

2007

Literature as Catharsis: Women's Voices on Male Violence

Amanda Joyner

Georgia College & State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Joyner, Amanda (2007) "Literature as Catharsis: Women's Voices on Male Violence," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 8 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol8/iss1/13>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Knowledge Box. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Corinthian by an authorized editor of Knowledge Box.

Literature as Catharsis Women's Voices on Male Violence

Amanda Joyner

Dr. Susan Cumings
Faculty Sponsor

"The ruling paradigm for male supremacy remains, to this hour, physical violence. This paradigm remains unchecked and untouched by change. Critically, the permissive environment for male violence against women is supported by a civic advocacy for violence as socially acceptable, appropriate and necessary."

Wayne Ewing's essay *The Civic Advocacy of Violence* makes a compelling and pointed argument concerning society's permissiveness towards violent behavior. Ewing's observation that violence is so pervasive in our culture that we have become numb to its presence has been made often. However, Ewing pays particular attention to society's complacency to violence directed towards women.

The subtle way that the fear of violence invades the everyday lives of women is often overlooked. It's just the way things *are*. Locking our doors, not being too direct, or not going out alone are all things we do to cut down our chances of being a victim. Precautions of every kind are an integral part of being female. Most women don't even realize how many times they look over their shoulders or lock their doors in their lifetimes.

However, Ewing does not describe how society's attitude towards violence affects crimes committed against women by strangers. He discusses how it plays into domestic violence, an issue that is both public and still very private all at once. According to Ewing, the complacency on the part of society often translates to many male batterers as advocacy. The connection he makes to how this violence affects women is valuable and often unstated by others. He maintains that until we can crack the societal advocacy of physical violence towards women, we will never be free of its effects. According to Ewing, the way to accomplish this is to draw the abusers and the complacency of society, not the victims, into the light. There are plenty of others who feel the same.

Women are expressing their frustration with the advocacy of society in many ways including politically, in literature, painting, and poetry. We see specific examples of women's feelings concerning our culture's attitudes towards male violence in Margaret Atwood's poem "Half Hanged Mary" and May Swenson's poem "Bleeding."

Atwood's "Half Hanged Mary" is a narrative-style poem that tells the story of Mary Webster, a Puritan woman who was hanged in the 1680s for witchcraft. She was left out all night, dangling from a tree, but survived and went on to live for another fourteen years. The implications of the story are profound enough, but Atwood also gives the tale emotion and a fair amount of wit by making Webster the narrator. It allows Webster to tell her own story, in her own words. It gives her the voice that she didn't have when she was alive. This makes the poem nothing short of powerful—how many can tell you about their own execution?

Ewing could have been describing the Puritan community in which Webster lived when he said, "The environment of civic advocacy of violence is ordinary, and not extraordinary" (363). Even though in fact he was describing *our* society, the observation rings true for both as evidenced by the section in the poem in which the women come to stare at Mary Webster after she has been hanged. She objectifies them, much like their husbands would have at this time, effectively setting herself apart from them by referring to them as "bonnets" and "dark skirts" (60). There is no fellowship for her. "Help me down? You don't dare," she proclaims (60).

Incidentally, Atwood makes an excellent point here about women's relationships in relation to society's inattention to "women's problems." They are all afraid to speak because they don't want to suffer the same fate; however, if they all spoke, no one would singularly have to be afraid. The type of violent punishment being inflicted on Webster is seen as the norm or the judgment of the majority only because half the population (i.e. women) is not allowed a voice. Much like Ewing's argument, what we see in the poem is the permissiveness of a society to allow violence towards women. What Atwood does so effectively here is to make us realize the predicament of the women who are *not* strung up by the neck. Their not speaking echoes loudly in the poem. It makes readers acutely aware of our own tendency to point fingers and stand in the background rather than focus on a solution, even in our society today.

In relation to Ewing's thesis, the poem about "Half Hanged Mary" makes

an important assertion in a very inobscure way: male violence is *not* always effective or necessary. In the case of Mary Webster, who survived and whom we can safely assume was not a witch, it was completely *ineffectual* and *unnecessary*. One of the first things Atwood establishes is the ridiculousness of the charge leveled against Webster. In the third stanza the narrator tells us bluntly, "I was hanged for living alone / for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin / tattered skirts, few buttons / a weedy farm in my own name / and a sure-fire cure for warts" (59). In other words, Webster is not hanged for being a witch or for being a woman. She is hanged for being a certain type of woman. She is self sufficient, different and, most importantly, unprotected by a husband or father. This is why the men of the village, who more than likely would argue that her hanging is their civic responsibility, single her out, much like prey. The narrator who describes how the men "stalk homeward / excited by their show of hate" clearly sees them as predators who kill partially for the thrill of it (59).

As an extension of the men who hang her, Death, who is typically seen as male, is also predatory to Webster. She says, "Death sits on my shoulder like a crow / waiting for my squeezed beet / of a heart to burst / so he can eat out my eyes" (62). This morbid description gives the reader the clear feeling that at this point Webster feels that all the male influence around her is animalistic and dangerous. The men have all the power and she has none. She even feels that God has forsaken her and describes herself as a "martyr in reverse" (63).

The poem exposes that her hanging is in no way an effective means of ensuring the well being of the community either. It is done only because she is a threat to the male power structure. The narrator's outrage is palpable to the reader when she says in a stream of uncontrolled words, "I call on you as witness I did / no crime I was born I have borne I / bear I will be born this is / a crime I will not acknowledge leaves and wind / hold on to me / I will not give in" (65). Her strength to live undermines the violence done to her and the social structure that permitted it. "Having been hanged for something / I never said, / I can now say anything I can say," she proclaims towards the end of the piece (68). Her "death" has had the opposite effect than what the village men intended. Instead of silencing her they have further empowered her, revealing their violence towards her to be not only unnecessary but highly ineffectual. The poem seems to suggest that if violence could not be used to

support the male power structure, like Ewing says it does, then it wouldn't be held as appropriate any longer by society.

