

Female Evil in Rosalie Ham's Novel the Dressmaker (2000)

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Abstract

This research highlights the theme of female evil in Rosalie Ham's novel *The Dressmaker*. It mainly seeks to examine the evil aspect of female as it is portrayed in the selected novel. The qualitative method is used to study the evil side of the main character. The focus is made on the psychological aspect of female evilness. Therefore, this research is psychoanalytical, and it is based on Heinz Kohut's theory of self-psychology. Much specifically, Kohut's theory of self-psychology forms the basis of analyzing the heroine's psychological structure and her motives behind burning the city. The findings reflect that Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* embodies representations of the female evil. Moreover, this female evil is a reaction, or in a sense an act of revenge, to bullying, abuse and rejection faced by the main character in the selected novel.

Keywords: *The Dressmaker*, female evil, Rosalie Ham, gothic novel, self-psychology

1. Introduction

The human mind and its realities have been an important subject of art since antiquity. Writers of different genres have created representations of human mind and its complexities that, in many cases, bring about evil, revengeful and aggressive actions. Moreover, the impact of socio-familial relationships on the structure of a person's self has received much importance by novelists, playwrights, poets, philosophers, scholars, sociologists, religious men and psychologists. This is due to the complex nature of human mind and its responsibility for all actions made by a person, whether the actions are right or wrong.

It is believed that evil doings are the outcome of a person's psychological problems which are caused by self-other relationships. Generally, evil is defined as a moral wrong or action committed by a person. Murder, theft, and other moral evils are the most common and widely spread evil doings. However, some evils are not committed by people but are instead experienced by people. Natural evils are things like death, disease, and home destruction. One path to look at is the evil woman conception, which notes that women often treated harsher than men in the criminal justice process, and indicates that this different treatment stems from the idea that women criminals not only violated legal boundaries, but also the perceptions of women criminals (Embry & Lyons, 2012).

The Dressmaker, a novel in which a high-fashion tailor returns to the repressed small rural town from which she was exiled to make peace, raises suspicions that it embodies representations of the female evil. Many readers assumed it would be a case of "cold comfort ranch"; an educated city girl returns to introduce her town to culture and class, as she finds love and learns that there is no place like home, but only after the universe has sorted out all the mistakes of the past and the town realizes how special it is. This novel embodies many themes beyond the female evil, as there appears to be a surprising gothic tone behind the story, which keeps it from being too saccharine. Despite the fact that this novel lacks the horror element common in Gothic novels, Tilly's belief that she was cursed to harm those around her keeps things interesting. The inclusion of vengeance spanning multiple generations and the notion that fate is nothing more than using death to right wrongs lends it a gothic tone that would otherwise be lacking in a story set in a repressed Australian country town in the 1950s.

This brief introduction reflects that there is a need to study Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* for the sake of understanding the complex structure of Tilly's psychological world. It is also necessary to investigate the complex and negative relationship between Tilly and her society.

Significance of the Research:

1.1 Subjective Significance

The subjective significance of this research stems from the importance of its topic. That is, studying female evil and the motives behind it, as represented in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*, will generate an understanding about the negative side of female psyche in and reveal how females can be so aggressive in taking revenge. Besides, this study is the first study that applies Heinz Kohut's theory of self-psychology to explore the psychological aspects of *The Dressmaker*'s main character.

1.2 Objective Significance

The objective significance of this study stems from the significance of its findings that will hopefully provide deeper understanding of Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*. Moreover, the findings will enlighten other researchers who like to investigate the negative emotions which

are represented in the works of Rosalie Ham.

1.3 Problem Statement

Literary works in general and the novel in particular have embodied representations of different types of evil doings. Much importance is also given to the portrayal of female evil. The concept of female evil refers to all evil doings which are committed by women. Interestingly, the categorization of evil into male evil and female evil seem ambiguous and illogical. However, such a categorization is significant and justifiable in the sense that, in many cases, the motives behind committing evil doings vary according to gender difference. That is, the psychology of a female is different from that of a male due to the socio-familial practices and stereotypes that shape their internal worlds. In a patriarchal world, females have to face many types of injustice, rejection, exploitation, aggressiveness, harassment, etc., simply because they are viewed as the weak sex.

