

10-2015

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Bailey George
Germanna Community College

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Recommended Citation

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Bailey George

Professor Critchfield

ENG 246

18 September 2015

Changing Roles in William Faulkner's *The Unvanquished*

From 1861 to 1865 the American Civil War took place. During that era, women were expected to marry, have children, and work in the home taking care of the children and household chores. Women were frowned upon for not wearing a dress or skirt, or for being anything but feminine. William Faulkner's novel, *The Unvanquished* takes place in the South, during this time period of strong role stereotyping for women. I've grown up in Fredericksburg, where the actual line between the North and South was drawn during the Civil War, and yet I only knew about women being nurses or housewives during the war. Some women did not find their place as housewives or mothers though; some were soldiers. It was estimated that four hundred females were disguised as male soldiers and fought in combat during the American Civil War (Derreck 1). Faulkner's fictional character, Drusilla, was a female soldier that fought in combat during the American Civil War. She began fighting because her fiancé, Gavin Breckbridge, was killed by Yankees at the beginning of the war. Instead of mourning over his death, Drusilla was motivated to leave home, cease to wear dresses any longer, and ride alongside men in battle. In *The Unvanquished*, William Faulkner uses female characters to illustrate and emphasize the emotional devastation brought on by the war.

Although Faulkner's story was fictional, the devastation of the Civil War was real and there were in fact female participants who were both dressed traditionally in more feminine roles

and others cross dressed as soldiers. One traditionally dressed Civil War participant was a female spy named Isabella Marie Boyd (Belle Boyd). Eliza McGraw points out in her article, “A Rebel to the Core,” which was featured in an American History periodical, that Belle Boyd was a Confederate spy who wore traditional Southern feminine attire rather than cross dressing (1). McGraw claims that Boyd depicted herself both as a rebel, and as a Southern belle (5). On the other hand Tom Derreck, author of “Soldier Girl: The Emma Edmonds Story” describes an example of cross dressing to become a soldier. According to Derreck, Sarah Emma Evelyn Edmonds was a soldier, male nurse, and spy for the Union army under the male identity of “Frank Thompson” (18). It is interesting to me that even when Edmonds was acting in the traditionally female role of a nurse, she projected herself as a male nurse. Having a male identity was important for females who wanted to be soldiers, because females - as females - were not able to be on the front lines of war. According to Derreck, Edmonds was able to hide her gender due to loose uniforms and because the wearing of undergarments while bathing was common for soldiers (20). Tom Derreck argues that women also had more traditionally feminine roles such as nurses, cooks, and laundresses (46). Sometimes even these women found it necessary to arm and defend themselves when caught in a fight or battle (Derreck 46). While being important, these roles did not break social norms like cross dressing female soldiers and spies did.

Faulkner takes the social norm for women and contorts it into his cross-dressing character Drusilla, which emphasizes – by the very existence of such a character – the horrific trauma experienced by some in the Civil War. After her fiancé is killed in the war, Drusilla transforms herself to assume a masculine appearance and behavior which contradicts the Southern female norms of the time period. Faulkner describes her hair as being “cut short . . . with a bayonet,” her hands as being “hard and scratched like a man’s,” and she was also usually sweaty and

sunburned (91). She wore “pants, like a man” and rode her horse “astride like a man” (89). No other women in the novel are mentioned to have hard scratched hands, nor do they wear pants, have short hair, are sunburned, or described as being sweaty. Faulkner further describes Drusilla’s masculine transformation as a deliberate effort to “unsex herself by refusing to feel any natural grief” as a result of her fiancé’s death in the war (189). According to Peter Sharpe, author of “Bonds That Shackle: Memory, Violence, and Freedom in the Unvanquished,” Drusilla turns gender norms upside down (34). Faulkner continuously gives Drusilla motivation to attempt actions that women do not perform, and men do: “Tell him I can ride, and maybe I can learn to shoot” (101). Not only does she dress and identify as a male, she acts like one and continues to submerge herself further into her male identity in order to continue coping with her fiancé’s loss. With the character Drusilla, Faulkner paints a picture of an environment so stressful and extreme that a person would undergo complete role reversal as a coping mechanism.

