

MICHÈLE ROBERTS'S HEROINES AND THE ACT OF WRITING CONSCIOUSLY

AS HEROÍNAS DE MICHELE ROBERTS E AÇÃO DE ESCREVER CONSCIENTEMENTE

LAS HEROÍNAS DE MICHÈLE ROBERTS Y LA ACCIÓN DE ESCRIBIR CONSCIENTEMENTE

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ABSTRACT:

This article is devoted to describe the fictional evolution of the contemporary Anglo-French writer Michèle Roberts by comparing her novels to one of her more recent books: *The Mistressclass* (2003). Despite presenting some changes in her narrative style, this feminist author has maintained the presence of women as activists in her fiction. I have focused on how Roberts is inspired by real, canonised or historical female characters in order to create story bound protagonists that express their own conscious voices by means of the modern novel of consciousness.² Most of Roberts's heroines are usually unknown and marginal characters that are positioned at the centre of her narratives in order to rewrite their own stories. The personal story becomes necessarily vital to have access to the general history of women.

Keywords: Heroines, Michèle Roberts, novel, women's writing.

RESUMO:

Este artigo é dedicado a descrever a evolução da ficção contemporânea da escritora anglo-francesa Michèle Roberts, comparando seus romances a um de seus livros mais recentes: *O Mistressclass* (2003). Apesar de apresentar algumas mudanças em seu estilo de narrativa, a autora feminista tem mantido a presença de mulheres como ativistas em sua ficção. Tenho focado em como Roberts é inspirada por personagens femininas reais, canonizadas ou históricas, a fim de criar protagonistas ligadas à história que expressam suas próprias vozes conscientes por meio do romance moderno da consciência. A maioria das heroínas de Roberts é geralmente

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² Sydney Janet Kaplan in her study of "Feminine Consciousness and Female Characters" argues that modern women writers "felt the need to consider consciousness not only as a means of organizing the novel but as a method of organizing the minds of women and for attempting to define a specifically 'feminine consciousness'" (p.2).



desconhecida e são personagens marginais que estão posicionadas no centro de suas narrativas, a fim de reescrever suas próprias histórias. A história pessoal torna-se necessariamente vital para ter acesso à história geral das mulheres.

Palavras-chave: Heroínas, Michèle Roberts, romance, escrita das mulheres.

RESUMEN:

Este artículo se dedica a describir la evolución de la obra ficticia de la escritora contemporánea y anglo-francesa Michèle Roberts, mediante la comparación de sus novelas y uno de sus libros más recientes: *The Mistressclass* (2003). A pesar de presentar algunos cambios en su estilo narrativo, esta autora feminista ha mantenido la presencia de las mujeres como activistas en su ficción. Me he centrado en cómo Roberts es inspirada en características de mujeres reales, canonizadas o históricas, con el fin de crear la historia de las protagonistas que expresan su propia voz por medio de la novela moderna de la conciencia. La mayoría de las heroínas de Roberts son personajes desconocidos y marginales que se colocan en el centro de sus narraciones con el propósito de volver a escribir sus propias historias. La historia personal se torna vital para tener acceso a la historia general de las mujeres.

Palabras clave: Heroínas. Michèle Roberts. Novela. Escritura de mujeres.

When I started reading Michèle Roberts, I realised then that the idea of rewriting stories was repeated in each work of fiction.³ There is always a historical or biblical reference but with an added point: women's voices are conveyed and identified in different periods of time. Roberts's heroines are able to create pages of words, to produce literature and fiction and to be finally read. They tell their everyday experiences in relation to different topics such as their roles as women in the patriarchal society, limited to being nun or mother and wife. The Catholic religion as a dominant and intolerant institution, sex as a repressed expression, and literary creation as manifestation, criticism, and exploration are recurring topics in Roberts's novels. This feminist writer has always fought back against oppression, against the Catholic Church and against the patriarchal society, by creating heroines who are liberated from stereotypes and constricted margins (GARCÍA-SÁNCHEZ, "A Conversation with Michèle Roberts", *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 2011, p. 184).