Many novelists have explored the female psychology and created lengthy works that portray the internal worlds of female characters. Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* is such a type of novel that ventures into the complex psychology of a female character and portrays her dark internal world. Ham succeeds in portraying the female evil reaction against social abuse and injustice.

1.4 Research Questions

This research is an endeavor to answer the following questions:

1. How is female represented in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*?
2. How does Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* deal with female evil?
3. What are the motives behind female evil in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*?

1.5 Objectives of the Research

This research seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To know whether Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* depicts the notion of female evil.
2. To know how the theme of female evil is represented in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*.
3. To know the motives behind female evil in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*.

2. Methodology of the Research

The descriptive analytical approach is used to describe and analyze the female evil as it is represented in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*. Much importantly, the analysis is based on Heinz Kohut's theory of self-psychology. That is, the analysis is based on Kohut's ideas like self-object needs, narcissism, and empathy.

2.1 Limits of the Research

This study is limited to examining the concept of female evil in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*. Moreover, it investigates the motives behind vengeance as is represented in the selected novel.

2.2 The Theory of Self Psychology

The present research relies on the theory of self-psychology as the basis for analyzing the traumatic experience of *The Dressmaker*'s main character. This theory was developed by Heinz Kohut in the second half of the twentieth century. It emphasizes the importance of self-other relationships for the development of cohesiveness and inner stability. Kohut discusses the concept of narcissistic rage (Kohut, 1968; Weshah, 2021) and argues that a person's narcissistic is the outcome of empathic failure. Many scholars followed Kohut's ideas. For example, in *Empathic Attunement*, Isaac & Rowe (2004) discuss certain self-psychological concepts like self-object, empathic relationships, narcissistic personality disorder and borderline personality disorder. Another psychoanalyst in this list is Phil Mollon (2001) who revisits Kohut's self-psychology in his *Releasing the Self*. Mollon makes a parallel between the Kohutian concepts of the fragmented self, empathy, self-object relationship, childhood trauma, narcissistic rage and other new perspectives in psychoanalysis like inter subjectivity, schizophrenia and the developmental neurobiology (Weshah, 2021). In his *The Restoration of the Self*, Kohut (2009) states that "the resistances are the activities of the archaic nuclear self...the resistances are motivated by disintegration anxiety" (p.136).

In fact, it was Heinz Kohut who first attempted to view a person's self as a psychological structure that is developed through his or her relationships with people, places and objects. His theory of self-psychology which was developed during the second half of the last century provides a deeper understanding of the human psychology (Weshah, 2021). In his book *Analysis of the Self*, Kohut views unempathic relationships as the cause of psychological problems, and he emphasizes the importance of the other's positive response for the stability of a person's internal world (Weshah, 2021).

The theory of self-psychology marked the beginning of a deviation from the Freudian orthodoxy that views the self as a component within the ego. Kohut believes that the self is not a dependent part within the ego but the center of a person's psychological world. His theory of self-psychology emphasizes the individual's need to form relationships rather than being motivated by certain sexual and aggressive drives (Weshah, 2021). Moreover, this theory includes many concepts like self-object needs, narcissistic rage, empathy, etc (Kohut, 1968). Kohut defined three primary self-object needs: merger with an idealized self-object; mirroring and twinship (Kleinberg, 2015). In this respect, the need for idealization, which refers to our needs to merge with, or be close to, someone who we believe will make us safe, comfortable and

calm, is emphasized (Baker & Baker, 1987).

