

Spiders in a Wreath of Orange and Poppy: An Analysis of 19th and Early 20th Century Marriage Laws through the Lens of Literature and Traumatic Insemination

by Teresa Sauer

Abstract: American marriage laws in the 19th and early 20th centuries promoted a culture of oppression which was inherently detrimental to women. In order to achieve a stable lifestyle and maintain their social standings, young women were expected to marry; yet the laws and customs in place required that they concede at all times to the expectations of their husbands. This conciliatory behavior lent itself to the objectification of women, which further propagated the culture of oppression. The following paper is a multidisciplinary project which examines the effects of oppressive marriage laws on women through the lens of 19th and early 20th century literature and poetry as well as the arthropod reproductive strategy of traumatic insemination. The two are compared both through in-depth literary analysis and a creative element. The negative consequences of the institution of marriage during the period are explored from a perspective which does not romanticize human courtship behavior, but rather demonstrates the pitfalls of a system which required women to diminish themselves in order to obtain or else remain secure in their marriages.

Introduction

In the natural world, the onus of attracting a mate often lies with the male. Since the production of viable egg cells requires more energy than the production of sperm, females are selective in their choice of a mate, which drives males to compete in an energy-consuming and often highly elaborate courtship ritual (Freeman 467). This phenomenon of female choice and male competition in the natural world contrasts with the historical treatment of women in marriages. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, women in Europe and America had little to no agency in their own lives. Wives especially were considered by the law to be, as written by the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, “civilly dead” (Stanton). In his 1869 essay, “The Subjection of Women,” John Stuart Mill comments, “If married life were all that it might be expected to be, looking to the laws alone, society would be a hell upon earth” (Mill 32). The law of the nineteenth century in most Western countries dictated that a wife must “vow a lifelong obedience to him [the husband] ... She can do no act but whatever by his permission... She can acquire no property but for him” (30). Although, as Mill points out, most men did not exert the full force of the law upon their wives, the power it granted them established a dynamic that made married women at all times subject to the whims of their husbands.

The subversion of female agency in the 19th century through strict marriage laws and social oppression closely mirrors a reproductive tactic known as traumatic insemination, which has been observed in a number of arthropod species. This alternative male reproductive tactic diminishes acts of female selection, just as exploitative marriage laws in the nineteenth century reduced the right of women to control their lives and reproductive output. After approaching the female cautiously in a pseudo-mating dance, the male traumatic inseminator will pierce the female’s abdomen and expel semen into her blood or ovaries directly. This significantly reduces the chances that any subsequent males with which she may choose to mate would be able to fertilize the eggs (Yong). While this reproductive strategy ensures the continuance of the male’s genetic line, it is highly costly to the female. The insertion of the male’s genitalia into her abdomen causes massive internal damage which can be fatal (Reinhardt et al.). Even so, despite the increased probability that his mate will die due to injuries that he himself inflicted, it is beneficial to the male to continue mating in this way, because it ultimately maximizes his reproductive success. In the same way, men of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were loath to change the culture and laws which gave them full

control over their wives and children, thus assuring them reproductive success. While they enjoyed this benefit, the women they married suffered.

This essay will further examine the similarities between the overtly disturbing biological process of traumatic insemination and the poor treatment of young women preparing for and already in marriage during the 19th and early 20th centuries which still impacts our discourse on marriage in the Western world today. Through the lens of a creative element entitled *Spiders in a Wreath of Orange Blossom and Poppy* (Figure 1), I will examine literature written during this period of women's oppression and objectification to illustrate the tremendous cost which marriage and society posed to women. Ultimately, I will argue that the institution of marriage which required women—both financially and socially—to cede much of their identities to their husbands gave rise to a toxic male perception of love as possession, a perception which was inherently damaging to women.



Figure 1. Creative element entitled *Spiders in a Wreath of Orange and Poppy*.

