

Jeļena Semēneca
Daugavpils Universitāte, Latvija

DEMONIZED WOMEN IN ARTHUR MACHEN'S CREATIVE WRITINGS

Abstract

Arthur Machen is a weird and occult writer of late Victorian literature. His creative writings are marked by mysticism. That is why it seems that the author is not really concentrated on the objective reality that is seen by everyone. A. Machen's works do not focus on picturesque descriptions of the objective reality - neither describing space, nor time, nor man. In A. Machen's artistic world male characters dominate. By all means it is the reflection of the Victorian world where women were oppressed by men. These women being a total subordinate to men undergo a certain process of demonization. At the same time it is interesting to note that all the female characters that appear in his texts finally, closer to the end of the narration, discover that the objective reality is nothing but the shadow of the true reality, which is hidden from us. This knowledge proves to be dangerous one, as it is not meant for a human-being. This ancient ever-living knowledge influences a person, namely a woman, demonizing her. In the long run the woman becomes obsessed by evil powers that destroy her life and the surroundings.

Key words: *Arthur Machen, Victorian Period, Victorian Woman, Demonization, Mysticism*

The mystical prose by Arthur Machen is directed onto a deep thorough investigation of the objective reality trying to find a relevant tool for its cognition. It comes naturally that the majority of the characters in Machen's literary works will be connected with the investigation and study of the laws according to which the universe is formed: these are scientists, detective-adventures, philosophers or just life observers. As Patricia Murphy states late Victorian literature linked to scientific matters featured women in such a way that they were marginalized and excluded from scientific discourse (Murphy 2006:1). So it is no wonder that male images dominate in the fictional world of A. Machen.

Numerous 19th century fictional and nonfictional literary texts reflected a general long-standing idea of the time (supported by objective scientific findings) about an innate female inferiority. The year 1871 is marked by the publication of Charles Darwin's "*Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*". In the book, which is mainly devoted to the description of the animal kingdom and human development in general, Darwin reinforced his suppositions of male superiority over female. Darwin summarized and offered his percepts that were scientifically proved having accumulating the ideas that were "in the air" circulating in the Victorian culture at large: "We may also infer <...> that if men are capable of decided eminence over women in many subjects, the average standard of mental power in man must be above that of woman" (Darwin 1981:327).

Women images not being numerous in comparison to the one of men still are of great significance for the understanding of A. Machen's novels.

On the whole, there is a noticeable diversity in the female images that appear in the novels by A. Machen; what is more, some female images are represented with the smallest details.

However, before starting a detailed consideration of the female characters it seems necessary to specify that a great number of the female images created by A. Machen are limited to some specific functions – a mother, a sister, a friend, an object of study, a beloved wife, etc., that are important for the Victorian society. However, there are two novels, namely “a Fragment of Life” and “The Great God Pan”, where female images are of great significance.

Any female image that appears in the literary works by A. Machen represents a woman that belongs to the so-called “middle-class” of the Victorian society. This fact is not a surprise because Victorian time period is an era of the middle class.

The middle –class was so numerous and influential that even queen Victoria's characteristics were most often found among the middle classes: representation of femininity which was centred on the family, motherhood and respectability (although it should be mentioned that in her manners she was decidedly aristocratic). As to the general attitude to class, it should be mentioned that class displayed itself through manners, speech, clothing, education, ideologies and values that were demonstrated by the people with a certain class belonging. All classes of the Victorian society lived in separate social areas; they stuck to different social customs and traditions observing them everywhere – from religion to courtship to the names and hours of their meals. The Victorians were convinced that each of the class had “its own standards: so, people were to follow the rules of their social class – to behave like someone from a class above or below one's own” (Mitchell 1996:17).

Consequently, it is possible to conclude that exactly a representative of the middle class of Victorian England can be taken as a model of Victorian woman, as a bearer and mouthpiece of the Victorian moral and values.