Kohut's notion of selfobject needs emphasizes the importance of a person's self-mother relationship. In his book *The Analysis of the Self*, Kohut emphasizes the importance of mother figure's positive response for "The growth of the self-experience as a physical and mental unit which has cohesiveness in space and continuity in time" (Kohut, 2013, p.118). The mother figure is viewed as a self-object whose positive response to her child's needs is so important (Weshah, 2021). Much importantly, self-psychology emphasizes the idea that narcissistic rage, which is an explication of anger that brings about retaliation, is the outcome of problems in a person's narcissistic experience. Mollon, who revisits Kohut's self-psychology in *Releasing the Self*, makes a parallel between the Kohutian concepts of the fragmented self, empathy, self-object relationship, childhood trauma, narcissistic rage and other new perspectives in psychoanalysis like inter subjectivity, schizophrenia and the developmental neurobiology (Weshah, 2021). Thus, this theory, which is followed in the present research, provides a scientific exploration of narcissistic rage and its causes.

2.3 *Evil's Concept and Feminist Literature*

Discussing evil and suffering in feminism entails thinking about the questions it raises for our shared lives; for the feminist philosopher, it raises questions about how philosophical debates affect how we act in the world. One explanation for female evil is that fiction reflects reality's horrors. Women commit fewer violent crimes in general, but female characters' commit atrocities and are frequently given back stories to justify their actions. Women are frequently portrayed as evil by writers (Guerrero & Montano, 2016, p. 28). They seek vengeance, are rejected lovers, and seek to avenge the death of a child. They're "crazy, not bad," as McGrath put it. These diluted background wallpapers have the potential to soften their actions. The most terrifying evils are those for which there is no explanation. There aren't many female characters in this category.

In Rosalie Hamm's novel, published in 2000, is set in the 1950s in the Australian city of Dungatar. In the novel, Ham utilizes narrative conventions such as gothic, seduction, detective story, and vengeance tragedy to raise the reader's expectations and help them understand the novel effectively. Through the novel we can see how the author uses images and figurative language to employ these conventions in *The Dressmaker*.

The novel's opening paragraph employs images to convey the aesthetic innovations of the Australian Gothic genre. An important use of descriptive language in the opening paragraph creates an image of the haunted house aspect of the gothic sort, where the hilltop house "seen from the plains - a quaking lighthouse in the massive Black Sea..." demonstrates how spatially separated from the rest of the town it "casts a shadow" over the downtown area, depicting a sense of darkness. Even though Mad Molly's house is still not essentially cursed, the stylistic style expressed in the first section is recognized as Australian gothic. Tilly also contends she is haunted, indicating she seems to be on the evil path (Ham, 2000).

3. Discussion

The analysis of the text here is ordered with five parts, through which we try to list the most important events and characters related to the novel to answer the basic research question: How is female represented in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*? The events are told according to the chronological order of the novel and based on the characters embodied by the writer and in line with those events with which the heroine of the novel coexists. We will propose and analyze the notion of Female evil by dividing the novel into sections:

3.1 *Historical Context*

Dungatar, a fictional setting set in the Australian outback, is an excellent example. Because the Outback has no precise boundaries, the areas in Australia which are considered to be part of the Outback vary slightly from one another. The main guideline that helps us understand the outback is that it is in the middle of the country, much further from Australia's urban areas. Its primary business is grazing, that also includes cattle, sheep, and other animals like goats. Because of the harsh nature of the lifestyle, it tends to prefer rural villages with plenty of space for livestock. With the exception of cattle trading, such towns are commonly detected and rarely interact with others around the world. In Dungatar, we see huge economic divisions but also rigid perceptions about men and women's roles. The McSweeneys, for example, are impoverished, whereas Council Evan and his family are fairly wealthy. The majority of women in town either look after their kids or sit home, revealing the obsolete belief that a man's role is to work and a woman's role is to be a housewife. As flawed as these concepts are, they are a way of life for Dungatar that they have been stuck with for ages. Attempting to change their lifestyle might be harmful because it requires a complete rethinking of their live hood.

Teddy with Tilly meet for the first time when he runs to her aid while she is recovering a wheelchair for her mother from a rubbish dump. Their friendship plays a very important role in Tilly's circumstances improving throughout the novel's second, or "Shantung" part, due to their shared situation as strangers. General interest increases as packages of fabric and sewing goods begin to emerge at the post office for her. When Tilly enters with Teddy at a football club ball, she wears a stunning, tight green skirt, which she sewed from fabric purchased at the Pratt shop. The people notice she is a talented Dressmaker. "Women begin approaching her and begging for sewing services after she designs a wonderful, elegant wedding dress for the big, clumsy Pratt daughter"(Ham,2000, p.25).