A Harsh Inevitability

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the law treated married women as property rather than people. As Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in “Declaration of Sentiments,” the famous Seneca Falls document, “In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master -

the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement” (Stanton). Married women were without rights and legal recourse for any abuse or mistreatment their husbands might inflict upon them. Yet despite the negative implications of marriage, it was perceived not as a harsh inevitability for women, but touted as the culmination of their lives, their “destinies” (Caird 78). In *The Young Bride’s Book*, an 1849 marriage manual by Arthur Freeling, he contends, “A woman’s happiness is essentially domestic—it is centered in the home” (Freeling iv). To be chosen by a man for marriage was to be worthy of that happiness. However, women were also entirely dependent on their husband for resources, given the limited availability of jobs for women. They were also reliant on the social position which marriage afforded them, as unmarried women were often expelled from high society. This forced women to defer to her husband regardless of the cost to her dignity or sense of self. Women were compelled to enter into these problematic unions because, as already mentioned, they often had no acceptable social or financial substitute for marriage.

Mill wrote that marriage was “the destination appointed by society for women, the prospect they are brought up to, and the object which it is intended should be sought by all of them” (Mill 29). Women were taught not only that marriage was something which should be anticipated with excitement, but also that the failure to marry was a failure of character. Any woman who failed to marry became a woman of lesser repute or even immoral character. In her essay, “Why Women Are Ceasing to Marry,” Ella Hepworth Dixon observes, “A strictly brought-up person was not supposed to have the only woman’s privilege, the privilege of saying ‘No’” (Dixon 84). When a man of the appropriate social standing proposed to a woman, she was expected to say yes, since he was in many ways validating her place in society and fulfilling her socially prescribed purpose.

If a woman did remain unmarried, she had few alternatives available to her, and no means of maintaining a high social standing. In Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, the protagonist Lily Bart reflects on her position in her social circle, saying, “I’ve been about too long—people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry” (Wharton 10). Published for the first time in 1905, Wharton’s story of Lily—an unwed woman

desperately seeking marriage to maintain her place in society—is a commentary on the expectations set upon women of the nineteenth century. Lily is permitted to participate in the activities of the luxury class only so long as she is a prospect for marriage. When insinuations of impropriety from characters who are secure in their own social positions along with a rapidly accruing debt make any possibility of a marriage proposal inconceivable, Lily is promptly relegated to the working class, where “society... drifted by, preoccupied and inattentive, letting her feel, to the full measure of her humbled pride, how completely she had been the creature of its favor” (225). Society did not permit a high station to a woman who failed to fulfill her purpose of being a wife. Instead, women who remained unmarried were cast aside and forgotten, just as Lily was in the novel.

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, marriage was often a requirement for a woman’s survival. As with Lily Bart, many women of the period were brought up only to be wives and were not taught the skills to pursue even the limited job options available to women. Prior to her exile from the luxury class, Lily Bart reflects on marriage with Selden, her closest confidant throughout the novel, saying, “Ah there’s the difference—a girl must, a man may if he chooses...We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop—and if we can’t keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership” (13). Without some other source of income, whether it was an inheritance, the good grace of relatives, or other more improper sources, women were forced to marry. The necessity of marriage for women can be seen again in *A Doll’s House* by Henrik Ibsen. First performed in 1879 in Denmark, Ibsen’s play sparked great controversy not only because the female protagonist—Nora—is openly unhappy in her marriage, but because she decides to leave her husband, which is the ultimate rejection of a woman’s purpose. Just as with Lily, the women in Ibsen’s play perceive marriage as a means of survival. Towards the beginning of the play, Nora’s friend Kristina says of her own marriage proposal, “My mother was still alive; she was bedridden and helpless, and I had my two younger brothers to look after—I didn’t feel I *could* reject his offer” (Ibsen 157). Desperate for income, Kristina married solely for the prospect of alleviating financial strain.