In May Swenson's poem, "Bleeding," we get a very different perspective on an abuser/abused relationship. Swenson writes allegorically about the relationship between the knife and the cut to symbolize violence against women and how it is rationalized by the batterer, society, and, by extension of society, the victim. The result is one of the most disturbing and insightful pieces that I have ever read. Ewing's thesis statement that asserts that violence is viewed as "socially acceptable, appropriate and necessary" (358) is validated by this poem. If we view the knife and the cut's relationship as symbolic of a typical abusive relationship, the dialogue between the cut and the knife can be seen as the way the power imbalance in such a relationship typically functions. When the cut says, "I know it isn't you it's me" and accepts the blame for its own pain, it makes the knife's actions both acceptable and appropriate (line 19). The knife's choice to stab is valid if it is the "right" way to deal with the cut. The knife also rationalizes its actions as necessary when it says, "If only you didn't bleed...I wouldn't have to do this" (line 8).

Unlike "Half Hanged Mary" the victim in Swenson's poem (i.e. the cut) does not resist its abuser. Instead it takes on all the blame for the injuries inflicted on it and never questions the knife. This creates a permissive environment for its abuse, much like what Ewing describes in relation to the permissive environment created by society towards domestic violence. The cut's self-blame is the voice not only of a victim, but also of society's beliefs about domestic abuse. Swenson writes, "I know said the cut I bleed too easily I hate that I can't / help it I wish I were a knife like you and didn't have to bleed" (lines 9-10). The cut's desire to be the knife is not surprising, given the cut's situation. If we look deeply into this desire though, we see that not only would victims like to be in their batterer's role because of the imbalance of power, but also because, as Ewing describes, men are often taught that this power they have is right and appropriate. It is their birthright as men to be at the top of the hierarchy. This leaves many victims, even victims who know that their abusers' *actions* are wrong, with the feeling that inherently their batterers are right, or are on better terms with society as a whole because of their gender. This is the fundamental reason for the cut's desire to change roles with the knife and for society to outwardly condemn spousal abuse but still uphold the belief that, as Ewing points out, male physical domination is still

the most appropriate and necessary way to uphold the male hierarchy.

The knife gives voice to society's "blame the victim" mentality that often results in domestic violence being downgraded by society and batterers. "Too many cuts around said the knife they're messy I don't know/ how they stand themselves," Swenson writes (lines 21-22). This mentality often is also what leads to the ease with which society justifies male violence as natural. Ewing points out that victims often spend more time in the spotlight than batterers do, thus allowing abusive men to remain faceless. He claims that every man has the potential to be abusive because of this culture's lack of accountability. He maintains that, "The simple fact is that we know more about the victims than we do about the abusers" (360). Ewing suggests men are not defined by their abusive acts; rather, they are defined by their maleness in our society. Violence is simply a part of their (socially constructed) gender. Along these lines Swenson's cut says, "See you're coming out now the/ blood is drying it will rub off and you'll be shiny again and clean" (lines 25-26). The knife maintains its autonomy from the cut after slicing into it. It can pull away and go on to cut again, much like a batterer is able to do within the society that advocates violence against women. However, the cut was only brought into being because of the knife. As a matter of fact, if it heals, it disappears, which is an important observation to make since the cut is symbolic of an abused woman in the poem. Much like abused women it is defined by its status as a victim and not by anything else. The only way to stop this would be to recognize abused women's identity outside their abusive relationships and to make violence towards women a less logical choice for men. As Ewing says, "For every female victim who is freed from the cycle of violence without intervening in the actual behavior of the male abuser, we still have a battering male-at-large" (360).

In Ewing's essay, he says, "What remains is for us to deal with what very few of us want to confront: American life remains sexist and male supremacist in spite of the strides of the second wave of American feminism" (361). Though this observation seems bleak, it is true in many ways. Society still differentiates what is appropriate for men and what is appropriate for women. Women are still seen as the weaker sex by many. What *has* changed is that with every generation there are fewer women who see *themselves* as the weaker sex. Both Atwood's and Swenson's poems are a testimony to this fact. What both poems do is draw attention to women as victims—each one in a

very different way. While Atwood's poem shows us a woman who is inadvertently empowered by the crimes done to her, Swenson shows us jarring images of a victim who is oppressed both mentally and physically by her abuser. Though the victims handle the abuse in very different ways, what is important to recognize is that the abusers are depicted very similarly: as brutal, self absorbed and oppressive. Though they are physically stronger they are morally weaker. In effect the poems do exactly what Ewing suggests is the most effective way to end society's passive attitude towards domestic violence. They call attention to how ignoble it is. The batterers seem un-evolved and small. They give voice to how the victim feels about those who abuse them instead of how they feel solely about the abuse itself. They say to people that abuse is not socially acceptable. As Ewing says, "Until the voices that say "(No!)" to male violence are more numerous than those that say "(Yes?)," we will not see change" (362).

WORKS CITED

- Atwood, Margaret. "Half Hanged Mary" Morning in the Burned House. Houghton Mifflin. Boston.1995. pp 58-69.
- Ewing, Wayne. "The Civic Advocacy of Violence." Men's Lives. Second Edition. Ed. Kimmel, Michael and Messer, Michael. MacMillan. 1992.
- Swenson, May. "Bleeding." Norton Anthology of Literature for Women. Second Edition. Ed. Gilbert, Sandra and Gubar, Susan. WW Norton. 1996. pp1830-31.