Tilly, also known as Myrtle Dunnage, is a well-known seamstress and the main character of *The Dressmaker*. The story begins with a detailed narrative of Tilly's life, which must be taken into account because she is cursed from her ejection from Dongatar following Stuart Bateman's accidental death. Then there was the discovery of Pablo, a seven-month-old baby, in his cradle, as well as the deaths of Teddy and Molly. Ever since Tilly started her life she has believed in survival and the only way to do that is to embrace her value and reject toxic

societies at first. In fact, despite Tilly's first noble effort of caring for her mother in Dungatar, the town's escalating desire for revenge only contributes to Tilly's pessimism. Here, we can explore that the concept of evil has yet to emerge because Tilly is unusually focused on the individual, and will not tolerate anyone, or anything, seeking to conform to the status quo and its oppression of individualism.

In this novel, Tilly Dunagh returns to the small Australian town where she was exiled as a child after twenty years of perfecting the art of tailoring in Paris couture houses. She only intends to visit her sick mother and then leave. But Tilly decided to stay, and though she was still an outcast, the gorgeous women of Dungatar found her lush and dainty dresses irresistible. She accepts a measure of malevolence through her fashion business, friendship with Sergeant Frat—the only cop in town with an unusual passion for fabrics and a budding romance with Teddy, a local soccer star whose family is almost as insulted as her own. But when her dresses begin to stir up competition and envy in the city, causing an old resentment to emerge, it becomes clear that Tilly's mind is bent on an even darker design: revenge on those who wronged her, in the most spectacular way (Ham, 2000).

An eloquent stranger visiting downtown for two days is astounded to see how nicely dressed the women of Dungatar are. Sparkly dresses with asymmetrical necklines, as seen in European fashion... Elegant frocks, showing flair in pantsuits... She walked downstairs towards Ladies Lounge, where she spotted a group of women chattering at a table, enjoying lemon squash, and wearing astrakhan-trimmed Balenciaga knockoffs. (Ham, 2000, p.52).

Tilly claims she can't move because the people of the town haven't rewarded her services, so the stranger finds her and gives her a job in Melbourne. Tilly is a beautiful visitor who comes to visit the town and stays in the hotel for couple of days. She shocked to see the "Dungatar Women," therefore knowing her character requires looking at these diverse qualities. Tilly is still troubled by the notion of evil, and she isn't convinced of the village's manner. We need to take a look at Tilly's behaviors. Tilly arrives, and despite the fact that everyone immediately likes and respects her, Tilly says that she is unable to leave since the villagers have not paid her for her efforts. It is the basis of her livelihood.

3.2 *The Female Evil in the Dressmaker*

The female evil in Ham's *The Dressmaker* is represented as an outcome of a history of bully, injustice and social rejection. Tilly was excited to be working, but she recalled her past, when Stewart Pettyman was the ringleader of her bullying. He pushed her against the library walls when they were 10 years old. Moreo, he felt her up, and threatened to murder her and her mother if she moved. He then took a step back and charged at her, his head lowered, with the intention of butting her in the stomach. Tilly stood aside, and as he ran headfirst into a brick wall, he was dead. The town condemned Tilly, who was taken from her mom and then sent to school in Melbourne. She finally worked in a clothing factory and later traveled to Europe's fashionable cities to learn the profession of couturier (Ham, 2000, p.73).

