

## ART AS A MEDIUM OF FEMALE SELF-EXPRESSION IN THE DOLL FACTORY BY E. MACNEAL

**K. A. Zinovieva**

*Lecturer (Minsk State Linguistic University, Belarus, Minsk)  
kira\_zinovieva@mail.ru*

The article presents a Feminist analysis of the novel *The Doll Factory* written by E. Macneal focusing on women's self-expression and the limitations imposed on females by the societal norms of the time. The article reveals how the historical background of Victorian England has influenced the novel discussed. The phenomenon of women in visual arts is considered through several historical sources, and the results demonstrate that E. Macneal purposefully conceives a fictionalized account of the main character in order to reveal the lost female potential in history. Iris, an artist's model and a painter, is seen as a «fallen» woman by her relatives and other people, her talent is overlooked. The use of ekphrasis in the novel *The Doll Factory* conveys the female perception of the world. The artistic process provides the main character with a sense of liberty.

**Key words:** women's self-expression; women's creativity; E. Macneal; ekphrasis; Feminism; neo-Victorian novel; historical novel; historical fiction.

## ИСКУССТВО КАК СРЕДСТВО САМОВЫРАЖЕНИЯ ЖЕНЩИНЫ В РОМАНЕ ЭЛИЗАБЕТ МАКНИЛ «МАСТЕРСКАЯ КУКОЛ»

**К. А. Зиновьева**

*преподаватель (Минский государственный  
лингвистический университет, Беларусь, Минск)  
kira\_zinovieva@mail.ru*

В статье представлен феминистский анализ романа Элизабет Макнил «Мастерская кукол», сфокусированный на теме самовыражения женщины, ограничениях женских прав социальными нормами времени. В статье выявляется, как исторические устои викторианской Англии повлияли на проблематику романа. Феномен женщины в изобразительном искусстве рассматривается в контексте некоторых исторических источников, которые позволили Э. Макнил в результате целенаправленно продемонстрировать fictionalized account за потерянный потенциал самореализации женщины в истории. Ирис – модель художника, выглядит «падшей» женщиной в глазах ее родственников и остальных людей, ее талант игнорируется. Использование экфрасиса в романе «Мастерская кукол» передает женское восприятие мира. Творческий процесс способствует формированию чувства свободы в главной героине.

**Key words:** женское самовыражение; женская креативность; Э. Макнил; экфрасис; феминизм; неовикторианский роман; исторический роман; историческая фикция.

The Doll Factory (2019) made a successful debut for the British writer Elizabeth Macneal: a novel set in the 1850s Victorian London narrating the story of Iris Whittle, a young woman working for Mrs. Salter's Doll Emporium and aspiring to become an artist, who, in attempt to learn the art of painting, becomes a model for the Pre-Raphaelite painter Louis Frost. At the same time, Silas Reed, a taxidermist and a curio-collector, develops an unhealthy obsession with Iris (after seeing her once in the streets) and is stalking her. It's a piece of historical fiction belonging to the subgenre of neo-Victorian novel, in which the author's objective is to «rethink and reinterpret not only Victorian literature but also Victorian culture as a whole» [1, p. 66]. In the novel, Macneal unmask the pretentious decorum of those days, reveals the systematic oppression in the patriarchal society and rediscovers a woman's path in Victorian society through her main character Iris.

The title and the imagery of the story serve well to expose the objectification of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Throughout the book, the reader may find multiple references to dolls: the shop at which Iris works is producing dolls; when posing for Louis's painting the protagonist has to sit still like a doll; when Silas captures her in his cellar Iris associates herself with a doll from Mrs. Salter's shop. The actual dolls are manufactured, put on the shelves and then sold for children's use, often the dolls sit on the shelves for the customers to see and admire their looks. The artists use their muses and models for painting, and the models are motionless for hours, which causes great pain in the muscles of a living being. The house occupied by Louis Frost has a plaque beneath the doorbell saying «The Factory. PRB» (meaning the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), which hints at it being similar to a doll factory. The painters draw women, emphasizing their beauty and then sell the pictures for financial gain. In the long run, the main character realizes that when she left the doll shop she turned into a doll herself – she is used, neglected and sold by men.

