

Evelyn Hugo's Defiance Against "True Womanhood" and Her Agency in *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine Taylor Jenkins Reid's historical fiction, *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017), focusing on how the protagonist, Evelyn Hugo, challenges the 1950s' values of True Womanhood. During this era, women were expected to be conventional housewives, but Evelyn, a young woman herself, rejects these traditional values, diverging from the ideal woman's life. This rebellion makes her character intriguing to study. My analysis explores how Evelyn defies the three virtues of True Womanhood and how this defiance grants her the agency to shape her own life. We will use Welter's 1966 critique, *The Cult of True Womanhood*, and Giddens' 1986 Concept of Agency to guide my analysis. The findings reveal that Evelyn defies societal norms by taking control of her body, rejecting societal expectations, and asserting her personal autonomy. Her desire for financial independence and self-reliance drives her defiance, allowing her to live without shame or guilt. Evelyn Hugo emerges as a feminist figure, using her defiance to gain agency in a male-dominated world and living ahead of her time.

Keywords: agency, defiance, independency, personal autonomy, true womanhood

INTRODUCTION

Historical fiction is still the publishing industry's mainstay. Johnson (2002) stated that historical fiction is a fiction that is set in the past but still emphasizes themes that are relatable to the present times. Nevertheless, the main purpose of historical fiction is to provide entertainment for the readers by portraying a genuine reality of the past (Lindblad, 2018). This genre maintains its popularity because it offers a sense of nostalgia for readers. It allows the readers to transport into a specific period through the character's point of view, romanticizing history. According to Short (2022), this experience describes the emotions that something is incomplete or imperfect as well as the desire for a flawless alternative experience. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) by Taylor Jenkins Reid is a well-known historical novel that has reached its peak of popularity during 2019. The writer decides to use this text in this study due to its content that has the cultural context of 1950s, yet the main character, Evelyn, has the characteristics of a modern woman. Hence, making her seem like a controversial woman during her time.

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo (2017) is a historical fiction whose setting takes place mainly in Hollywood during the 1950s. Evelyn's story is told in a flashback manner by her seventy-nine-year-old self during an interview with a journalist named Monique Grant. It tells the story of Evelyn, a poor Cuban-American woman who grew up witnessing her mother suffering from poverty and abuse from her father during the marriage. When her mother died, Evelyn's father planned to sell her off by marrying her to some random older men. Evelyn realizes she does not have any skill, but she has her beauty. During her teenage years, she came across a boy who let her take anything from his store in exchange for showing her chest to him. From then on, she realizes that she possesses such attractiveness which she can use to her advantage. Hence, she decides to utilize her beauty to escape poverty by being an actress.

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During her journey as an actress, Evelyn has taken several actions that were deemed improper during her time which aids her in advancing her career. However, Evelyn continues to do what she feels is right despite the peculiar methods she uses. Until the end of her life, Evelyn is still loved as a renowned celebrity while also being labeled as a controversial woman.

Although the book is published in recent years, the cultural context of the book is set in the 1950s. Throughout the text, Evelyn Hugo is depicted as a woman who has done actions that are deemed inappropriate for a woman during her time. Her actions are considered inappropriate because they are against American society's criteria of an ideal woman in the 1950s, which is traced back to ideal women's values in the 1800s known as True Womanhood. She married seven times with seven different men as well as seducing and having sex with other men before and in between her seven marriages. She also appeared on the big screen undressed or semi-undressed most of the time. In the house, she dismisses her domestic duties and shows autonomous behavior towards her husbands. True Womanhood is a set of values that dictates the quality of a true woman mentioned by historian Barbara Welter in a 1966 article titled *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 - 1860*. It is a cultural belief in the 19th century that dictates the gender roles of white upper-class and middle-class women. Welter (1966) described that there are four values a woman should have: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. If a woman deviates from this set of values, then she would be regarded as corrupt and dishonorable. In this novel, Evelyn Hugo is shown not complying with the values of purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

We will use Welter's critics titled *The Cult of True Womanhood* that criticizes a set of values called the True Womanhood that dictates how the white upper and middle-class woman should behave in the 19th century. Although Welter's theory is addressed to 19th-century society, the theory is still relevant in the time setting of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. The set of values that was said to be the benchmark of how a woman should act in the 1800s is still used to evaluate women during Evelyn's era. Therefore, the criticism will also be used to analyze the ways Evelyn defies the traditional gender roles. In True Womanhood, a woman "judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter, 1966, p. 152). First of all, piety is regarded as the most important virtue women should have. It is stated that "religion or piety was the core of a woman's virtue, the source of her strength" (Welter, 1966, p. 152). It suggests that a woman's moral strength and ability to cope come from her strong faith and commitment to her religion. Second, society regards purity as the second most important thing a woman should maintain. Welter (1966) noted that society regards the absence of purity as unfemininity, "without it, she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order. Third, submissiveness is deemed as the most feminine among the virtues. Instead of acting and feeling autonomously, a woman should submit to a man. Lastly, society also prefers domestic women. Welter's (1966) findings also suggest that society believes domesticity is the most prized virtue even among women.