To answer the question of whether and how *The Mistressclass* (2003) is

³ Michèle Roberts has said on different occasions that she is a traditional feminist and has been influenced by Virginia Woolf. Lois Cucullu emphasises that "Woolf signally invites women ... into the production and consumption of culture" (p.27-8). Most of Roberts's heroines are also presented as creators of words, of language and content. Following Cucullu's argument and Woolf's influence on Roberts, it is clear that Woolf, as Roberts, "urges the descendants of the deposed matriarch to join her in the professions. From the demise of the domestic woman arises the authority of the modernist intellectual" (CUCULLU, p.28).

different from Roberts's previous novels, I will highlight that a piece of writing incorporates a combination of stories in Roberts's style. This will be done by analysing the concept of *intertextuality* or the mixture of different opinions in the same literary creation in order to emphasise the idea of diversity. Instead of divided and opposed women, Roberts's heroines portray valid and varied observations of being women, although unconventional, achievable in the same novel. The second objective will look at Roberts's muses and how dualities and pluralities are predominant over the traditional patriarchal dichotomy of good-bad women. Finally, it will be observed how these narratives have some similarities at both the beginning and the end of Roberts's novels, presenting the main characters by means of the first person narration. At the same time, the topic of feminism, as a union of women who look after each other, or the idea of sisters who cherish their relationship, will also be analysed as a common characteristic in the novels *A Piece of the Night* (1978), *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) and *The Mistressclass* (2003).

Andrew Gibson argues that the interrelation between decentring and recentring are essential actions in the process of narration. One can see that both approaches take place in the creation of Roberts's novels. As Gibson declares, the creative process requires decentring first in order to recentre later. This second action will be influenced by the writer's subjections: "this is to 'decentre' narrative only promptly to 'recentre' it again" (GIBSON, 1996, p. 121). In *The Mistressclass*, the Victorian writer Charlotte Brontë is not only an inspiration for Roberts, but also for her protagonist Vinny. Brontë's history is decentred to be recentred in a new context and situation that corresponds with another contemporary woman, Vinny. The two stories correlate in this recentred context.

As in Roberts's previous works of fiction, one can see that a variety of events characterised by everyday protagonists are mixed with historical personalities in *The Mistressclass*. The use of *intertextuality* takes place by means of rewriting, inventing stories and subverting traditional topics as it is the case of marriage. This can be exemplified with the writers Charlotte and Emily Brontë and the contemporary sisters Vinny and Catherine in the novel. Roberts reflects upon how the Victorian woman needs to be married in order to survive. Roberts rescues Charlotte Brontë from her compromised marital status as marriage was soon the death for her. Charlotte Brontë is presented with her own ideas in literary writing, even though her viewpoints are against the nineteenth century tradition. Only by means of literature, Brontë feels

unconventional. However, Vinny, in *The Mistressclass*, would represent the twenty-first century woman who does not marry to make ends meet, but she is totally independent and a genuine writer, participating in the text with professional inspiration and without worrying about financial issues.

Both Charlotte and Vinny in *The Mistressclass* express their voices and find a room of their own by means of writing, as Virginia Woolf claimed not only for herself but for all women.⁴ Although it may have become traditional nowadays, Roberts insists on Woolf's message about the essence of any beginning. This particular place of an independent and mindful being is associated with darkness and the unconscious versus the conscious world. Roberts's heroines are presented as women who need darkness as a state of liberation that allow them to write and express their own voices. Although they start creating in the shadow, they finally encounter clarity and cheerfulness as they face an active position in literature. This darkness could also denote the position of any woman who is determined to start writing. As there is not a balanced equal history between men and women, the individual and independent woman who starts to uncover herself understands that there is not a conscious past of literary women. This woman writer must write her story and contribute to women's history written by women. Most of Roberts's heroines share the need of entering history (FALCUS, 2007, p. 79).

In the Red Kitchen (1990) presents a fragment in which Roberts deals with the unconscious state and the ability to create by means of writing. Flora, the main character in the novel, connects to different women and times in the same story. For Flora, her home is darkness. This mental, unconscious space liberates Flora by allowing her to write a novel for her own satisfaction:

So darkness becomes a homely place breathing in and out, an enormous room in which to fly free, roam unconstricted, turn somersaults.