Being born in a family of an impoverished clergyman, A. Machen himself belonged to the Victorian middle-class. All his life, although having a dream of becoming a writer, he had to work hard to earn his living as a publisher's clerk and then a tutor, but for most of his life Machen worked as a journalist.

For purpose of inferring a female representation by A. Machen, it is useful to observe the female characters that appear in Machen's first decade novels: primary female characters that determine the narration and secondary ones that have supporting roles to provide the main

characters with information in order to advance the plot development. Although there is a general opinion shared by some literary critics concerning Machen's inability to create living vivid characters, it should be mentioned that female characters are created scrupulously.

In the novel "A Fragment of Life" (started in June, 1899, published in 1904) A. Machen manifests his sympathies and antipathies along with the proclamation of his understanding of human life demonstrated on its everyday level. The novel suggests a glimpse of a family life of Edward Darnell, a city clerk. He has been married for a year to Mary.

In fact Arthur Machen creates a specific collective image of a Victorian woman. The description of the society, its constituents – men and women, other social characteristics are given indirectly as an integral part of the general depiction of an individual. It seems that Arthur Machen focuses on the representation of the background, against which all the events will take place, against which some definite female characters will be traced out. That is why A. Machen gives a detailed description of a Victorian woman in her all class belongings and social roles. The description of the existing social problems is given indirectly as an indissoluble part of a whole description of a character. A female character drawn by A. Machen is a kind of "everywoman" – it is any and every woman, who lived in the 2nd half of the Victorian period. In spite of the differences that are determined by their social origin or background, it is possible to deduce a kind of mould – a generalized female representation of the description of late Victorian everyday life. A. Machen does not give any evaluations to the female characters marking them neither with "+" nor with "-": he simply states what a woman was and how she was perceived by the objective reality. A. Machen follows a traditional concept of "womanhood" elaborated in the 2nd half of the 19th century that presupposed that a woman was man's property, serving as a decoration of a house – in other words, being "angel in the house" (this metaphor taken from the poem by Coventry Patmore came to be widely used in reference reference to women who embodied the Victorian feminine ideal: a wife and mother who was selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband). A woman was passive, powerless, meek, submissive (in all senses – economically, politically and legally), charming, self-sacrificing, pious and pure.

Offering a mould of a Victorian woman, A. Machen comes to the conclusion that the daily routine, in fact, does not differ from death; the real world is nothing but the shadow of the real one, hidden behind the material objects. In Machen's opinion, the life, which is either reduced to "a matter of kitchen ranges, of saving a few shillings" or "concerned with racing stables, steam yachts, and the spending of many thousand pounds", is just "absurdity": mediocre people live, "day by day, strangely mistaking death for life, madness for sanity, and purposeless

and wandering phantoms for true beings” (Machen 1906:34). The Darnells (especially Mary Darnell) are repressed that disables them to communicate to each other their love: the material world having crushed them down destroyed them socially, economically and emotionally, as A. Machen says: “It was a very small life” (Machen 1924:51). It may be suggested that A. Machen offers an opportunity to agree that all people’s emotions and motivations found in the real world are the really fantastic things that come from another world or the otherworldliness. It seems apparent that the moral and behaviour of an ‘ordinary man’ is determined by the specific time and environment he lives in: so, neither time nor the environment can be taken as a constantly stable absolute. That is why A. Machen does not support the social norms, restrictions and regulations that have been formed. Depicting the female characters that are out of the society – its regulations and moral, A. Machen provides them with some demonic features.

In this respect the novel “The Great God Pan” can be taken as the brightest example of such a transformation of a common woman into a demonic creature represented by Arthur Machen. It should be pointed out that the novel itself is quite short. As Julia Briggs assumes the novel is in a sense science fiction, “perhaps inspired in part by the experiments of Pierre Flourens and others, who began in the 1820s to try to chart “motor centres” by removing various portions of animals’ brains and studying their subsequent behaviour” (Briggs 1977:71). In “The Great God Pan”, Dr. Raymond makes “a slight lesion in the grey matter” to effect “a trifling rearrangement of certain cells” (Machen 1894:11) in the brain of his ward Mary. After the operation Mary becomes reduced to idiocy having encountered the Great God Pan, by whom she conceives devil-woman, Helen Vaughan.