The prevalence of “mercenary marriages” in which the woman actively sought out a proposal or accepted one in order to maintain her social or financial position precludes the notion that marriage was based on mutual affection and love; instead, it was a strategy of survival (Caird 78). In a similar way, females of those species which reproduce through traumatic insemination must engage in a dangerous mating ritual with males in order to fulfill the female’s biological imperatives to reproduce. My creative project element, *Spiders in a Wreath of Orange Blossoms and Poppy*, encapsulates this notion of intentional participation in a detrimental ritual. In the center are two *Harpactea sadistica* spiders, a male and a female. The female, laying vulnerable below the male, is decorated with excerpts of Freeling’s marriage manual, which exemplify the expectation placed on young women to enter into marriage. Just as the *H. sadistica* female permits the infliction of damage on her body to successfully reproduce, women entered into marriages to fulfill their socially and financially prescribed imperative to marry, an imperative which they then had to protect regardless of the cost to their identities.

Necessary Lies

The necessity of marriage for women’s survival and secure social status meant that there was significant pressure on them to remain as desirable as possible to their husbands. In *The Young Bride’s Book*, Freeling writes “...let your husband once believe that your affections are on the decline, and you lose the firmest hold upon his. Gentleness, good humor, tenderness, and attention, will secure the affection of every sensible man” (17). It was more advantageous for a wife to be complacent to her husband so that he remained tolerant of her than it was to express her true opinions. This manual, marketed towards women entering marriage, dictated that a woman must deliberately change her behavior, or conceal it, to lessen the probability that her husband would become angry with her. This disregard for the woman’s opinions and individuality was rooted in the power which the law granted husbands and was propagated by the reliance wives had on the integrity of their marriages.

This distortion of a woman’s identity as a means of appeasing a man is demonstrated by Wharton in

Lily Bart's interactions with Percy Gryce, one of her more promising marriage prospects at the beginning of the novel. In the pursuit of a marriage proposal, Lily aligns herself entirely with Percy's dull and narrow interests. Wharton writes, "she resolved to identify herself with her husband's vanity that to gratify her wishes would be to him the most exquisite form of self-indulgence" (45). In order to ensure that her husband, as she assumes at that time Percy will become, will freely give her those material objects which she struggles to acquire from her own meager income, Lily attempts to sacrifice a part of herself so that she is more attractive to him, and therefore more secure in their relationship. This attempt is unsuccessful, however, as the thought of "landing" Percy becomes an "unpalatable reward" (27). Lily receives no proposal, because she acted according to her own interests rather than continuing the pretense that she cared about his. This choice is the first of many which leads to Lily's eventual expulsion from New York society and her untimely death.

The nineteenth century woman's conflict between securing a marriage proposal and preserving a sense of independence and identity is seen again in *A Doll's House*. When, at the end of the play, Nora declares that she must leave her husband Torvald and their children, he asks how he has wronged her, to which she replies, "You arranged everything to suit your own taste, and so I came to have the same tastes as yours...Or I pretended to...perhaps a bit of both" (Ibsen 226). In order to maintain their "lovely happy home" (161), Nora aligned her views to those of her husband out of necessity, so that when she looked back at their marriage, she found that they had never once "sat down...to get to the bottom of a single thing" (225). It was impossible for husband and wife to have earnest conversations because Nora had reasonable incentive to always concede to her husband's point of view, which negated the need for discussion of any kind. Nora remained Torvald's conciliatory skylark and Nora in turn was secure in his affection for her, until the point when she realized she must endeavor to become more than a "doll-wife" (226). When Nora resolves her conflict by asserting her independence, her losses include not only social status but also the basic resources needed for physical survival: reliable access to food, shelter, clothing, and protection. However, staying would

have been far more detrimental to her psychological health and sense of self, so she elects to take the risk.

A parallel can once again be drawn between women forced to concede at all times to their husbands and the females in species which reproduce through traumatic insemination. Both experience trade-offs between resources gained and damage incurred. In the latter instance, the longer the male's reproductive organ remains inside the female, the more ejaculate she receives from him. This ejaculate can be used as a source of nutrition while she cultivates the fertilized eggs. However, longer mating sessions also cause the female injury. The females must balance between the benefits and risks so that she maximizes the amount of ejaculate she can receive while minimizing the damage to her own body (Yong). In humans, a woman secured resources for survival and reproduction by being submissive and accommodating. The cost of doing so was depression, anxiety and other psychological disorders, all of which were grouped into the singular diagnosis of hysteria throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries (Wood).