Darkness has always been necessary to me. Now it is my one faithful companion. Walking at four a.m. as I so often do these days, I pull it around me as a comforter, and settle to continue writing this story of my life. For no reason except to please myself (p. 17-18).

⁴ I will mention here how important the artist figure is for Virginia Woolf and Roberts. Although Roberts's protagonist Julie is an example of both maternity and artistic creativity in *A Piece of the Night* (1978), "Virginia Woolf implies that the two forms of creativity cancel each other out" (KAPLAN, p. 98). The question of motherhood and writing is a recurring topic in feminist studies and Julie in Roberts's first novel is an example of such possibility. Other Roberts's heroines such as Mary Magdalene, Josephine, Mousse, Vinny or Aurora for instance, do not become mothers but literary producers in *The Wild Girl* (1984), *Impossible Saints* (1997), *The Mistressclass* (2003) and *Reader, I Married Him* (2005).

As Norman Fairclough highlights: “[t]he concept of intertextuality points to the productivity of texts, to how texts can transform prior texts and restructure existing conventions ... to generate new ones” (FAIRCLOUGH, 1992, p. 102). The *intertextuality* or *pastiche* that is on the hunt for subversion in the form and the content of texts is also maintained in Roberts’s literary production. This is the case of *The Mistressclass*, for instance, where two stories are joined in one piece of writing. On the one hand, Charlotte Brontë’s voice can be read and her letters, narrated under the first person storyteller, are addressed to her impossible lover. On the other hand, we have the account of Vinny, Catherine, Adam and Robert in contemporary London. Although they are two independent stories happening in two distant periods of time, they both form a textual union. As Pam Morris suggests, “intertextuality has become current to suggest that many ‘texts’ or voices (conscious authorial intention, unconscious desire, current and past social implications) meet in every apparently discrete individual work” (MORRIS, 1993, p. 138). One story alternates with another from beginning to end in the novel. In the following scene, Michèle Roberts interweaves the contemporary writer Vinny and Brontë by means of *Jane Eyre*:

Vinny let *Jane Eyre* fall closed ... The copy she’d had since early adolescence, pages yellowing and dog-eared, end-papers spotted and foxed; given to her by her mother forty years before ... She knew *Jane Eyre* almost by heart. Reading it was effort-less, like floating rocked in salt waves just off a boulder-strewn coast ... Also, reading *Jane Eyre* was like reaching land (p. 49).

Intertextuality becomes another permanent aspect in Roberts’s technique, considering not only one of her last pieces of work, *The Mistressclass*, but also previous texts such as *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), *Impossible Saints* (1997) or *The Looking Glass* (2000), in which different voices express their wishes and feelings and meet together by means of literary creation.⁵ In Roberts’s novel, *Reader, I Married Him* (2004), the protagonist named Aurora finds the words to wake herself up. Consequently, she makes a conscious revision of her life by looking at the books she has read.⁶ Now in her fifties and although she has been attached to a male figure

⁵ See GARCÍA-SANCHEZ, M. SORAYA’s *Travelling in Women’s History with Michèle Roberts’s Novels* (2011) for further reading.

⁶ The relationship between reading and writing is essential when dealing with *intertextuality*. In a way, “intertextuality will always remain the ‘transposition’ of influence into a critical terminology rewritten by deconstruction” (RAJAN, p.61). As it is illustrated with Roberts’s novels, *intertextuality* “reconceives the hierarchical model of literary history” and includes new perceptions of telling women histories. It looks backwards, and then forwards, in this way of writing with a focus on criticism, progress and change (RAJAN, p.61).

since an early age, Aurora rescues herself and enjoys her new identity by being really her and not what others have wanted her to be. This revision of her literary and personal history influences on her final intention to find her identity:

With Tom I'd been a hippy who smoked dope, listened to David Bowie, threw the I Ching. With Cecil I'd been an elegant and gracious hostess giving art historical dinner parties. With Hugh I'd been a walker, camper, devotee of folk songs and real ale. But now? Alone, I could be anything (p. 35).