In fact, male characters, by all means, dominate in the novel being quite numerous. Edward Wagenknecht mentions this fact as one of the disadvantages of the novel as there are many different male characters, and few of them are clearly enough defined.

As to the female characters then it should be stressed that there are only two main female characters: Mary – an object of the scientific experiment, Helen Vaughan – the result of the scientific offence against the nature of things. At the same time there some other women images are mentioned but their appearance in the novel is reduced to the function.

Once again Arthur Machen represents Victorian Britain with its bent to the observance of definite social roles.

The first female image to appear in the narration is Mary, a girl about seventeen. It is written that she is “beautiful” (Machen 1894: 24). Arthur Machen mentions that, being in Dr. Raymond’s ward, Mary trusts him entirely asking no questions about the scientific experiment

she is to undergo: she obediently and humbly does what she is demanded to do. Father or guardian was a head of the Victorian household – he was usually strict and was obeyed by everyone in the household without any question. At first it may be concluded that Mary is a common Victorian woman who is charming, self-sacrificing and totally submissive to a man, who is her guardian, being entirely responsible for her. At the same time Machen hints at the possible close relations between Dr. Raymond and Mary: she calls him “dear” and asks to kiss her before the operation. Taking into account the fact that an unmarried young woman could not live in the same house with a man even if he was her father, the described situation comes in opposition to the Victorian values. It is impossible to imagine such a situation, when two people are kissing each other openly in the presence of a witness. The very fact that Dr. Raymond kisses Mary on her demand and the description of their kiss (although it was in Victorian literary tradition) allows concluding that Dr. Raymond and Mary had intimate sexual relations breaking all social laws and norms of Victorians.

Helen Vaughan, the daughter of Mary and the great god Pan, appears in the narration along with mentions of some awful, terrible events connected with death.

Arthur Machen introduces Helen Vaughan telling that she is an orphan, “adopted in her infancy by a distant relative, who brought her up in his own house till she was twelve years old” (Machen 1894:34). Helen is sent by her guardian to a village on the borders of Wales, where she is welcomed by one of the local families. This situation does not surprise anyone – no one even paid attention as the death rate among adults was relatively high and a lot of children lived in single-parent families or they were adopted by a friend or neighbour (a guardian). Still, regardless this seeming commonness, Arthur Machen proclaims that she differs greatly from the other villagers giving a very brief description of hers: “She was, however, of a very different type from the inhabitants of the village; her skin was a pale, clear olive, and her features were strongly marked, and of a somewhat foreign character” (Machen 1894:35) Helen had almost an “Italian appearance” (Machen 1894:43).

Gradually it becomes clear that Helen Vaughan is in opposition to the world of common people, as she is always harming it attacking its moral principles and values. Being a girl of 12 years, Helen frequently goes into the woods to play with “a strange naked man” (Machen 1894:38) there. When a local boy, by chance, sees them this shocks him so much that he starts suffering “from a weakness of intellect, which gives but little promise of amending” (Machen 1894:42). A friend of Helen’s childhood, Rachel M., becomes mad with terror and shame experienced after their walk in the woods. Helen Vaughan then disappears from the narration for