Here, the author tries to say that Tilly has many reasons for the idea of evil stemming from her. Tilly has flashbacks of her childhood when Stuart Bateman was the leader of the gang bullying her. Past events and accumulations lead the character down the right path. Tilly's experiences taught her to distrust others and to take special care of others. Tilly, who was kidnapped from her mother and sent to Melbourne, is being blamed. In fact, the feeling of being betrayed is always attributed to others, and they are always blamed. Many writers have created characters that are obsessed with the past. For example, in Niekerk's two novels, *Triomf* and *Agaat* (2015), the main characters obsessively revisit the past again and again. Therefore, the past is viewed as the historiographic archive which contains images of their cracked and fragmented selves. In *Triomf*, for instance, the character of Lambert experiences psychic conflict and depression as he repeatedly recalls the past. Being the product of the incestuous relationship of Mol, Pop and Treppie Benade, Lambert is unable to know his biological father (Weshah, 2021). Consequently, he fails to develop a stable sense of self. This inability to develop a sense of self can also be noticed in V. S. Naipaul's works. In V. S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (2012), for example, the character of Singh reflects an inner sense of conflict and restlessness. Having traveled to London, Married an Englishwoman, he feels a sense of fragmentation as he comes back home (Weshah, 2021). Psychologically, he is unable to remerge with the places where he spent his childhood, and at the same time he fails to establish a sense of belonging to the English land. Again, in *A Bend in the River* (1980), Naipaul touches the notion of self-fragmentation through the character of Salim, who descends from an Indian Muslim family and lives in Congo. Salim is unable to merge with the African community and at the same time he has no real sense of belonging to the land of his ancestors. His ideas are "a jumble, are simplified fragments, and that his mind is filled with junk" (Harrow, 1991).

In the same context, something upsets Tilly more than local snootiness and childhood memories. Teddy welcomes Tilly to his family's Holiday near the garbage dump, but she refuses, citing the joy with the tiny kids near the tree, claiming, "That would destroy my heart," without clarifying why. Despite Tilly's increasing passion for Teddy and her business achievement, it seems that there will be no typical happy ending. When another person dies, the people accuse her of being responsible because she was present at the moment. This is yet another point of accusation. We must make it clear that Tilly is going through a lot of things that caused her to take a different path in life and become such an evil individual in the community. Tilly's situation declines in the third section. She feels cursed, despite being innocent in Stewart's death and this recent second one. The motif of burning contributes to the experience's atmosphere. The McSwineys pack up their belongings and flee town, setting fire to their camp. The town soon starts burning waste in the garbage, blowing noxious smoke upward towards Tilly's home (Ham, 2000, p.200).

Finally, readers discover Tilly's secret anguish, her family's previous struggles, and Tilly's father's identity. Rather than accepting the Melbourne position, she decides to seek revenge on Dungatar. The nasty-natured Dungatar people are the creators of their misery in the novel's final section. Tilly's only role is to design costumes. Tilly's major motivation for being evil was to burn rubbish in the trash pit, which

sent irritating smoke into her home. "Suffering will not be our curse any longer, Molly," Molly promised her mother before she died. It will be our revenge as well as our cause." Tilly is the personification of evil, and the residents of Dungatar of wicked nature are indeed the cause of their misery; all Tilly has to do is make clothing, and there is no offense in that (Latta, 2009). The thoughts that make Tilly's internal world chaotic is similar to what Rosenberg has described. In his book *Conceiving the Self*, Rosenberg (1986) presents a description of what the self is. He views the self as an object which is made of feelings and thoughts. Other scholars like Pierre Janet used the term dissociation. In this context, Pierre Janet's doctoral dissertation *L'Automatisme Psychologique* is his first major study of dissociation. Janet's explication of dissociation involves his discussion of concepts like traumatic memory, very similar to Tilly's case. In this respect, R.D. Laing (2010) uses the term ontological insecurity to describe a self that is characterized by instability. Commenting on this point, Weshah (2021) states that Laing attempts to define man's internal world in relation to certain existential changes and life difficulties.

