

Sample Analytic Essay

The Pearls of Sexism: Cyclical Oppression in Cixous' *Portrait of Dora*

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove.

— "The Laugh of Medusa", Hélène Cixous

Written in response to Sigmund Freud's *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, Hélène Cixous' play *Portrait of Dora* distorts Freud's case study, shifting it from a description of female hysteria into a commentary on the nature of sexism. In particular, the addition of two back-to-back scenes near the end of the play — a dream scene where Dora dances with another woman and a violent, un-performed narration — often confuse the reader at first. These scenes, while traditionally read as a metaphor for sexist attacks on Dora and a call for women to take on leadership roles, can also be read as a commentary on the resilience women build up to sexism and how that can lead to their own upholding of systems of oppression. While Cixous' *Portrait of Dora* is often described as a feminist retelling of Freud's original case study, the play goes far beyond that interpretation to illustrate how some women, after developing resiliency to sexism, actively participate in upholding and enforcing sexist ideals. By unveiling of the cyclical nature of sexism, this passage critiques a particular brand of feminism, where women are given a voice in order to simply reinforce sexism, and attempts to put forth a more revolutionary form of feminism instead.

Echoing the rampant sexism of Freud's original case study, *Portrait of Dora* displays sexism as discrimination against women, specifically with the treatment of women as objects, the stifling of female voices, and male domination of society. Freud analyzes Dora's actions, asking, "Don't you think that your words might apply to another meaning for the little purse;" she responds: "Yes, if you like. That's what men think" (46). Dora here acknowledges the male objectification of women as sexual objects and subsequent degradation of women as individual, intellectual beings. Another instance occurs between scenes when Dora yells, "You think you can buy me? You think you can sell me?" (41) Dora again

highlights how men's actions in this play stem from the societal belief that women are objects to be traded. Disregard for female voices is evident when Dora's father refuses to believe her claims against Mr. K saying, "You must have imagined it! A man like Mr. K. is incapable of such intention." (36) Dora's own father does not believe her because he values men's voices more. The systematic nature of sexism is best exemplified when Freud states "I am an institution" (51). By calling himself an "institution", Freud illustrates how men dominate societal power structures through the upholding of sexist ideals. As a whole, sexism in this play appears as symptoms of an unjust system where women's voices and overall beings are seen as lesser than their male counterparts'.

Not only do women in this play experience sexism, but within this passage they become hardened by it, growing stronger with each blow. While recalling a dream she had dancing with a girl, Dora mentions how the girl carries around a heavy bag every day that Dora then offers to carry for her: "But instead of carrying it by the handle as she was doing, I sling it over my shoulder bandoleer-style... this bag is so extremely heavy that, staggering under the weight of it I had to go and crouch down at the edge of space." (52) While the bag could be seen as a metaphor for Dora's own emotional baggage, the fact that it is handed off between the only two women in the scene suggests that it may stand for something more, for the weight sexism places on women. The other woman only has to hold it by the handle, revealing how she has become accustomed to the weight and by extension more resilient to the sexism the bag represents. On the other hand, Dora, new to the weight, crumbles under it as she is physically struck by the sexism it represents. Dora's metaphorical weakness in this scene, however, lies in stark contrast with the following conversation that she has with her father. Mr. B states, "You are stronger than all of us put together" (53) which is repeated again in the following scene. This juxtaposition between the two scenes, first highlighting Dora's weakness and then her strength, illustrates this process of Dora's own hardening to sexism.

Due to the resilience women in this play build up to sexism, these women end up reinforcing sexist ideals as well, working to uphold a system that oppresses them instead of tearing it down. Mrs. K. tears down Dora, dismissing her claims against her husband, saying: "Dora *is* a child, who is only

interested in sexual matters. When she was staying at our house on the lake, she used to slip off and read *The Psychology of Love* by Montegazza and other such books, which excited her.” (36) As a fellow female, Mrs. K should understand Dora’s struggle, yet she does not, stifling Dora’s voice and falling into sexist patterns attacking female sexuality. However this tearing down of other women doesn’t always have to be through words as the woman Dora dances with her in dream breaks Dora in another way: “She has to carry this heavy bag around with her, every day. I offer to replace her, to relieve her for a while.” (52) With the bag as a metaphor for the weight of sexism, the passing off of it represents how the other woman places the weight of sexism onto Dora. Cixous displays this through word choice as well, as done in the shooting scene where Dora’s attackers shoot pearls instead of bullets (53). Pearls, as pieces of elegant jewelry mostly worn by women, are often associated with “proper” femininity. This substitution of “pearl” for “bullet” ties this societal standard of “proper” femininity to the destruction and pain caused by a bullet. In addition, the connotation of pearls as a “female” object highlights how women themselves, as “pearls”, force sexist ideals onto other women.