In relation to the concept of *intertextuality*, it seems necessary to explore the predominant narrator in Roberts's writing. In *The Mistressclass*, it has been stated that Charlotte Brontë's story is written with a direct *I* and using the epistolary form, while the fiction of Vinny and Catherine is expressed under the voice of a *she* or a *they*. It is by means of this narrator that is looking over your shoulder but is not omniscient, and also by bringing into play the simple conversations between the protagonists, that the mixture of stories is completed.

The majority of episodes portrayed in *Impossible Saints*, for instance, is directed by the third person narrator. Only two chapters are expressed with the *I* that confesses that she has invented the story, and who she is in relation to the story told: "Here and from henceforth I must say 'I'. I, Isabel, write this account of my aunt's life. I shall no longer write in disguise ... How can I recount the story of Josephine and not admit I am making it all up" (p. 261). Isabel confesses that she is the protagonist of her text, she is the one who has written the episodes dedicated to her lost aunt, Josephine, inspired by Saint Teresa of Avila. Yet who is the narrator of the events that interfere with Josephine's story? Is it possible to think that Josephine is the voice who has recounted them or is it Roberts who pretends to make other unknown women's voices heard and shared? The omniscient third person narrator has been predominant in historical and religious texts. With the first person storyline, the reader feels closer to the main character and there is complicity between the reader and the storyteller throughout the work of fiction. Andrew Gibson recalls Marc Blanchard's study of Genette's "non-existence variation" regarding first and third person narrative. In Gibson's words, Genette insists that "every narrating is, by definition, to all intents and purposes presented in the first person" (p. 145). I will argue, however, that Roberts's use of the *I* emphasises the individuality of the heroine and the correspondence with her own singularity and unique self.

According to Elaine Showalter, the woman's novel, being feminine or feminist, has had to fight against the imposed patriarchal culture and history: "Feminine, feminist, or female, the woman's novel has always had to struggle against the cultural and historical forces the relegated women's experience to the second rank" (SHOWALTER, 1977, p.36). With Roberts's novels, one can examine a variety of viewpoints and new alternatives related to contemporary women who make a reflection about their female ancestors. In the case of *The Mistressclass*, the nineteenth century heroine is liberated by means of writing her feminist and feminine sides. The woman writer has to face her past and present circumstances by analysing and criticising history and society.

The third aim of this analysis deals with the celebration of dualities and pluralities instead of dichotomies that have separated women between themselves, a predominant characteristic in Roberts's production. An example of this celebration is illustrated in *The Wild Girl* (1984). Roberts invents the character of Mary Magdalene who has been opposed to the Virgin Mary, according to traditional myths. *The Wild Girl* is a significant novel considering Roberts's religious Protestant/Catholic background. According to the traditional perspective, there is a good/accepted and a bad/rejected woman and a variety of rival opposites. However, in this novelist's view, both the virgin and the prostitute are part of a same scene since they are not separated by Christians any more: "Part of the Magdalene's appeal is her challenge to these either/or categories. In the world of the unconscious, virgin and whore dance together, friends. Christianity tried to separate them. Recently, they're getting back together again" (ROBERTS, 1998, p. 29).

In *The Wild Girl*, the marriage between opposites is strengthened since it is part of Mary Magdalene's identity and resurrection when she encounters Christ: "the man and the woman within us has become separated and exiled from each other ... The image of this rebirth is a marriage, ... the marriage between the inner woman and the inner man" (p. 110). Likewise, *The Mistressclass* presents two conflicting sisters, Vinny and Catherine, who have promised themselves a relationship of sisterhood, especially after their parents' death. There is, however, a betrayal between them: Catherine married Vinny's boyfriend. As a result, Vinny is presented as a modern independent woman who is not married but has developed the skills to be considered a genuine writer. Catherine, on the other hand, is described as a wife, a mother, a lecturer and a writer who only writes for money: "Catherine seemed like a

person in disguise ... She had such a blank, polite face. She was a writer of sado-masochistic feminine crap... Writing, Vinny said: the usual. I was finishing something” (p. 201, p. 207).

