

An Approach to (Vulner)able Women in Paula Hawkins's Novels

Abstract:

The notion of vulnerability has had a very prolific role in the last years, as the term has been applied to many and varied fields of research, being contemporary literature one of them. Taking Emmanuel Lévinas's notion of the ethical encounter between the self and the other through what he calls the "face of the other" ("The Trace of the Other" 351) my aim is to explore through literary analysis how vulnerability is portrayed in contemporary literature and how it may affect that ethical connection. Lévinas himself in a later work, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (1998), describes the unveiling of the other's face as: "extreme exposure, defenselessness, vulnerability itself" (145). In this way, Lévinas draws particular attention to the encounter with the *vulnerable* other, which inevitably makes the self be vulnerable as well, as s/he is unable to resist the ethical call (Shildrick 2002, 92). This duality of vulnerability allows us to explore the notion not only as it has been traditionally understood—as a weakness, difficulty or impairment to the subject—but rather as a tool for self-acceptance, empowerment and agency that may facilitate the ethical connection. To address this idea, as both the ethical encounter with alterity and vulnerability are two very broad fields of study, I will focus on the way that vulnerable female characters are presented and developed in two contemporary and widely popular British novels: Paula Hawkins's novels *The Girl on the Train* (2015) and *Into the Water* (2017). These best-selling novels introduce leading female characters who can be labeled as vulnerable both from a physical and a psychological viewpoint. Therefore, by briefly analysing the plot of the novels as well as by close reading key passages, I will reflect on which elements make a woman be considered as vulnerable in today's societies. At this point, Judith Butler's, Erinn Gilson's and Margrit Shildrick's works will be of use to reflect on why despite the fact that vulnerability is a universally shared human characteristic, it is especially attached to women for both biological and socially constructed reasons. However, as I will conclude with my analysis, it is these characters' female vulnerability that allows them to move from victims to agents of their own lives. Instead of being static and passive subjects, they are able to embrace their own limitations and reconstruct their sense of selves, which allows them to take control over their lives and relate to others (particularly other women) in a different, more ethical and emphatic way. I will conclude by suggesting that this change in representing women in contemporary fiction may be in fact a new trend that aims to show real women who despite their debilities are proactive subjects, characters with whom contemporary readers are able to emphasise, being *vulner-ability* the perfect transition in this process.

References:

Hawkins, Paula. *The Girl on the Train*. London: Doubleday, 2015.

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Lévinas, Emmanuel. *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*. Translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia UP, 1998.

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Keywords:

Vulnerability; ethics; otherness; women; contemporary fiction