While Mrs. K does illustrate how women can contribute to sexism, her role in the play goes beyond that as her character also highlights the blurry line between men and women who uphold a sexist system. The use of “Mr. B, Mr. K, Mrs. K” (91) as character names instead of using their full names makes Mrs. K blend in with the men of the story. They all can and do hurt Dora by upholding sexism, building on a vision of sexism not as something enforced only by men but by people of all genders when they refuse to acknowledge and fight societal gender roles and instead place them on others. However, Mrs. K is not the only woman grouped with the men of this play as seen when the Voice of the Play outlines a scene where Dora is shot at: “They all pick up their guns. They spray Dora with thousands of pearls.” (53) The use of the ambiguous and all-encompassing “they”, instead of reference to specific people, highlights how one’s contribution to sexism is not dependent on gender, expanding on what was previously seen in Mrs. K’s character alone.

Although Dora is the punching bag for the women in this play, Dora herself is also complicit in this cycle of female oppression as seen in the metaphorical shooting scene and in Dora’s descriptions of

other women. After speaking of Dora's habit of touching her purse, Freud mentions switch points to which Dora replies, "Cross stitch, railway stitch, needlepoint, petit point. That's women's work." (46) Dora, in listing these sewing terms and labeling them "women's work", affirms the societal norm that women are in charge of domestic chores. Dora also does this when condemning her mother for never visiting her cheating father while he was sick, calling her stupid (28). Dora's attack on her mother stems from the sexist idea that wives must always be loyal to their husbands, even when their husbands are unloyal to them. In denouncing her mother's actions simply because they are not considered "proper", Dora maintains the sexist status quo. Even as the Voice of the Play describes the scene of Dora's shooting, she goes beyond being shot and into gathering up the loose shells "in case they should run out of ammunition." (53) This vivid imagery paints the picture of an injured girl who despite being wounded by her oppressors aids them in her own destruction, collecting ammunition to use herself. On the previous page, Dora also picks up the other girl's bag and carries it "bandoleer-style"(52), which is how soldiers carry ammunition, across the chest. This connection drawn between the bag she carries as ammunition and the pearls she collects from her shooters highlights how sexism, while breaking down women, also leads them to arm themselves.

While many readers of Cixous' *Portrait of Dora* see her work as a feminist retelling of Freud's *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, the work goes far beyond that to model how some women, after being hardened by sexism, actively contribute to upholding sexist ideals. The emblematic status of Dora in Freud as a case study continues in this work as Dora stands for more than herself. She symbolizes a problematic brand of feminism: one where women given a voice use it against other women instead of against the male authorities that have been silencing them. Even with a voice, Dora simply reiterates sexist ideals, as she views "women's work" the same as her male counterparts. By giving Dora a voice, but having her use it against other women, the play critiques one approach to feminism, pointing out how simply giving women a voice is not a solution.

However while *Portrait of Dora* critiques one brand of feminism, another of Cixous' works "The Laugh of Medusa" provides an alternative to this cycle of oppression, with women using their strength,

and struggles against sexism, to break the cycle instead of enforce it. By the time Cixous wrote *Portrait of Dora*, she already had published “The Laugh of Medusa”, where she lays out how women through writing can break this cycle of sexism by taking something traditionally oppressive and male dominated and shaping into something revolutionary:

Writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural— hence political, typically masculine— economy... where women has never *her* turn to speak—this being all the more serious and unpardonable in that writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures.

— “The Laugh of Medusa”, Hélène Cixous

This idea of using a previously oppressive tool and flipping its use to instead break the chains of oppression is precisely what Cixous does in writing *Portrait of Dora*. By making Freud’s case study her own and exposing the hidden nature of sexism, Cixous redefines “women’s work” as writing to disrupt a cycle of ignorance and fight sexism instead of upholding it.