a considerable period of time. Later she reappears in London using different names; and her presence is marked by several totally ruined men. Charles Herbert, after his marriage with Helen, turns into a “wreck of a man” (Machen 1894:51); she takes all his money and property, so that Charles is forced to go begging. Charles Herbert states that she has corrupted his soul and body, by talking about something that was terrifying even for a man, who “stood in the midst of a wilderness” (Machen 1894:54). All the men Helen Vaughan has had a close contact with die. Blank dies of fright, of sheer, awful terror; Arthur Meyrick, the painter, after having experienced “the frightful Walpurgis Night of evil, strange monstrous evil” (Machen 1894:97), dies because of “an utter collapse of the whole system, probably caused by some severe shock” (Machen 1894:141). Then a trail of suicides follows: Lord Argentine, Mr. Charles Aubernoun, Lord Swanleigh, Mr. Collier-Stuart and Mr. Herries are all found hanged, having committed a suicide. In fact, where Helen Vaughan lived, she left an atmosphere of evil and a hint of nameless infamies. In the end of the novel Helen kills herself with a given rope.

Undoubtedly, Helen Vaughan represents evil as such, it is a demonized woman. It is possible to offer several explanations to the fact that diabolic evil is revealed through a female character.

The first explanation may seem simple, plain and, although being supernatural, lying on the surface: supernatural origin of Helen Vaughan or, as it was called by Dorothy Scarborough in her book “The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction” published in 1917 – “supernatural biology” that, in the author’s opinion, presupposes “the application of modern science to supernaturalism, or of the supernatural to modern science, is one of the distinctive features of recent literature” (Scarborough 1917:251). She says: “The most revolting instances of suggestive diabolism are found in Arthur Machen’s stories, where supernatural science opens the way for the devil to enter the human soul, since the biologist by a cunning operation on the brain removes the moral sense, takes away the soul, and leaves a being absolutely diabolized. Worse still is the hideousness of *Seeing the Great God Pan*, where the daemonic character is a composite of the loathsome aspects of Pan and the devil, from which horrible paternity is born a child that embodies all the unspeakable evil in the world” (Scarborough 1917:139). In other words, the crime against the very nature of a human being brings to life ancient chthonic evil: once the veil that hides the real essence of the world is taken off, the uncontrolled powers of the otherworldliness – a dark, fearful, terrifying, awesome elemental force of nature outside society and beneath the veneer of the human civilization.

In this connection another example of a dreadful biological experiment, which demonized a woman can be mentioned. In the novel “The Inmost Light”, Arthur Machen, in a more compact way, repeats the same motif of “scientific daibolism”: Dr. Black being obsessed with an idea to bridge “the gulf between the world of consciousness and the world of matter” (Machen 1894:230-231), persuades his wife, Agnes, to permit him to draw the soul out of her body. Agnes, being totally dependent on her husband could not deny, although perfectly realizing what kind of a procedure she was to undergo. Arthur Machen claims that even a delicate cutting of the brain removes the soul and utterly diabolizes the woman: since a material body cannot remain untenanted, Agnes becomes possessed by a devil with “a visage of a satyr”, but she is spared the absolute evil, as she has agreed with the experiment on the condition that her husband would kill her afterward, when she starts transforming into something horrible.

It may be concluded that, the very possibility of supernatural interference into the laws of Nature can be considered as one probable explanation of the appearance of demonized women in Arthur Machen’s texts.

Bibliography

1. Briggs, J. (1977) *Night visitors: the rise and fall of the English ghost story*. Faber.
2. Darwin, Ch. (1981) *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Princeton University Press.
3. Köhler, A. (2008) *Social Class of the Mid-Victorian period and Its Values*. GRIN Verlag.
4. Machen, A. (1906) *A Fragment of Life*. The House of Souls. London, E. Grant Richards.
5. Machen, A. (1894) *The Great God Pan*. University Press: John Wilson and Son: Cambridge, U.S.A.
6. Machen, A. (1924) *The London Adventure*. London: Secker.
7. Mitchell, S. (1996) *Daily Life in Victorian England*. Greenwood Press Westport, Connecticut London.
8. Murphy, P. (2006) *In Science's Shadow: Literary Constructions of Late Victorian Women*. University of Missouri Press. Columbia, MO.
9. Scarborough, D. (1917) *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*. G. P. Putnam’s Sons, New York and London.