We will also use the concept of agency by Anthony Giddens to analyze Evelyn's agency. Agency is the capacity of individuals to act on their own and make choices that lead them to their own course of life as well as the social structures around them. Giddens (1986) emphasizes that "agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place" (p. 9). When talking about agency, it is inseparable from the exercise of power. Giddens (1986) notes that "to be able to 'act otherwise' means being able to intervene in the world or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs" (p. 14), means having agency let individuals change the status quo, whether by doing something or choosing not to do it. To be considered as agents within social structures, individuals must have two essential capabilities. First, agents

should possess motivations or reasons that drive them to do actions, providing a foundation for their behavior. Second, they must possess the ability to explain their motivations when questioned. While some rules can cause limitations, they can also give opportunities for them to exert their agency. Some rules can limit individuals from doing certain things while enabling the agency at the same time. Such as how the True Womanhood limits Evelyn's autonomy yet drives her to gain her autonomy at the same time.

ANALYSIS

Evelyn's defiance is interesting due to her mindset which is different from the majority of young women during her time. In the 1950s, most American women longed to be the ideal feminine women. On the contrary, Evelyn refuses to follow the rules of being an ideal woman. We will search for her behaviors that are in contrast with the virtues of True Womanhood which are described in the text.

Evelyn Hugo's Defiance Against the Three Virtues of True Womanhood

First, Evelyn defies the purity virtue that requires women to keep their bodies as pure as possible to take ownership of her body. Evelyn Hugo sees her body as a commodity that helps her in obtaining her goal. In this case, her body does not merely serve as the source of labor power, but "a more comprehensive form of physical capital; a possessor of power, status, and distinctive symbolic forms" (Shilling, 2003, p. 111). Evelyn is not using her body to work for money, but her body itself has become valuable as a form of physical capital. She realized her attractiveness in terms of physicality is considered a valuable good in society, especially men. She uses her body as a tradable item to get what she wants. The excerpts below will show how Evelyn uses her body on purpose to get what she wants.

So I put on my favorite green dress, the one I had just about grown out of. And I knocked on the door of the guy I heard was headed to Hollywood. I could tell just by the look on his face that Ernie Diaz was glad to see me. And that's what I traded my virginity for. A ride to Hollywood. Ernie and I got married on February 14, 1953.... I was just fifteen by that point, but my father signed the papers (Reid, 2017, p. 58).

The excerpts narrate Evelyn's procedure in exchanging her virginity with her first husband for a ride to Hollywood. She uses her body as a form of commodity in exchange for being an actress in Hollywood. In this case, she has no other means for an exchange except her body. This suggests that Evelyn understands her body's value from the point of view of a man. She confidently believes that by offering her body, the man will grant her wish. According to Welter (1966), loss of purity is often associated with guilt of crime and madness or death. In contrast, Evelyn's behavior that willingly losing her "innocence" at the age of fifteen for the sake of her goal shows her unawareness of the value of ideal women. Her lack of emotion and inner conflicts when she describes the incidents, aside from the fact that she sees her body as an asset, shows her ignorance of the values of purity as dictated by True Womanhood.

Evelyn defies the purity virtue of True Womanhood because she does not see her body as a temple. She defies the value without any guilt or inner conflict that baffles her. This is due to her environment that drives her to think of her body as an asset for getting what she wants. Her outlook on this is in contrast with the purity value of True Womanhood.

Second, Evelyn also defies the societal norms that women should be submissive through her assertiveness and ambition Evelyn is an assertive woman who stands on her ground even against her husband although it is advised that women should be dependence and

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conscious of their inferiority, and thankful for men's support (Welter, 1966). She shows assertiveness toward her husband in regard to the leader in their relationship. Below is the excerpt of Evelyn's conversation with her second husband, Don Adler, about Evelyn's last name.

"People around town are asking why you're still going by Evelyn Hugo."

"I changed my name legally. What do you mean?"

"On the marquee. It should say 'Don and Evelyn Adler.' That's what people are saying."

"Who is saying that?"

"People."

"What people?"

"They think you wear the pants."

