

From Villain to Victim: The Feminine Hero in Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations*

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Abstract

Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* (1984) is based on the infamous legend of Lizzie Borden and the murder mysteries of her father and stepmother at their family home in Fall River, Massachusetts. Despite her acquittal, Lizzie remained the suspect by society facing ostracism. Pollock's play creates a scenario some ten years after the murder, portraying a different side to the myth. Her feminist play invites the audience to sympathize with Lizzie, regardless of the speculations surrounding the heinous act. However, this paper goes beyond feelings of sympathy by portraying the suspected patriarchal pariah and father-killing figure as the hero of the oppressed.

Keywords: Sharon Pollock, *Blood Relation*, Lizzie Borden, Romantic Hero, feminism

1. Introduction

Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations* (1984) is a psychological murder mystery based on historical facts and speculations surrounding the life of Lizzie Borden and the murders of her father and stepmother, whose bodies were discovered in a downstairs room of their family home in Fall River, Massachusetts, on 4 August 1892. The Bordens' maid, Bridget Sullivan, had discovered the body of Lizzie's stepmother. She was subsequently summoned by Lizzie to witness the second body, before being asked to call the doctor. It was revealed that both victims received multiple blows to the head. The subsequent investigation and trial of the tragedy set a precedent for media coverage. Lizzie was tried and incarcerated during the trial that lasted fourteen days before her lawyers convinced the jury that the evidence presented against her was circumstantial, and she was soon acquitted. Despite being shunned by her community, Lizzie continued to reside in Fall River with her sister, Emma. However, her relationship with a young Boston actress named Nance O'Neil became another concern for both the community and Emma, who later moved out. The ill and unmarried Lizzie died of pneumonia on 1 June 1927, but the mystery behind the twin murder still lives on. Pollock's play sets the scene some ten years after the murder where two characters, Miss Lizzie and her companion, The Actress who visits her at times, reconstruct various incidents and events before and after the murder. The author helps the audience picture another perspective toward the murder mystery by allowing an insight into Fall River's outlaw, Lizzie Borden, who has, through the eyes of many at that time, questioned the conventions of nineteenth-century America and remained culturally convicted: "Lizzie Borden took an axe, gave her mother forty whacks. When the job was nicely done, she gave her father forty-one." (Note 1) As Erin Striff points out Lizzie has been "acquitted in the courtroom but convicted in the playground." (Note 2) Pollock's feminist play gives a voice to the accused, allowing the accused to interact and express her true nature in her own eyes through dialogue with her companion. From a feminist perspective, the real-life Lizzie faced a society "based on the premise of masculine authority." Nevertheless, Pollock has dropped Lizzie into literature since "literature can play in overcoming such [patriarchal] biases." (Note 3) By doing so she has broken barriers and paved the way for a different perspective towards the life of Lizzie Borden. This paper pursues that different perceptiveness in order to highlight the protagonist's different nature portrayed to that of its real life counterpart. The argument aims to reveal the main character as a hero, rather than a villain, through a feminist perspective.

2. Argument

One would come to ask, how does Pollock portray patriarchy's pariah as a hero? To answer that question, it is

firstly vital to sympathize with the protagonist's struggle and understand why she is considered a victim. In order to do so, it is imperative to consider the relationship between the oppressors and oppressed in the play. Pollock's work portrays many instances which bring to the forefront the idea that Lizzie Borden is of the marginalized and oppressed and by extension Pollock portrays the marginalization and oppression of women in society as a whole. The Redstockings Manifesto, a radical feminist group, categorizes women as an "oppressed class" and blames "all men" for this oppression. It argues that men have control in all matters and sustained their position of power while keeping women in an inferior position. (Note 4) This sense of oppression is visible in Pollock's play and becomes most noticeable in Lizzie's conversations with her father, Mr. Borden. One instance of oppression is quite evidential in Lizzie's argument with father regarding her choice for a companion:

Mr. Borden: God damn it!! I said you'll see Johnny MacLeod Tuesday night!!

