"It's Kind of Hard to Explain…It's Better Just to Look at One": Women, Masculinity and the Reader in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*

Recently, author Zadie Smith has received a great deal of critical praise in response to the publication of her first three novels. With the exception of Fiona Tolan's 2006 essay, "Identifying the Precious in Zadie Smith's On Beauty," and limited work on Smith's 2002 novel *The Autograph Man*, the steadily emerging scholarly discourse on Smith over the last six years has mainly focused on her debut novel *White Teeth*. While *White Teeth* offers a unique and compelling opportunity to examine various cultural tensions in the British neighborhood Willesden, little scholarship exists specifically addressing the complex role gender plays within her work. The absence of discussion on gender could be attributed to both the nascency of Smith's career, and to current scholarly trends to study social constructs in relation to globalization and ethnicity. "New Ethnicities, the Novel, and the Burdens of Representation" by James Procter embodies this trend: "[f]or the most part, multiculture no longer appears exotic in the contemporary scenes of *White Teeth*. It is something that appears taken for granted, ordinary, mundane even" (2006 116). Smith's latest novel *On Beauty*, marks the author's departure from British settings and arguably marks the onset of potential scholarly shifts in study of Smith's work relating specifically to gender. Throughout *On Beauty*, race complicates masculine behavior in the novel, as is evidenced by the biracial makeup of the Belsey family. Also, *female* characters such as Kiki Belsey and Carlene Kipps, define the expected masculine traits the novel's male characters are encouraged or purported to possess. Despite a lack of awareness of the social and behavioral influence characters demonstrate, various masculine expectations are expressed in such a way as to encourage the reader to bridge the gap between characters and interpret female definitions of masculinity or manhood for the male characters. In order to address the problematic power structure of gender relations in *On Beauty*, Angela McRobbie's "Feminism, Postmodernism, and the 'Real Me'" (1995) will be helpful in explaining the benefits of female characters in contemporary literature talking about masculinity. Finally, borrowing from Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" (1980), I would like to examine the importance of the readers' encouraged interpretations of masculinity.

D

"Now at Sweet Home, My Niggers is Men": The Social Constructs of the Black Male Slave in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) is highly acclaimed for its feminist overtones. Both Teresa N. Washington and Lorraine Liscio believe that Morrison's work is a novel that deals solely with the matrilineal relationship and the female plight of slavery. While partially agreeing with the aforementioned critical writers, I argue that *Beloved* is thematically a masculinist text as well. Firstly, I identify freed, white male social constructs and argue that, although Garner says that he allows his slaves to be men, his ideologies concerning black masculinity are warped by slavery, thus disallowing him to free his slaves to construct their own ideal versions of manhood. I assert that most white men, during the antebellum period, desired to attain and sustain certain lifestyle choices. Those choices being: the ability to own property and govern themselves as free, property owning white men, love whomever they choose, become fathers, and physically protect and emotionally support their families. By identifying that Garner's ideas of manhood are solely tied to his experiences with white masculinity, I argue that each of the aforementioned choices are impossible to attain for the black men living on the Sweet Home plantation. Also, by predominately discussing the male slaves from the novel, I am stating that Morrison is defining black masculinity. Contending that her illustrations of the black male characters' inabilities to become Garner's definition of men is, in actuality, a statement that black masculinity has been defined and confined due to slavery. Morrison is showing that the Sweet Home men do not have the ability to ever attain the standards of white masculinity that Garner is familiar with, on or off the plantation, and the Sweet Home are aware of that fact. However, Morrison gives the Sweet Home men, specifically Paul D, a restoration of his manhood in the character Sethe, a black female slave on the Sweet Home plantation. Sethe's ability to give Paul D a semblance of humanity and dignity, even in her enslaved state, allows a form of restoration to Paul D's black masculinity. Garner cannot give Paul D or any of the other Sweet Home men the manhood that Sethe does, which asserts that black femininity is necessary to the completion and restoration of black masculinity.

M

"I Was Done Playing by Society's Rules": Another Look at Spike's Gender Hybridization

Abstract

Traditionally, academic studies involving gender and Buffy the Vampire Slayer have focused primarily on the basic feminist representations of power, formally taking full advantage of Joss Whedon's encouragement of "B.Y.O. subtext" (qtd. in Jowett 2005). Whedon, a self-described feminist, initially envisioned the show's mission statement as portraying "the joy of female power: having it, using it, sharing it," and this statement tends to encourage a traditional feminist reading of the show (qtd. in Jowett 2005). It is a rare fact, then, to see much in the way of critical analysis towards the show's portrayal of masculinity in the male characters of the show. Of those that are available, Arwen Spicer's " 'Love's Bitch but Man Enough to Admit It': Spike's Hybridized Gender" (2002) seems to be one of the few that focuses specifically on a male character within the realm of gender studies. Although Spike truly embodies a "hybridized gender" that "betrays characteristics that unsettle masculine stereotypes," as Spicer argues, I disagree that the focus of academic gender conversations about Spike should be limited to "certain feminine positionings into Spike's character". Both masculine and feminine work together to empower Spike, and the show disempowers him for veering too far into either stereotype. At critical junctures in the show, especially in seasons four and five, Spike's overt attempts at portraying conventional masculinity without responding to his feminine characteristics conclude in him being degraded, disempowered, and, at times, brutally beaten. It is during seasons six and seven, however, that a purely emasculated and feminized Spike is not only unacceptable, but completely worthless to Buffy and everyone else. It is only through an acceptance of the masculine qualities of his character, and the integration of this into his feminine qualities, that allow Spike to become whole and reach his "self-authorization" that "is vital to personal empowerment" within the show (Spicer).