In *Food, Sex & God. On Inspiration and Writing* (1998), Michèle Roberts writes about the importance of including both contradictory features in one same identity. According to this novelist, the use of the disjunction needs to be replaced by the conjunction when dealing with women’s features: “We won’t label it *either* little angels *or* little devils, because we know that inside us are *both* little angels *and* little devils, both mother and child, both man and woman, both darkness and light, both good and bad” ROBERTS, 1998, p. 22). Josephine, inspired by Saint Teresa of Ávila in *Impossible Saints* (1997), combines contraries, and celebrates not only dualities but plural characteristics in her personality. The possibilities Saint Teresa had were limited to be married to another man or to God and she chose the second option. In Roberts’s fiction, it is only after Teresa’s father’s death that the heroine shows a transformation. She decides to live outside the convent with her cousin Magdalene. Lucian (a priest) and Josephine (a nun) will be sexually and secretly liberated in Magdalene’s house. Michèle Roberts shows that the religious man and woman are confined by the Church that conditions their lives and wishes. Nevertheless, they are liberated by becoming lovers and friends outside the religious walls. Meeting in the darkness of the night will transform their personas:

Or if she has tiptoed downstairs to join Lucian on one of the wide sofas in front of the fireplace, where he slept when he stayed the night, she would share breakfast with him outside in the garden.... Josephine hid her nocturnal expeditions from Isabel. She believed herself to be very discreet. Her niece slept late in the mornings, and, by the time she struggled bleary-eyed from bed, Lucian was long gone (p. 178).

In *The Visitation* (1983), the idea of dualities and pluralities in the same protagonist is also distinct. The protagonist, Helen, is first introduced as the twin sister of her brother. Her beginning in this world depends on the birth of her brother. From the very beginning, she questions gender and identity issues regarding her position in society. She finally reacts at the end of the novel as she has found her own qualities. Helen has developed a voice in this text thanks to other women, especially Beth, who represents the other side of Helen. Beth is her inner sister, her own unconscious self, divided and united. Roberts also highlights the concept of sisterhood in this work of fiction: “She ached for mothering, the love that listening

gives, the love that a woman now gives to her. Beth has nourished her in her need, before Helen knew what that need was” (p. 172).

Not only are the questions of sisterhood, dual and plural women identities, and *intertextuality* recurrent topics in Roberts’s production, but also the outline of the introduction and conclusion of some of her novels. *The Visitation*, inspired by the Genesis and the creation of man and woman, is the only novel that begins with a birth, Helen’s and her twin brother’s: “The first thing of which she is aware is the dark... They dance in the womb, within their separate sacs... Their mother’s body divides them” (p. 3). However, when analysing Roberts’s texts, it is more common to find a death present at the beginning of her novels in works like *A Piece of the Night* (1978), *In the Red Kitchen* (1990) and *Impossible Saints* (1997). This loss of a character is at the same time associated with a birth, which is portrayed at the end of these works of fiction as a female daughter or a piece of writing:

There is a dead nun in the school chapel (ROBERTS, 1978, p. 1).

The funeral carriage is badly sprung, despite the amount it cost to hire, and makes me feel sick (ROBERTS, 1990: 2).

The golden house was where the bones were kept... Nine months after Josephine’s death and burial she dug up again (ROBERTS, 1997, p. 1, p. 4).

Flesh & Blood (1994) makes reference to the figure of the protagonist’s mother from the very beginning, but the narrator does not choose a birth to commence the story; rather, she takes action by killing her own mother. It is only after this death that the account begins: “An hour after murdering my mother I was in Soho ... I’d always had a gift for inventing stories ... When I made them up, I believed they were true” (p. 1). In *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987), Mrs Noah, who lacks a first name, feels that death is growing inside her, but she also experiences how she will be born again in different stories. Mrs Noah believes that she will find new readers that can identify with her life. Her death revisits her birth in a continuous circle where she will meet different readers of different times. The process of writing makes possible endings and new beginnings start afresh, so that characters and events can agree to start again: “Welcome death. In you I drown. Until I’m reincarnated, born again into the next story ... waiting my chance to haunt a new generation of readers. I’m what’s missing. I’m the wanderer” (p. 89).