Lizzie: No.

Mr. Borden: Get the hell upstairs to your room!

Lizzie: No.

Mr. Borden: I'm telling you to go upstairs to your room!!

Lizzie: I'll go when I'm ready.

Mr. Borden: I said, Go!

He grabs her arm to move her forcibly, she hits his arm away. (Note 5)

Her father orders her to see Johnny MacLeod in an attempt to encourage her to marry, and Lizzie clearly objects to such an arrangement. The argument signifies Lizzie's unwillingness to accept her father's decision, and this unwillingness results to nothing but punishment: "Get the hell upstairs to your room." She disapproves the idea every time it is brought up: "He's looking for a housekeeper and it isn't going to be me!" (Note 6) However, Lizzie's lack of interest is not strictly towards Johnny, but also towards marriage: "I don't want to get married. I wouldn't be a good mother." (Note 7) Lizzie is obviously unable to choose her fate; she must either agree to her father's decision and marry or receive punishment. Such an option shows she has no freedom to choose her own path in life, making her a victim of her father's oppression.

This imposed submission to parental authority also makes its way into another aspect of Lizzie's life. Another instance of repression is brought to light by Mr. Borden's response to Lizzie's request to work for her father:

Lizzie: I know it! ... I want out of all this ... I hate this house, I hate ... I want out. Try to understand how I feel. ... Why can't I do something? ... Eh? I mean ... I could ... I could go into your office. ... I could ... learn how to keep books [...] Why can't I do something like that?

Mr. Borden: For god's sake, talk sensible. (Note 8)

Lizzie expresses dissatisfaction concerning her current situation as a financially dependent woman living under her father's roof. She suggests a solution that may open ways to more independence by working and earning her own income, and at the same time having the same privilege as men, which is having the same job as them. The Redstockings Manifesto states: "All men have received economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy, (Note 9) and here the audience witness Lizzie's rejection of receiving the benefits of "male supremacy," since she is not allowed to have the same job as men who work for her father and is also not entitled to earn her own income. Such a condition would keep Lizzie dependent on her father's wealth, but Mr. Borden believes it is not "sensible" to see Lizzie work where he does, treating her unequal to men. Her desires to work with her father and remain an unmarried woman are desire denied to enter, what French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan terms, the Symbolic Order. French feminist and literary critic Julia Kristeva builds on Lacan's ideas of the three orders to explain that The Symbolic or the Symbolic Order represents "the language of transparency, power and conformity" and moreover, it is "aligned with patriarchal functions in culture." Furthermore, the Symbolic represses what Kristeva refers to as the "semiotic," a concept derived from Freud's infantile pre-Oedipal stage and Lacan's pre-mirror stage. (Note 10) She sees the semiotic as the site of "instinctual drives" which is usually found within the "infant prior to the acquisition of language." (Note 11) However, it is also "a realm of meaning that resists any systemization." (Note 12) It is in many ways related to Lacan's Imaginary Order (Note 13); therefore, it could be thought of as the realm of desires and thoughts yet not shaped or repressed by patriarchal policies. Feminists associate the society with patriarchy and its language with the "language of the father." One must submit to "masculine functions" when learning the language of The Symbolic or society, (Note 14) and Lizzie seems to be no exception. For Lizzie, Mr. Borden is the embodiment of patriarchal ideology repressing her desires of independence, leaving her no choice but to accept Symbolic castration.

Mr. Borden shows to agree with the segregation of the role of men and women in society and does not deem fit to see her daughter handling a job usually carried out by men. In addition, he is at odds with Lizzie's desired role of an independent unmarried woman. He is unable to make Lizzie conform to the only role he knows for women:

Mr. Borden: Just listen to me, Lizzie....I'm choosing my words, and I want you to listen. Now...in most circumstances...a woman of your age would be married, eh? Have children, be running her own house, that's the natural thing, eh? Pause. Eh, Lizzie?

Lizzie: I don't know.

Mr. Borden: Of course you know.

