

lecture 8: Haters gonna hate: the unlikeable protagonist (feminism part 2)

1. Discussion of the songs

the songs:

- The Archer
- Anti-Hero
- Shake it off
- Look What You Made Me Do
- Vigilante Shit

questions:

- What are these songs about?
- How does she characterise her audience?
- (If relevant) Who is the 'you' being addressed in the song?

The Archer

- How does the speaking persona characterise herself in the song?
 - Greek/classical mythology: Olympian gods → archers, combat, hunter and prey...
 - allusions to cupid, amazons...
 - someone who is alone, lost her friends
 - lonely at the top
 - she's a Sagittarius - indicates that she is the archer
 - reference to humpty dumpty → childish innocence
 - Actaeon turned into a deer by Diana after he saw her bathing → he's being hunted by his own dogs
 - self-sabotage? (jumping off a train)
- How does she characterise her audience? / Who is the 'you'?
 - the fans as the audience, who still love her even though she's not reliable
 - audience could also be another
 - herself as the audience?
 - solitude, isolation, self-reflection → divided speaking persona (link to anti-hero)
 - solitude and the heroic

Anti-Hero

- How does the speaking persona characterise herself in the song?
 - Taylor as the speaking persona
 - self-sabotage (one sees oneself as a monster)
 - referring to herself as a narcissist (reference to Greek mythology)
 - her against the world but also against herself
- How does she characterise her audience? / Who is the 'you' song?
 - her fans, friends, enemies...

- she tries to fit in everywhere but she doesn't fit in anywhere (also seen in the video where she's bigger than the others) → imposter syndrome
- everyone fights for her, everyone wants a piece of her and thinks they know something about her

Shake it off

- How does the speaking persona characterise herself in the song?
 - video: rather silly, she's bad at dancing but it doesn't matter, she still has fun and has a good time even though she's bad at it → anti-perfectionism
 - link to anti-hero: trying to fit in everywhere but she never fits in
 - careless
 - claiming ownership of critique
- How does she characterise her audience? / Who is the 'you'?
 - hoping for her audience to also care less, say 'I don't care'
 - she's claiming ownership of the critique

Look What You Made Me Do

- How does the speaking persona characterise herself in the song?
 - death of her old persona, grave, undead (reinvented herself)
 - imagery of resurrection (she comes out of the grave as an ugly zombie) → not designed to ...
 - gothic (historically seen as problematic, associated with women, critique...)
 - cage metaphor
 - her claiming back her power (e.g. snakes) → imagery of cheating, lying...
 - heist imagery
- How does she characterise her audience? Who is the 'you'?
 - the people who criticised her, are against her → she's saying 'I'm still me, I'm rising above' (can be seen in the video with her rising above her other personas)

Vigilante Shit

- How does the speaking persona characterise herself in the song?
 - link to LWYMMMD
 - she characterises herself as a spy, vengeful woman, a criminal genie
 - take your revenge, don't sit there, don't get sad, get even
 - taking justice into her own hands
- How does she characterise her audience? / Who is the 'you'?

2. Discussion of unlikeable protagonists

- Who are they, and why are they unlikeable?
- Multiple examples were given: Sherlock Holmes, Jay Gatsby...
- see Padlet on Ufora for the full list

3. What is the antihero?

- anti-hero contradicts our expectations
- if i don't like them - why is that? what expectations are they contradicting?
- unreliable narration
- anti-hero = a character that is different, stands out

4. William Makepeace Thackeray - Vanity Fair

- Statement:
 - 'There is not a person in the book who excites the reader's respect, and not one who fails to excite his interest [...] The novel not only has no hero, but implies the non-existence of heroism. Yet the fascination of the book is indisputable, and it is due to a variety of causes besides its mere exhibition of the worldly side of life.' (Edwin Percy Whipple, 1865)
- Main question: Is Vanity Fair 'a novel without a hero'?
- paratext (all the things that surround the book) sets up some expectations, which were partly fulfilled
- in relation to antiheroism
- Dobbin might be close to being a hero
 - heroic in terms of his military achievements
 - reader feels frustration with him for wasting his life on this 'quite silly woman'
- Amelia as the most moral character, but she's not interesting, she's almost too good and boring (colourless, naive, childlike) → almost unlikeable because she's so good
- Becky unlikeable because she is 'so bad'
 - she's a woman, there are certain expectations at the time for them
- George died in the war and treated as a hero, while he was not a great man when he was alive
 - almost literally held up as a hero (picture on the wall)
 - those who 'fetishize' heroes – different reality

5. Charlotte Brontë - Vilette

- autobiographical novel, Vilette as Brussels
- protagonist who is like 'oh I'm not attractive' to the extent that it becomes annoying (// Twilight and Jane Eyre)
- she frustrates our expectations of a narrator
 - she says that she recognised Dr. John way back but she didn't mention it to the reader
 - contract between narrator and reader: to tell the truth → this book plays with that contract
- 3 statements
 - discussion in groups: agree/disagree + argumentation
- Statements:

- 'Miss Bronte has written a hideous, undelightful, convulsed, constricted novel [...] one of the most utterly disagreeable books I ever read. [Her mind contains] nothing but hunger rebellion and rage' (Matthew Arnold, 1853)
- [Lucy Snowe] is in a state of chronic nervous fever for the most part; is usually silent and suffering; when she speaks, speaks in enigmas or in raillery, and now and then breaks out under the torture of passion; but she acts admirably - with readiness, sense, conscience and kindness. Still we do not wonder that she loved more than she was beloved.' (Harriet Martineau, 1853)
- 'You dislike [Bronte's characters] at first, yet you learn to love them' (George Henry Lewes, 1853)
- Main question: Choose one of the statements to respond to. Decide on an argument and choose (at least) five quotations from the novel to support your point. Discuss each briefly.
- Our discussion for statement 3:

Even towards the end of the novel, we disliked Lucy Snow. She was still unreliable. We understood her more towards the end, but still, love is a big word. A better word would be that we 'tolerated' her.

Quotes:

- Nobody spoke. Mrs. Bretton, being a mother shed a tear or two. Graham, who is writing lifted up his eyes and gazed at her. I, Lucy Snowe, was calm (P.22)
→ She refers to herself as the only calm one who is put together. This is from the beginning of the book, and as the reader we do not know her that well but she praises herself and puts the other characters down and points out their faults and flaws.
- Two days after came home – a pink dress! "That is not for me," I said hurriedly, feeling that I would almost as soon clothe myself in the costume of a Chinese lady of rank (P.207)
→ Here she pulls herself down, but at the same time, she is humble bragging. She is the ultimate pick-me girl here (fishing for compliments). She seems ungrateful, they made her a custom-made dress.
- And was I grateful? God knows! (p.404)
→ This quote comes from the end of the book, but she is still quite unlikeable and ungrateful. So we disagree with George Henry Lewes because it is really hard to like her in our opinion.

6. How do Thackeray's and Brontë's unlikeable protagonists represent a challenge to society?

- gender roles are challenged, social classes
- expectations of women that they always have to be happy
- characters self-aware about the contradiction of expectations
- reading, vision, eyes, seeing, not seeing

7. What does it mean for Taylor Swift to frame herself as an unlikeable character?

- women don't always have to be perfect (woman as young, pretty and marriageable), they're just human and can do things we don't always agree with
- Jia Tolentino
- situating herself in a long line of female antiheroes