Tilly lives in town, and while society condemns her for Ted's death and abandons her once more, she starts producing clothes for the women of the surrounding towns. A competition between neighbors occurs. Molly Dunnage, then dies suddenly. Later, one of the neighborhood's meanest gossips suffers a serious injury while snooping, and the town's chemist drowns. Both of these accidents were unintentional (Ham, 2000). Tilly then begins to reveal the truth about Tilly's heritage and Stewart's death to Marigold Prettyman, the town councilman's wife; that Councilor Evan Prettyman was Tilly's father; and that he had also been taking drugs and abusing Marigold that evening. Marigold eventually kills her husband before trying to commit suicide with the same drugs that her husband used on her. Readers are attracted to Tilly's being a lovely character, notably one who was kind to her enemies and offered them a second opportunity to respect her fairly.

Tilly, on the other hand, seems to be intended for evil, especially now that the point has approached its peak, as Tilly has to be tough and keep her inner fibers. Tilly produces extravagant garments and elaborately retaliates in the final part, which is regarded as lavish brocade. Here, evil does not exist in a single place or happen suddenly; rather, it emerges through time. When a District Inspector arrives to check on the unusual increase in deaths, the policeman seems surprised (Ham, 2000, p.77). Tilly knows about an upcoming Eisteddfod and recommends that the drama must be included when outfitting one of the women from the nearby town. The people in the town came to her for support with the clothes for their rendition of Macbeth, which they didn't know and wished to stage in classical style. Tilly refuses unless she is paid a fee for the costumes and is rewarded for her previous efforts. The money comes from payments that should have been spent to restore the town's facilities. Tilly sews all of the outfits and stands by as the entire people arrive to either perform or watch the show. She immediately sprays the town with fuel and sets fire to her home, escaping with just her sewing machine. Tilly goes by train, leaving the damaged town to be discovered by the people after the show (Ham, 2000). Tilly promises to do so until she is paid for her previous labor and is ahead on the dresses, which increases the extent of the evil within Tilly's mind. Tilly intended to produce all the costumes and watch as she left the city, either to participate or to see a performance, so she set out to do so.

4. Findings

Based on the previous psychoanalytical analysis, this research has found that the theme of female evil is represented in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* through the character of Tilly. Moreover, female evil is represented in Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker* through Tilly's aggressive reaction to the social bully, social rejection and injustice. It has also been found that the motives behind the female evil in the selected novel are related to Tilly's revenge against social rejection, bully and injustice. It is the outcome of her inner narcissistic rage.

5. Conclusion

The theme of female evil occupies a wide space in the thematic structures of Rosalie Ham's *The Dressmaker*. Ham presents the idea that female evil is not an action but a reaction. Moreover, it is the outcome of internal insecurity, instability and lack of empathy. Besides, Ham depicts the female evil through the revengeful act of Tilly. That is, revenge is a product of female evil which is fueled by narcissistic rage. In short, Tilly's life has greatly turned into a vital path after seeing many of the residents of this village. Many residents wanted to be against her. Here, society can create an evil person. Tilly departs by train, leaving the burning city. Thus, writer clarified that there is a female evil in the novel through the gradation of this evil as follows:

Gingham is a checkered fabric made of cotton or threads. Gingham is frequently used in fashion design as a "test fabric" or to make napkins. It thus provided us with a vintage vibe, signifying Tilly's comeback to her homeland as well as its fascinating history. Tilly's name is believed to be derived from a Malay term that means "isolated," indicating her thoughts of total isolation in the Doncaster region. Within that section of the novel, Sergeant Firat also bought gingham fabric to secretly modify into something like a dress, symbolizing that the neighborhood was always full of surprises and indeed the disparities between the common and special figures among its community members.

Shantung is a fiber that is widely used in bridal dresses. Gertrude was indeed married throughout this department, and Tilly's dress is the first example in town that attested to her work. Shantung originated in China, revealing the grotesque or exotic that pervaded city dwellers' perceptions of the dress.

Felt, it is the diadem that is strongly used, as the writer recounted the scope through which Tilly works and shows hatred and evil, and a diversity of Tilly costumes were also revealed in the city to show.

-Brocade, a boldly colored material crafted from silver and gold threads. It is also most typically found in leather, garments, and fashion. This is a reference to the Dungatar stage clothing and aftermaths that inspired Tilly to perform the feminine act of evil.

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