Lizzie: You're saying I'm unnatural [?] (Note 15)

To him, Lizzie would only seem more "natural" if she follows the traditional role other women possess in River Fall, which is looking after the house and raising their husband's children. On the contrary, Feminism rejects the idea that women be fixed to traditional social roles (Note 16); as Simone de Beauvoir puts it "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one." (Note 17) Feminism seeks to explain that women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine, and it is culture that has produced the inferior woman. (Note 18) Consequently, Lizzie's "unnatural" nature is merely the perception of the patriarchal culture that reigns over River Fall. This culture portrayed in Pollock's work clearly depicts the power possessed by men and it is the phallographic reality of the community that has painted women as the Other and inferior.

However, Pollock also exhibits the different level of inferiority in women, which is most visible when comparing Lizzie to her stepmother, Mrs. Borden. Lizzie's stepmother shows to possess "traditional modes of thought," (Note 19) and favours Mr. Borden over Lizzie in every verbal conflict they have. She shows signs of no objection toward her role and position as a housewife, implicating her views and beliefs to be aligned with patriarchal policies. Mrs. Borden fits the description of a "patriarchy women." (Note 20) Tyson describes the patriarchal woman as being submissive to the opposite sex. If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she is labeled as a "good girl" and if she chooses not to abide by the rules, she's labeled as a "bad girl." While the "good girl" image is associated with a gentle, submissive and angelic female, the "bad girl" is usually perceived as a violent, aggressive and worldly woman. (Note 21) Mrs. Borden is depicted as a gentle and submissive character and always in agreement with Mr. Borden and River Fall's views, especially when it comes to issues concerning Lizzie: "Mrs. Borden: Speak to her about Johnny MacLeod. Mr. Borden: Alright! Mrs. Borden: You know what they're sayin' in town. About her and that doctor?" (Note 22) She agrees that the sinister Lizzie should accept the role of a traditional housewife that has been assigned to Mrs. Borden and other women around her. Even their rivalry plays its part to distinguish Mrs. Borden from Lizzie, the non-patriarchal woman. Lizzie appears to play the perfect role of a non-patriarchal woman being exactly the opposite of her stepmother and even other women, as mentioned earlier, staging her feelings of oppression and difference of opinion with her parents. This difference in women has proven to be less rewarding for Lizzie, supplying her with a different kind of treatment in comparison to other women, such as her stepmother or Emma. The patriarchal woman is shown to have more importance than that of the non-patriarchal woman (Note 23); and this difference of treatment and benefit the patriarchal stepmother receives, becomes apparent even to Lizzie. She shows frustration over the fact that her stepmother may be the next in line to inherit Mr. Borden's farm: "Lizzie: He would never leave me the farm, not with her on his back, but now (She gets up from the chair) I will have the farm, and I will have the money, yes, to do what I please!" (Note 24) Even though Lizzie dreams of economic independence she knows her stepmother will prevent her from reaching her ambitions of attaining the farm and her father's wealth. She understands that her stepmother, who is a symbol of a patriarchal woman, has a better chance of receiving Mr. Borden's will. Lizzie's difference sets her apart from other women in that she avoids living up to the patriarchal expectations set out by her father and others around her. For other women in the play, these expectations to live out their assigned roles and submit to patriarchal rules appear to be "common sense." Emma advises Miss Lizzie not to have The Actress around: "Emma: Common sense should tell you what you ought or ought not do. Miss Lizzie: Common sense is repugnant to me. I prefer uncommon sense." (Note 25) Emma shows that she cares about what others might say and assume about the mysterious relationship between Miss Lizzie and The Actress. Miss Lizzie thinks nothing of the community's thoughts and condemnations: "Emma: That ... actress who's come up from Boston. Miss Lizzie: What about her? Emma: People talk. Miss Lizzie: You needn't listen." (Note 26) The clear contrast of thought between the two sisters shows that Emma has no problem with obeying the policies set by the people of Fall River, and her submission to The Symbolic has led Mr. Borden to perceive her as a "good girl." To Emma, the understanding of the Symbolic Order is "common sense." Lizzie on the other hand portrays a completely opposite outlook preferring "uncommon sense," which is

