

### Self-Aware Victims of Convention

In her article *Victims of Convention* Jean E Kennard explains that there is a disconnect between the heroines and their endings in the works of novelists who deal with women's coming of age stories. Kennard explains that authors such as Austen, Eliot and the Brontë sisters, wrote of idealistic heroines and their personal journeys of maturation in a way that reflected a deep understanding of the female psychology, yet seemed to forget their character's development by marrying them off in conventional marriages that perpetuate women's roles according to society.

Kennard explains that novelists, unable to disregard the marriage convention, resort to illustrating the heroine's evolution through the convention of the wrong suitor vs. right suitor, in which the heroine must reject the wrong suitor, who represents the wrong values and is not based on reality, in favor of the right suitor, who does represent a realistic world view as well as the right values. Kennard's view is that all things considered, it seems unlikely that the heroine would find fulfillment with either suitor. The novelists seem to have sacrificed their themes for their aesthetics because they (the novelists) are victims of convention as well. Kennard's arguments are accurately represented in her example from *A Room with a View*, in which Forster makes his heroine Lucy reject Cecil and marry George, even though the entire novel is a critique of conventional society. During the story Lucy wishes for the freedom to have independent thought, but she is only able to understand and express her wishes after George explains them to her. In the end, Lucy's biggest defiance of convention is eloping with George, who is deemed to be unsophisticated. The book's final chapter, in which Lucy and George have already eloped, does not match the tone of previous chapters by its portrayal of their version of domestic bliss.

For the most part I agree with Kennard. I agree that authors seem unable to disregard the two suitors-formula when writing about complex women, arranging love matches that do not allow

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their heroines to explore any alternative lifestyle choices. Their growth always culminates in a husband. However, though it may seem contradictory within the novel that these heroines should find true contentment in the exact path dictated by society, I do feel it reflects real life. Even in modern times with all the personal freedoms afforded to women (mainly in western societies), everyday women face the same issue of the wrong suitor vs. the right suitor, (or perhaps no suitor at all who might interfere with their ambitions!) and how these choices can affect their present and future. If real life women cannot escape this conundrum, a heroine who rises above might become unrelatable to them. I daresay, the fact that these novels present such an ideal and romantic right suitor at all, is what preserves their statuses as forms of escapism in the minds of readers.

Kennard claims that “Novelists are still defining women’s experiences in terms of their relationships with men, are still using a convention that was made popular with Jane Austen. Yet women no longer define themselves in this way, even if they once did; they are artists, lawyers, professors – people.” But it is not surprising to see that literature still perpetuates the old narratives. The truth is that women have not been able to separate themselves from societies expectations of marriage and motherhood, they are now expected to want and pursue both a family and professional achievements. Both society and literature would need to evolve further for these conventions to cease being the template, though I doubt they would ever go fully out of favor for novelists (and readers).

## Works Cited

Kennard, Jean. "Victims of Convention." *Pacific Coast Philology* (1973): 23-27.