justifications of points made. This is because as a Black postmodern playwright, Susan was handed the Pulitzer Prize for drama, the first to be won by a Black woman. Having said this, the drama for which she won the award, which is *Topdog/Underdog* gives several justifications to the claim that has been made of female writers in the discussions above. From a perspective of difference in

approach and message, the drama shows a very high sense of preference for contemporary approach to writing where issues of ordinary society are addressed. This is because without using any strange approaches to presenting her theme, Susan touched on the issue of the struggling adult lives of two African American brothers who had to cope with contemporary social issues including poverty, racism and work (Tomlinson, 2005, p.12).

• **August Wilson** As discussed in the paper, male writers would want the comic side of life and so it was not surprising that while writing his ten series play, *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, two of which won the Pulitzer Prize in two different decades, August Wilson focused almost all his themes on the comic and tragic aspects of African-American experiences (Baker, 2000, p.212). Appreciating the fact that most of these aspects of the African-American experience demanded urgent solutions to make life easier and better, the writer did not fail to appreciate the fact that until problems are solved, life must go on. This is why Wilson, like most other men decided to take up writing from the lighter side of life, creating a room for the troubles of the world to be lived with until they are finally done away with.

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## CONCLUSION

This paper has been an avenue by which the issues of postmodern drama and differences in male and female writers have been intertwined and effectively discussed. At this point, it has been established that the coming of postmodern drama was necessary as a means of creating a new line of philosophical thinking that would give much power to the audience to be the judge of what the realities of life are. In doing this, males and females have all played very important roles as far as the representation of their drama works are concerned. While doing this however, the two genders have not used the same approaches, styles, themes and motifs in their writing. Whereas males have tried to be as free, open ended and informal as possible, females have been solution oriented, formal and close ended. In totality however, both genders have been useful in correcting several myths and misconceptions in their attempts to use gender as a theme in their works of postmodern drama.

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