In the Victorian era, painting, literature and the theatre were deemed important for signaling the nation's moral health and were also used to establish and retain social values. «Major public art exhibitions, such as those at the Royal Academy, were treated as important social events» [2, p. 21]. Painting in the early years of Queen Victoria's reign was dominated by the theories of Joshua Reynolds, who believed that it was the role of an artist to make the subject of their work appear as noble and idealized as possible. Art in the first half of the 19th century was also heavily impacted by Romanticism and Neo-Classicism. The painter's artistry used to be signified by his or her competence in handling a range of stylistic devices, and by the choice of techniques and genres suitable for the chosen subject. Such standards were perpetuated by «reviews, critical writing, universities and national bodies like the Royal Academy» [2, p. 27].

John Ruskin, a well-known British critic, changed the public's perspective on art. He argued that the purpose of art is to represent the world and allow the viewer to form their own opinions of the subject, that art expressed a society's character and beliefs, which reinforced the ideological function of the arts.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood immersed in 1848 as a reaction against the teachings of the Royal Academy. Their works were based on painting as accurately as possible from nature. The Pre-Raphaelites proclaimed that the artist's role is to tell moral lessons.

The author of *The Doll Factory* chooses this turning point in the history of art as a backdrop for Iris's creative development and invents Louis Frost – a fictional member of the PRB (The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) who, in search of a new beauty for his painting finds the red-head with a rare physical defect – a deformed collarbone. Louis ends up becoming the protagonist's art teacher, and, subsequently, undergoes an experience which at the time was rare – a man and a woman talking about artistic perception, art and life in general on equal terms.

Women's position in culture and art was predominantly reckoned as the object of admiration romanticized in the arts. Although this was the time of the emergence of female painters, not so many women had the opportunity to paint professionally, and the existing artworks made by women were often disregarded.

The central concepts of Victorian society were «domesticity, the celebration and idealization of the home». Middle-class women prided themselves on their innocence and sexual acts and desires were considered normal in men were seen as abnormal in women.

Women were categorized using binary oppositions «virtuous» and «vicious», «innocent» and «fallen», «wife» and «prostitute», so it was either one or the other: «Marriage was women's proper destiny, their calling, and their profession. Women who failed to marry were viewed with either pity or contempt if they wanted to marry, with suspicion if they did not» [3, p. 243]. The Victorian morale could not allow women to work as prostitutes, so philanthropical organizations (usually organized by the middle or upper class women who were far away from the realities of street life) tried to «save» them: «Between 1820 and 1870, rescue workers spent much time, money, and effort trying to reform prostitutes via harsh regimes in rescue homes followed by offers of work in domestic service» [3, p. 245].

The role of an artist's model in the creative process came to be more influential than before. The common practice was to paint from life, and even though family members of the artists were often asked to pose, it prompted an influx of models. «Any person, adult or child, real or imaginary, shown in a picture should be drawn from a live model...Hence, throughout the century, models plied for hire» [4, p. 132]. A model had to be conventionally beautiful (in those times, pallor, fine facial features, lean figure and clear skin were strongly favored) and to have an individual allure, a persona. The ultimate symbolization of an artist's muse in the Victorian period was concentrated in the image of Dante's Beatrice. Many artists tried their abilities at depicting the muse, the essence of which was «a woman of frail, enigmatic, elusive beauty» [5, p. 8].