A Love of Possession

The laws established in the nineteenth century dictated the life of a woman should be "one of duty and service" to their husbands (Caird 78), and this, in conjunction with the compulsory appeasement of husbands by their wives, established a society in which men valued their wives not as partners, but as extensions of themselves. Since women were taught to be passive and obedient to their husbands, they became that much more easily objectified until they were little more than, as Nora would put it, "doll-wives."

The male attitude of possession is prevalent in the tone and subject of many male-authored works of literature and poetry in the nineteenth century. In Gustave Flaubert's 1856 novel, *Madame Bovary*, the perspectives of newlywed protagonist Emma and her husband Charles Bovary are in stark contrast: Charles feels the elation of ownership while Emma has begun to bear the burden of being owned. In Charles' mind, "he now possessed, for always, this pretty woman whom he so loved. The universe, for him, did not extend beyond the silky contour of her underskirt; and he would reproach himself for not

loving her more” (Flaubert 30). Marriage has allowed Charles to finally lay claim over Emma. His marriage is not a symbolic claim of partnership and mutual admiration with Emma, but rather a validation of his ownership over her appealing physical form.

In contrast to Charles, Emma reflects, “Before her marriage, she had believed that what she was experiencing was love; but since the happiness that should have resulted from that love had not come, she thought she must have been mistaken” (30). The happiness which Emma had been brought up to believe came with marriage, the fulfillment of a woman’s destiny, remains elusive to her. The contrast between husband and wife in the novel clearly demonstrates that Charles’ love is rooted not in mutual partnership or contentment, but in his possession of her.

Nineteenth-century poetry also elucidates the tendency of men to love of women as possessions rather than people. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of artists, consistently portrayed women in paintings and poetry not as man’s equal, but rather as mysterious objects of beauty which the artist might seek to possess in his representation of her form. In his sonnet, “The Portrait,” Rossetti writes, “let this my lady’s picture glow/Under my hand to praise her name...Let all men note / They that would look on her must come to me (lines 2-3, 12, 14). Rossetti seeks to capture his subject in a manner which captures her whole being. While this notion alone may not be sinister in intention, Rossetti’s final statement makes the painter’s intentions disturbingly clear; he has painted his muse not only to memorialize her beauty or capture her “inner glow,” but rather to possess her identity so completely that anyone who sought to understand her would have to look at his interpretation of her being rather than ascertaining the details from her themselves. The painter has become the possessor of his muse’s identity, just as a man became the possessor of his wife’s identity as soon as they were married.

Other nineteenth-century poems that exemplify the male attitude of possession towards the women they claimed to love are Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” and “I Worship You” by Charles Baudelaire. Browning uses situational irony to

highlight the toxic nature of the male narrator’s desires while Baudelaire uses grotesque imagery to depict the speaker’s desire to possess his lover. Browning’s poem describes in detail the insane narrator murdering his vivacious lover, Porphyria, so that she may become to him “mine, mine, fair...” (line 36). The poem ends with the gruesome image of the speaker sitting with the corpse, demonstrating the disturbing notion of what the love of a woman should be. This same problematic notion of love is seen in Baudelaire’s poem, in which the speaker says of the woman he worships, “I rise to your attack... Crawling like a host of worms that gormandize/ Some rotting corpse” (lines 7-8). Selections of these poems, as well as Rossetti’s “The Portrait” adorn the sides of the male spider in the creative element of my project to highlight the toxic nature of this type of “love.” Just as the narrators of these poems take delight in the possession of their dead lovers, so too is the male *H. sadistica* compelled to spear the abdomen of his mate despite the tremendous injury inflicted on her.