an indication of her unwillingness to accept rules defined by the Symbolic Order. The fact that the community may dislike her for being a lesbian does not bother Lizzie at all and she shows she does not consider homosexuality as society's taboo. Pollock draws this fine line between the bad girl and good girl image and clearly places Lizzie at the opposing end of patriarchy. The protagonist understands that she does not bear the traits of a patriarchal woman: "Lizzie: do you suppose there's a formula, a magic formula for being "a woman? ... Perhaps the death of my mother ... I didn't get that Ka Thud!! I was born ... defective." (Note 27) Being a non-patriarchal woman makes her more inferior to other women. However, the misunderstood and oppressed protagonist should be thought of as a victim rather than a villain. Even among the same gender, Lizzie receives more share of that oppression. Nevertheless, that should not undermine the fact the female sex in the play, in general, has been considered inferior; they are all surely subject to oppression and inferiority.

Other women in the play such as Emma, The Actress, and Bridget, also indicate concealed desires of objection and retaliation which have developed from suppression. Through Miss Lizzie, the dramatist chooses to disclose Emma's hidden desires of retaliation. Emma asks Miss Lizzie if she had killed their parents, and Lizzie replies if she had, Emma too must have been a part of it, since they share the same desires and have apparently been subjected to the same treatment in the family: "Miss Lizzie: ... Yes, your hand working my mouth, me saying all the things you felt like saying, me doing all the things you felt like doing, me spewing forth, me hitting out, and you, you---!" (Note 28) Miss Lizzie reveals that they shared the same feelings towards their parents; it could be understood that Emma carries the same suppressed feeling as Lizzie, and holds the same desire to express her dissatisfaction. Therefore, if they share the same struggle, then they have also faced the same sort of oppression. Besides Emma, The Actress is also depicted as yet another oppressed soul. Her comment concerning the twin murder mystery of Lizzie's parents exposes a desire for retaliation against everything Mr. Borden and Mrs. Borden symbolize: "The Actress: Did Lizzie Borden take an axe? ... If you didn't I should be disappointed and if you did I should be horrified." (Note 29) The Actress implicates that it is the act of murder that terrifies her, and not the act of retaliation. She shows to champion the act of retaliation which indicates her sympathy towards Lizzie's struggle; and even when she is playing the part of Lizzie, she plays the role of a rebellious Lizzie. She creates a murderous Lizzie Borden who commits the crime, as Miss Lizzie reminds The Actress: "I didn't [do it]. You did." (Note 30) The Actress' use of imagination while playing the Lizzie character indicates how she would react and behave if she was in Lizzie's position, and it is actually the actress' performance that portrays Lizzie as a rebel. Moreover, Pollock's portrayal of female inferiority and oppression can also be seen through the maid's encounter with Harry. Bridget faces a case of sexual harassment by Harry and evidently fails to do much to change her situation: "Bridget: I'll give you a good poke in the nose if you don't keep your hands to yourself." (Note 31) Her comments are merely attempts to fend off harassment, rather than put an end to them once and for all. Pollock's depiction of Bridget seems to be of a woman who accepts the role carved out for her as a powerless female that fails to stand up to sexual harassment. Her lack of power to rectify the situation that is causing her suffering is shown as being the product of her acceptance of her inferiority to her male harasser. All three women exhibit a weakness to stand up to agents of oppression and instead resort to the suppression of hidden desires which are only revealed through Lizzie (played by the Actress) or Miss Lizzie. If there is anything unjust they have to endure, it seems they do anything but justice to their mistreatment.