Lizzie Siddall is the most popular example of an artist's model, she modeled for several Pre-Raphaelite artists and was herself a painter. Siddall served as the inspiration for Iris's character but she is also present in the book. The feature that

qualified her for Beatrice's part was, according to sources, «...the same otherness, the same remoteness of someone outside our world» [5, p. 6]. Artists often indulged in amorous relationships with their models and were later not keen on marrying them, which left the women to public scorn. Many models were considered «fallen» women and treated poorly, repeatedly associated with dirt: «Fanny Cornforth had almost certainly been a prostitute – the only question is whether she'd been amateur or professional – and Annie Miller is described to us as one of the earthiest and filthiest creatures they had seen»; «Annie's relationship with him was slight, though almost certainly sexual» [4, p. 22].

The future of an overwhelming part of those models was not bright, Fanny Cornforth, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's model, for example, was obliged to turn into Rossetti's housekeeper as she «put on weight and he lost interest in her sexually – cruelly dubbing her “the elephant” – but was turned out of the house when he became ill and his middle-class family reclaimed him before his death in 1882» [6]. Fanny was then put to a psychiatric facility.

Through the character of Iris E. Macneal manages to refer to this problem. Iris is reluctant to take up the job Louis proposes to her, and even the unsatisfying work of painting dolls for low pay and poor working conditions is thought more respectable than what the main character is dreaming of. When the eccentric painter declares his unwillingness to marry, this causes a major stir in their professional and personal relationships.

One of the key themes of *The Doll Factory* is art. In the case of Iris, art provides her with a chance of economic growth, but also, more importantly, with the opportunity to express her vision, to pass her emotions onto canvas. Being a young woman from a regular working-class family, Iris Whittle has no facets through which she could use her creativity and share her thoughts and feelings. Her mother encouraged her to be more placid and conforming: «And her mother's rebuke: Sit, quiet, be still, talk less, be more like Rose» [7, p. 109].

In her childhood, Iris loved to draw everything around her and showed signs of having a talent. But after she is physically fit to work she is sent to Mrs. Salter's Doll Emporium and works there almost every day from early morning to late in the evening. Iris has an artistic kind of perception: she sees the colors and textures around her as those she could put on paper, sees life in motion, in progress and wants to transfer this «movement» in her paintings. She has to draw in a cellar at night with the small amount of art supplies she can afford from saving every penny.

Instances of ekphrasis can be found throughout the novel, ekphrasis may be termed as «a literary description of art» [8]. Readers observe the painting by means of which Iris transfers her vision of life onto paper, a vision markedly different from that of the Pre-Raphaelites: «A mouse escapes the grip of a cat, a vase is filled with irises and roses, all yet to bloom fully, and a blonde maid sits in the background and helps herself to a bowl of strawberries while her mistress's eyes are averted. These unnecessary details detract from the true intimacy at the heart of this work, namely the embracing lovers. They turn towards each other as if on the brink of laughter, and are

arranged with such a stark naturalness, such a sweetness, that the scene is prevented from tipping into a sickly sentimentality» [7, p. 356]. In the picture, all its parts can be analyzed on their own and none of the objects in the painting are used only as a background. The atmosphere is life-asserting and each moment visualized in the artwork is shown in its progress.

Apart from the description of paintings made by Louis and Iris, the reader can find the description of the process of painting. In one of those moments the main character is getting to know her body: «*She copies her faults faithfully: her widely spaced eyes, the deformed twist of her collarbone*» [7, p. 9]. When Iris is painting she feels liberated: «*Iris grips the brush and scores it downwards in a single, triumphant streak. She dabs at the canvas again, making marks little better than a child would, but there is something boisterous and euphoric about it. She is allowed to make a mess*» [7, p. 112].

The use of ekphrasis in the novel *The Doll Factory* functions as a means of conveying female perception of the world in the novel, the difference women's perception has if compared with male perception. The artistic process is shown as emancipating to Iris, a medium through which her silence is obliterated and an overflow of thoughts and feelings is finally let out. The protagonist's circumstances (being given art lessons, rightfully paid and not abused by the artist) are privileged, it is rather a fictionalized situation, and in it Macneal creates a dream-like reality, laying bare a woman's potential which was stifled and silenced in Victorian England.

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