The Cost of Objectification

It is important to note that the women of the nineteenth century were not passive actors in their oppression; the women’s suffrage movement that began in America at the Seneca Falls convention in 1848 as well as the social New Woman movement both called for a shift in the social and legal power dynamic which made women so vulnerable to the powers of men. However, the call for change and its full implementation throughout society did not occur simultaneously. Women who shirked convention by refusing to marry, leaving their husbands, or demanding real partnership within their marriages had few options. As previously discussed, there was no “reasonable alternative” to marriage at the time (Caird 78), which was precisely why it had become such a powerful oppressive force in the first place. Though the need for women’s legal and social liberation had been recognized, there were not yet pathways by which that liberation could be pursued by the masses. As Mona Caird notes, “We cannot ask every woman to be a heroine and choose a hard and thorny path...” (78). If such a thing were possible, all liberation movements throughout history would be easily won.

This powerful social moment in the late nineteenth century saw women recognizing and reacting against oppression without yet being successful in freeing themselves. This brought forth a plethora of poets and authors whose stories clarify the condition of women as property. Kate Chopin lived from 1850 to 1904, just as challenges to the social restrictions of marriage were beginning to emerge. She was known for confronting the social expectations which made women an extension of their husbands. In her short story, "The Story of an Hour," Chopin demonstrates that though a woman may love her husband, the institution of marriage was a source of anguish because it required her to forfeit her free will. When Louise Mallard, the subject of the story, is told that her husband is dead, she is overcome by the realization that "there would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence which men and women believe they have a right to impose..." (Chopin 5). Without her husband, Louise is no longer subject to his whims, nor does she have to face the consequences for attempting to impose her will onto him. That freedom, Chopin contends, is far more important than any affection which is shared between a husband and wife. She writes, "What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion..." (5). As soon as she believes she is free from the oppressive institution of marriage, Louise finds that her own free will is far more important than the mysterious and transient emotion which had kept her bound to Mr. Mallard in the first place.

Another example of the cost of a marriage based on possession is Elizabeth Siddall. Known as "the wife and muse" of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Trowbridge 7), she was from the onset a victim of objectification and possession by her lover and later husband, the same man who wrote the sonnet "The Portrait." Although she was a painter and "poet of great promise" (Orlando 616), Siddall's work never achieved the same fame as Rossetti. She is, as Trowbridge points out in the introduction to her anthology of Siddall's work, *My Lady's Soul*, a woman "represented purely by her face" (7). Rossetti successfully possessed her image, thereby controlling the way which society perceived her, a perception which was antithetical to Siddall's own perception of her identity. The distinction between Siddall and her controlled image becomes

clear in her work and the work of Christina Rossetti, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sister.

Rossetti was more focused more on capturing the beauty of his muse than he was with actually understanding her. In her poem, "In An Artist's Studio," Christina Rossetti writes, "He feeds upon her face by day and night/ And she with true kind eyes looks back on him...Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright; Not as she is, but as she fills his dream" (Rossetti). The poem was a scathing renunciation of Rossetti's treatment of Siddall as his muse. That Gabriel Rossetti "feeds upon" Siddall's beauty implies an inherently exploitative relationship, and one in which Rossetti values Siddall not for her character, but for her beauty. Gabriel's painting showing "her true kind eyes," from when "hope shone bright" also implies that there was a time in which, believing still that marriage would yield happiness, Siddall was content to sit as a model for Rossetti in order to fulfill his whims and secure his affection. Siddall herself reflects on this love in her poem "The Passing of Love," writing, "Love help me joyful through the day / And dreaming ever through the night..." (Siddall lines 13-14). In the poem, Siddall acknowledges that though she had at one time felt great love for Rossetti, that time quickly passed.