My head fell into my hands. "Don, you're being silly..." "I think you have gotten the wrong impression here, Evelyn," Don said... "We are not equals, love. And I'm sorry if I've been so kind that you've forgotten that." (Reid, 2017, p. 89-104)

Evelyn refuses to change her last name publicly because her last name Hugo is more selling and is the one helping her towards her success. Her action contrasts with the submissive virtue of True Womanhood. Despite Evelyn having changed her family name legally to her husband's, the media still regards Evelyn as Evelyn Hugo instead of Evelyn Adler which irritates her husband due to people's perception that Evelyn Hugo is the "leader" in their marriage. Evelyn refuses to change her last name publicly because her last name Hugo is more selling and is the one helping her towards her success. Evelyn's action in refusing to change her last name is against the statement that women should be dependent and grateful for men's support. By refusing to publicly announce her last name as 'Adler', she has stood her ground and shown independence. The husband's demand is also based on submissive virtue. He believes that Evelyn's position in their marriage is lower than his and expects her to silently obey him. His reminder about their inequality suggests that Evelyn is not aware of her inferiority.

Evelyn also defies the submissive virtue by pursuing her ambition. During her time, a woman should not think of any ambition and be fulfilled by her husband's achievement instead. Yet, Evelyn believes that her dream is important and insists on chasing it. The excerpts below will help this study to provide further explanation.

I had come to Hollywood to do one thing, and I was going to do it.... I went home and told Ernie that I was shocked that anyone at Sunset Studios would be interested in the little old me. I said that being an actress would just be a fun lark, a thing to do to pass the time until my real job of being a mother began. Grade-A bullshit.... "Sure," he said. "I think it's a smart thing to do. You'll get better, and who knows, you might even star in a picture one day." I would start. I wanted to punch his lights out (Reid, 2017, p. 59-61).

Evelyn's ambition to be a Hollywood actress is evident in her determination. Her strong reaction towards her husband's response which seemingly belittles her also suggests that she is very passionate about pursuing her ambition of being an actress. The way she devalues her goal to be an actress to her husband, Ernie, claiming that acting is just a "fun lark" until she starts her "real job" of being a mother to deceive him shows the conflict between her ambition and the expectation that a woman should not have ambition but devoting her life for her family. Evelyn's determination to be an actress defies the value that women should not pursue selfish ambitions outside their conventional roles.

Evelyn also defies—defy the domesticity virtue by claiming her personal autonomy. During her time, women and wives are expected to fulfill their domestic duty, but Evelyn refuses to do it because she sees it as a form of imprisonment. Her refusal of this obligation implies that she defies the domesticity virtue. The following excerpt will show Evelyn's unwillingness to do housework.

Don and I woke up in our rented bungalow, and he told me to make him breakfast. Mind you, he did not ask me to make him breakfast. He barked at the order. Regardless, I ignored his tone and called down to the maid (Reid, 2017, p. 96).

The excerpt above suggests that as a wife, Evelyn is expected by her husband to do her domestic duties, in this context cooking. Evelyn does not accept the concept of cooking for her husband as a wife's obligation. Instead, she presumes it is non-obligatory that her husband needs to ask. The way she expects her husband to ask her politely to do her obligation shows that she perceives herself as her husband's equal. Don expects a wife to act according to the norm women are supposed to follow by catering to their husbands' needs. At the same time, Don knows that Evelyn is not following the quality of True Womanhood in terms of domesticity, yet he still believes that a woman's job is to tend to her husband.

Evelyn also shows her personal autonomy by refusing to be a mother. Back then, experiencing motherhood willingly was a must for women (Welter, 1966). Yet Evelyn feels forced when she is asked to be a mother by her husband. Below is the excerpt of the event where Evelyn refuses to experience motherhood.

"I think this should be the last movie you do," he said. "I think it's time for us to have children." His career wasn't turning out the way he wanted. And if he wasn't going to be the most famous person in his family, he surely wasn't going to allow that person to be me.

I looked right at him and said, "Absolutely. Positively. Not" (Reid, 2017, p. 99).

Evelyn considered becoming a mother an obstacle in her career. She has a highly negative take on motherhood even as far as considering it as a "weapon" Don uses to stop her from being famous. She believes that having children will make her less famous because childbirth will change the public's perspective about her. Her refusal to experience motherhood is also due to a negative understanding of the experience itself. Evelyn's view of motherhood stems from witnessing her mother's suffering while she was growing up. She sees her mother giving up her dream to be an actress after marrying her father. She views her mother's life as devalued to doing household chores and nurturing her as well as her father.

Getting married for a beneficial purpose is another act that shows her personal autonomy. During that time, a woman should marry in the name of love only. This idea contrasts with Evelyn's purpose of marriage. She married seven men in total, each serving a different purpose with the ultimate goal which is to gain fame. Here are some excerpts that show her getting married for fame.