In *The Mistressclass*, Roberts focuses on the masculine figure. Adam is the representation of a new being. After his father’s death, Adam jumps into the river and

is being reborn. The water in the river symbolises a new beginning for him. Death and birth are combined as in the cycle of life, but this time, Roberts has focused on a man as the main character. If, on the other hand, the ending of *The Mistressclass* is considered, it is observed how Charlotte Brontë goes back to her childhood with her sister Emily. Only these memories help her to achieve the words that make her feel the inspiration to write. Adam is the character in the novel that lacks creativity. Only when he discovers the truth by means of his father's paintings, hidden when he was alive, can Adam awaken and face the reality in a different way. However, it is not clearly stated that his awakening is developed by means of creative writing. Although the ending is open, I would like to imagine that Adam, like Charlotte Brontë, abandon that darkness that has been controlled by the figure of the oppressive father. Roberts presents Adam's father's colourful works of art as literary texts, formed of flesh and bone. In other words, Roberts uses the metaphor of *pastiche* in the paintings in order to illustrate the combination of different techniques:

This first group of pictures was all about flesh. Seen one by one they represented a dismemberment. A hand. A foot. A cunt. An eye. Put together they made one reassembled body.

The second group was strongly narrative ... At first glance the pictures were so pastiched as to be hopelessly old-fashioned. Then you saw that the handling of the paint did make the work modern (p. 287).

If the ending of other previous novels, such as *Daughters of the House* (1992), is analysed, it can be seen that its conclusion refers to that meeting between words and writing by means of darkness and the unconscious world that liberates the protagonist: "The voices came from somewhere just ahead, the shadowy bit she couldn't see. She stepped forward, into the darkness, to find words" (p. 172). *The Looking Glass* (2000) is also produced with a similar ending in which Genevieve would feel free if she could tell her story. Now that the protagonist has found the words that she was not able to pronounce before, she writes her account to be finally heard. Accordingly, Genevieve finds her identity:

And also I felt you might lose something precious by making and telling a story, because then all its parts stretched out ... whereas while the unspoken words remained inside you all of them connected one to the other in a mad circling dance which was indescribably beautiful ... The story would be put in order and for the moment I would be able to live with myself and it and I might feel free (p. 274-275).

The Book of Mrs Noah (1987) is another work of fiction that finishes with the

awakening of words that the sibyls achieve in order to create literary texts and to express themselves.⁷ Mrs Noah, who invents and introduces herself at the beginning of the story in Venice, finishes her creation highlighting that the women must survive by means of writing (also mentioned by Virginia Woolf or Hélène Cixous, for instance). Mrs Noah's words, however, will not be eternal, limited, fixed and unchangeable, as traditional history has pointed out, but they will refer to everyday situations and to her experiences as a woman, and to the possibility of dreaming⁸:

How does a woman survive?

I pick up my pen and open my diary.

[...] I was taught that art is supposed to last, to be preserved in libraries and museums ... to contain eternal meanings that transcend history ... My art won't be like that ... Writing in this diary won't be like that. My creation will be as daily as dusting, or dreaming (p. 288).

In *A Piece of the Night* (1978) and *The Visitation* (1983), this search for messages that produce women's writing is also appreciated. The conclusion of both novels is presented as a beginning to talk about the histories of women. The heroines, Julie and Helen, are finally being defined and so are their histories. They have now found the words to convey who they really are:

Tell me about your past, Julie begins to urge other women, and they to urge her. The women sit in circles talking. They are passing telegrams along battle-lines, telling each other stories that will not put them to sleep, recognising allies under the disguise of femininity (*A Piece of the Night*, p. 186).

She cuts the cord, and declares Helen separate, loose, free, baptised by tears. She commands her to sing of her redemption, her life, to speak, to write. She orders her: now define *self*, now define *woman*. The heart of the labyrinth is not the end, but another beginning. Start to write (*The Visitation*, p. 173).

⁷ On the figure of the sibyl and its correspondence with Roberts's female protagonists in *The Book of Mrs Noah*, see its meaning associated to communication, wisdom and revelation: "The sibyls symbolizes the human being who is raised to a transnatural level which enables him or her to communicate with the godhead and to act as a channel of communication with it ... Sibyls were even regarded as emanations of divine wisdom, as old as the world, and repositories of primeval revelation. On these terms, they might symbolize revelation itself" (J. CHEVALIER, 1994, p.879).