Faulkner also depicts the effects of the war through his character Granny Rosa Millard who assumes some traditionally male roles, but in a less extreme manor than Drusilla. In the absence of men in the house, Granny takes on the male chores of the house but otherwise keeps a Southern woman image. For instance Faulkner illustrates Granny wearing a “shawl over her shoulders and Mrs. Compson’s hat on her head and the parasol in one hand” to appear more feminine as she enters Colonel Newberry’s tent and tries to scam him into agreeing to give her mules (129). On the other hand, after her mule scam was discovered, the lieutenant confronting her referred to their discussion as being “man to man” (144). These two events help show the reader Granny’s combination of feminism and power that were formed as a result of the war. Acting like the “man” of the house, Granny believes that she can be both respected like a man

and treated delicately like a woman. These behaviors she takes on for her own physical survival. Granny claims: "They won't hurt a woman," that "Yankees do not harm old women" (153). By implying this, Granny is using both her age and femininity as a shield to protect her. Faulkner describes Granny's character as a product of the south, having her believe that men will be gentlemen, and never hurt or confront her because she is female. Everyone is effected differently by the war, but Granny was not necessarily effected by death from the Civil War as Drusilla was, therefor she never goes to the full extreme of exclusively taking on a male image.

Faulkner uses his character, Aunt Louisa, to also depict the effects of war, but she does not take on a male image nor a male role. Instead the effects of the war can be seen in her almost neurotic behavior of ceaselessly carrying around an article of black knitting "that never progressed" (203). Faulkner is demonstrating that Aunt Louisa is desperately clinging by a thread to the Southern woman ideal. This black knitting symbolizes the grieving that Aunt Louisa is still dealing with, over the loss of her husband in the war. Faulkner illustrates Aunt Louisa as "a Southern woman," having both a feminine appearance and behavior, unlike Drusilla or Granny (190). Aunt Louisa displays and promotes the Southern woman ideal which provides stark contrast to Drusilla's character. Aunt Louisa copes with the turmoil of war by clinging to Southern female norms, whereas Drusilla abandons these norms and portrays the opposite sex.

Perhaps Faulkner's most powerful description of emotional devastation brought on by the war occurs near the end of the book after the war has ended when Aunt Louisa, with the help of thirteen other Southern women, locate some trunks full of Drusilla's dresses from before the war and put her back in a dress and back in the traditional Southern role. These trunks were filled with the heavy weight of memories, of a time before the war when Drusilla was chained to the traditional roles of the southern woman like the heavy shackles used to keep slaves from running

free. When the War began, the shackles of slavery began to disappear, and driven by the death of her fiancé, so too did Drusilla's shackles to the traditional southern woman roles. After years of choosing to live free as a man, when Drusilla finally let them put the dress on her "she was whipped," she no longer had a choice but to be a Southern woman (201). Similar to a straitjacket, Faulkner confines Drusilla with the Southern woman ideal which causes her to become slightly insane: "the laughter rising, becoming a scream yet still remaining laughter, screaming with laughter, trying to deaden the sound by putting her hand over her mouth, the laughter spilling between her fingers like vomit" (239). Faulkner illustrates Drusilla with this screaming laughter, an action that some mentally insane people perform. This insanity that is shown at the end of Drusilla's dynamic path, reveals the destruction war brings to the people associated with it.

Faulkner uses female characters as separate examples of how emotionally devastating war can be, Drusilla as being the most extreme example. War brings turmoil to these characters and all three coped in different ways: Drusilla took on a male identity, Granny took on both male and female roles, and Aunt Louisa clung desperately to Southern woman ideals. Like the American Civil War shattered social norms, Drusilla's character shattered Southern female norms. According to Virginia Laas, a writer for *The Journal of Southern History*, women challenged the norm of the time period by fighting for either the Union or Confederate Armies during the Civil War (441). Regardless of whether Faulkner was aware of female soldiers at the time, he created a character that challenged the customary role that was depicted in that time period, possibly to give a new perspective.

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