There's no reason a man like Don Adler should have a different effect on me from the rest of the men in the world. He was no more handsome than Brick Thomas, no more earnest than Ernie Diaz, and he could offer me stardom whether I loved him or not (Reid, 2017, p. 79).

Evelyn considers marriage as a tool to advance her career due to her view of it as a strategic move rather than a romantic one. She sees Don Adler as the same as other males she has encountered in her life previously. In Evelyn's eyes, the only thing that differentiates Don from the rest is his ability to offer her stardom. She already calculated that his fame could

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benefit her if she married him. This shows that Evelyn regards her marriage to Don Adler as a means to further her career. She understands how the industry works, and the power Don has in the industry. To put it simply, Evelyn does not regard marriage as something that should be based on love but as a tool that brings her closer to her goal.

All her life, Evelyn has defied the idea of True Womanhood to get what she wants. She regards her body merely as a tool to get what she wants and does not see the importance of keeping the purity of her body. Evelyn also insists on rejecting societal norms and obtaining her personal autonomy due to the fear that her life will be back to what it used to be: stuck in poverty and abuse. She defies this due to her fear of ending up like her mother who has to give up everything and bear with her father's abuse. To conclude, Evelyn's deviances can be seen as her rebellion to obtain her freedom.

Evelyn Hugo's Agency

Evelyn's first and foremost agency is obtaining her financial independence. She consciously makes decisions that can bring her out of her poverty. Growing up in a poor household, Evelyn grows to understand the value of money and slowly becomes obsessed with it. She hates her past life and even compares her environment with hell by calling it *Hell's Kitchen* which she desperately tries to escape.

Agency means having the ability to act intentionally and with awareness, then Evelyn has shown her agency in escaping poverty. First, she consciously uses and offers her body to men to get what she wants as explained previously. Second, Evelyn understands how the film industry works, and she intentionally makes a choice to create a scandal. She tried to save her career from the issues that said that she was a lesbian, which was seen as taboo at that time. She creates a scandal with Mick Riva and is successful in making headlines. After that, the issues of her being a lesbian are gone in an instant. This shows Evelyn's agency that she consciously makes choices that can alter her course of life. This is in accordance with the concept of agency that an individual is said to have agency if she holds a considerable amount of power that might be able to change her own life (Giddens, 1986).

Evelyn's strong desire to escape her destiny and take control of her own life also shows her agency. Her clear goals of having a nice house and money as well as her determination to run far away from her current life show her motivation to change her situation. Giddens (1986) states that as an agent, and individual must have motivations that drive them to do the following action. Evelyn also clearly stated the reason behind the motivation to obtain wealth, which is to get away from her abusive father and poverty during her narrative.

From here, it can be seen that Evelyn is indeed an agent within social structures. She has a motivation that drives her towards her actions that defy True Womanhood, which is to maintain her wealth, and at the same time, she can explain her motivations behind her actions when asked by the journalist.

Evelyn's second agency is obtaining self-reliance. To get away from poverty and abuse, Evelyn realizes that she should only rely on herself. Evelyn exerts her agency by taking decisive action to escape her abuser and abusive environment. She understands the urgency to leave Hell's Kitchen and avoid the harmful relationship with her. She also recognizes the bleak future that awaits her if she stays and lives a life with a husband who resembles her father whom she would submit against her will. Her realization of these dangers motivates her to change her situation. By deciding to leave and actively seeking a better life, Evelyn shows her power to shape her own destiny and break free from the cycle of abuse. Evelyn shows her agency by

showing her determination to avoid a life of submission and suffering, demonstrating her ability to take control of her future.

Evelyn shows her agency to change her life, which can be seen in her ability to act and change her course of life. As stated previously, Giddens' concept of power means that individuals can change their own lives and the lives of others by doing or not doing certain acts. When Evelyn was fourteen years old, she realized that she could show her body to a boy in exchange for anything she wanted that was sold in his store. This shows that Evelyn is aware of the patriarchal structure in society that restrained her as a woman. This awareness helps her to see the pattern of male dominance in her life and use it to her advantage.

CONCLUSION

Through this analysis it is clear that by defying the values of True Womanhood, Evelyn has shown her agency. She shows it by defying virtue in order to choose her own course of life. She shows her agency by her ability to get out of poverty and to get out of her abusive environment. She shows that she can choose to do something to change the course of her life. True Womanhood in this context serves as a structure that hinders Evelyn from limiting her choice of life, yet at the same time, this structure also enables her agency when she goes against it. Despite her ignorance towards the norm, she can be considered as a feminist because she has shown her agency in controlling her own course of life.

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