⁸ Janice Rossen analyses some modern women writers such as A.S. Byatt. Although Roberts is not included in her observations, I agree with Rossen's comments regarding *Women Writing Modern Fiction* when she argues that "the structure of the book moves from dark fatalism to an increasing realm of light and of free will" (p.6). Most of Michèle Roberts's novels such as *The Book of Mrs Noah*, *Daughters of the House*, *The Looking Glass*, *A Piece of the Night*, *The Mistressclass* and her recent novel, *Reader, I Married Him*, share this manifestation of darkness in modern fiction, which reaches a light and a state of freedom, usually demonstrated by means of writing.

This paper has aimed to demonstrate that *The Mistressclass* shares similar characteristics to Roberts's previous novels such as the use of different female narrators in the same work of fiction, writing techniques such as *pastiche* or *intertextuality* and the subversion of voices inviting women to write about their personal stories. Furthermore, Roberts's heroines, mainly inspired by historical or biblical women, have been presented with twofold and even manifold characteristics that aim to end with the imposed dichotomy between the good-virgin and the bad-whore. Roberts's protagonists embrace a variety of possibilities when finding their identities. Finally, a brief analysis has been devoted to observe the beginning and ending structures of Roberts's novels. In most cases, the first person narration, the thought of a death at the beginning of the story that concludes with a birth at the end, the topic of feminism as a union of women who look after each other, and the concept of rewriting stories inspired by historical women are predominant qualities in Roberts' literary production.

As this feminist novelist has always claimed, her intention is to join form and content in a language that has a body and it is related to the text (Roe, 1994, p. 171). Patricia Waugh claims that there is a correspondence between feminism, history and postmodernism, which is also present in Roberts's production. The absence of knowledge and of a history written by women allows Roberts to imagine, interpret, rewrite and create works of fiction with new meanings that revisit histories about women which are still untold:

Like feminism, Postmodernism ... has been engaged in a re-examination of the Enlightenment concepts of subjectivity as autonomous self determination; the human individual as defined without reference to history, traditional values, God, nation. Both have assaulted aesthetic or philosophical notions of identity as pure autonomous essence (WAUGH, 1992, p. 208).

This only emphasises Hélène Cixous's message of women writing about women. According to Cixous, the text must portray the voice of the woman and it can only be done by writing about her body. As I have aimed to demonstrate, Roberts's protagonists are usually searching for words that help them to tell readers about their individual and personal feelings. For that reason, most of Roberts's novels begin with darkness. Darkness or death are portrayed as solitary and liberated situations that allow the female characters to invent, to reword and to reclaim a new beginning and a history by and for women.

I will finish this study having in mind the proposition put forward in the previous two passages from *A Piece of the Night* and *The Visitation*. First, Roberts describes that the histories of women are shared and are formed by means of writing. The female character must find a way to express and talk about her identity in order to produce changes. The signs of renovation analysed here must be constant and must take into consideration women in different historical periods of time with a yesterday, today and tomorrow's consciousness. Change is clearer when comparison is valued, either positively or negatively. Second, the search for words is also an exploration of identities. The word *woman* has been mainly defined in masculine and patriarchal terms, if we consider the dominant modes of traditional history and religious myths. With the ending of binary and opposite standards and the union of different female voices, women must continue the constant battle against those institutions which aim to diminish them. In every form of production, flowing together makes us, women, strong and conscious of ourselves.⁹

⁹ My last argument highlights Kaplan's analysis of the *Feminine Consciousness in the Modern Novel*. In her study of heroines by Virginia Woolf or Doris Lessing, for instance, it is possible to observe some similarities with Roberts's protagonists as "the inner struggle regarding men takes various forms in these novels, sometimes denying passivity, other times elevating it" (p.175). Roberts's heroines' main ambition is to criticise history and "to defend their position – and it must be remembered that the feminine consciousness is itself a defensive construction" (p.176-7).

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