The resentment which Siddall felt for Rossetti's objectification of her and its ill effects is reflected both in her life and her work. Sick for many years prior to her death, in 1862 Siddall succumbed to her addiction to laudanum (Marsh 9). As with "The Passing of Love," her poems focus on the falsehood and transience of love, as well as the harm which it inflicted upon her. In "Worn Out" she writes, "I cannot give to thee the love / I gave so long ago / The love that turned and struck me down..." (Siddall). Again, she admits that she once had great love for Rossetti, but it was a love which betrayed her. She even renounces Rossetti's worship of her beauty in "Love and Hate," demanding, "Lift thy false brow from out the dust...And turn away thy false dark eyes" (Siddall). The love which brought Rossetti and Siddall together was tainted by his desire to capture and possess her beauty. Siddall was not Rossetti's partner, but instead was a "...constructed figure who bolster[ed] her husband's reputation and [was] a signifier for his status and power...erected on the negation of the female model" (Trowbridge

8). Rossetti's treatment of Siddall during the creation of his 1865 painting *Beata Beatrix* exemplifies his exploitation of her. In Orlando's essay, "That I May not Faint, Die or Swoon," she points out "...an unfortunate rumor had it that Rossetti propped up Lizzie's corpse on her deathbed while he painted *Beata Beatrix*. Urban legends of this sort—coupled with the uncomfortable fact of Rossetti's exhumation of Siddall's body—cement her status as a woman whose beauty was exploited, in death as in life, in the name of art" (Orlando 622). Just as in Browning and Baudelaire's poems, Rossetti was perfectly willing to worship the corpse of his lover and wife, because that is the aspect of her which he considered to be valuable and worthy of love.

The circumstances of Siddall's actual death are replicated time and again in the deaths of women in the literature of the period. Emma Bovary dies after overdosing on arsenic, while Lily Bart dies from an overdose of sleeping draught (Wharton 276). These women, disillusioned with the myth of marriage, femininity, and societal fulfillment, died from overdosing on drugs meant to soothe and placate those who take them. In both stories, it is a male character who provides commentary on their corpses: Charles Bovary and Lawrence Selden, respectively. In the creative element of my project I have surrounded the pair of *H. sadistica* with a wreath of orange blossoms and ripened poppy fruits. These are representative of the dichotomy between the expectations and realities of marriage during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During that era, orange blossoms were often woven into the hair of brides on their wedding day (Powell). On the other hand, poppy fruit is the source of the drugs like laudanum and opium which are associated with the deaths of Elizabeth Siddall and Lily Bart. The inclusion of both symbols in my creative element highlight the difference between the societal illusion of marriage and its stark reality. Women bound by the social and legal restraints of marriage found the condition to be intolerable because they were treated as prized possessions or objects of beauty rather than human beings. That the death of women through overdosing or despair became a trope in nineteenth-century literature implies a persistent despair within the female population, a despair that was fetishized by male authors like Rossetti and Baudelaire and

condemned by more progressive authors like Chopin, Wharton, and Flaubert.

Conclusion

Phenomena like traumatic insemination are perceived today as nothing more than "nature taking its course," isolated entirely from the civil and ordered world which we as humans have created. Yet, as I have argued through the literary and symbolic elements of my project, the treatment of women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in regard to marriage is not unlike the ways in which traumatic inseminators exploit females to ensure their reproductive success. Just as *H. sadistica* females are driven to mate to fulfill their biological imperatives, so too were women driven by their social and financial situations to enter into the oppressive union of marriage. Just as *H. sadistica* females risk greater injury to themselves in order to obtain as much nutrition as possible from the male ejaculate, so too did women concede to the desires and opinions of their husbands to remain secure in their marriage. Finally, just as the *H. sadistica* male is driven to pierce the female in order to ensure that it is his offspring which she bears, so too were men driven to marry and possess the women who were motivated to appear to them at all times perfect.

The literature and poetry which I have examined above demonstrate a cultural moment in which society promoted the political and social oppression of women. The culture which shaped that literature, though infinitely more dynamic than that which dictates the social interactions of spiders, was defined by the same drive to ensure success no matter the detriment to anyone else. In species like *H. sadistica* which reproduce through traumatic insemination, females evolve strategies to deter males from inflicting injury like stomach barbs or thicker abdominal exoskeletons. So it was in the nineteenth century. What else was the social rebellion of women and the first women's rights movement but a tactic to overcome the intolerable and injurious institution of marriage which had been thrust upon them by the men in power?

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