Amongst the oppressed there is only one who stands above the rest to actually retaliate against this act of patriarchal tyranny. From all the women mentioned above it is obvious that Lizzie is the voice of the voiceless. She is the only character to have spoken and acted her desired thoughts that other women in the play have only harboured. Pollock's play uses, what Hélène Cixous terms *écriture féminine* (feminine writing) to attack the patriarchal construct of the 19th century Fall River society, and she does that best through the identity of Lizzie Borden (represented by both Miss Lizzie and The Actress). Therefore, the Lizzie Borden character should not be seen as just a victim, but also a champion.

Lizzie's identity, therefore, shifts from a victim to a hero and this transformation first begins when she allows her desires, which Kristeva explains stem from the semiotic, make their way into the Symbolic. Therefore, it begins when Lizzie expresses her ambitions of economic and marital independence, goals which were considered not "sensible" for women at the time. In addition to that, Lizzie also expressed thoughts of murder when she converses with Mrs. Borden about death; both the thought and act of murder are other examples of unwelcome desires for The Symbolic:

LIZZIE: Do you know something? If I were to kill someone, I would come up behind them very slowly and quietly. They would never even hear me, they would never turn around... They would be too frightened to turn around even if they heard me. They would be so afraid they'd see what they feared. (Note 32)

However, Lizzie prevails in surfacing this unwelcome murderous thought out into the open, resisting submission

from The Symbolic. Even her mysterious relationship with The Actress is a sign of rebellion against traditional courtship. (Note 33) Her hatred towards her stepmother goes against traditional values (Mrs. Borden holds a parental position in their family and is usually expected to be treated with respect): “Mr. Borden: Show some respect. Lizzie: She is a fat cow and I hate her!” (Note 34) Lizzie disobeys her father countless times, and fights against what she sees as oppression, and she clearly shows to reject patriarchy’s assigned roles and restrictions. In this way, the protagonist prevails in her attempt to escape oppression from the Symbolic Order. Feminists such as Cixous look to resist submission from patriarchal law” by using discourse derived from the Imaginary Order, (Note 35) and Lizzie’s discourse does just that by surfacing her desires. Just as Cixous explains “a Feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive,” (Note 36) and Pollock’s protagonist shows to be subversive every time she is faced with patriarchal restrictions.

Nevertheless, Lizzie’s most subversive act is her persistence not to disclose the actual truth behind the murder of her father and stepmother. Neither does the actual case nor Pollock’s work charge Lizzie with murder, but the speculations and gossip that pin her as the suspect do most of the damage. Ten years after the incident, the children chant: “Lizzie Borden took an axe, gave her mother forty whacks. When the job was nicely done, she gave her father forty-one.” (Note 37) The fact that nobody else was charged after the trial is what gave birth to the ambiguity and mystery behind the double homicide. Pollock makes good use of this component of ambiguity which becomes a vital weapon of subversion as she states herself: “the ambiguity of her art is what keeps the Lizzie Borden legend alive.” (Note 38) But the question remains, how has Lizzie Borden prevailed in subverting patriarchy and its agents, given the fact that she has been declared innocent? The murder is seen as an “attempt to destroy blind male authority and female acceptance of it.” (Note 39) If Lizzie has blood on her hands, then her actions succeed in eliminating the patriarchal ruler (the father), and the patriarchal woman (stepmother); on the other hand, and more importantly, if Lizzie is innocent, it is this presence of doubt and ambiguity that plays its part to leave Lizzie with a tarnished reputation, placing Lizzie as the Other, an outlaw and a rebel. Either way, to the people of River Fall, the verdict of the trial does not change the way Lizzie is perceived; she has stood up to her oppressors and succeeded, guilty or not guilty. To those around her, she fits the perfect profile for axing patriarchy to the ground.

Throughout the journey, Pollock shows Lizzie’s struggle through Miss Lizzie and The Actress, who plays Lizzie ten years ago. Interestingly, when Emma asks Miss Lizzie did you do it, she replies: “Did you never stop and think that if I did, then you were guilty too?”; and at the end of the play, where The Actress accuses Miss Lizzie of murder, she responds, “I didn’t. You did.” (Note 40) Even though the audience is left with an open interpretation, the character of Lizzie will remain the figure that acts out women’s darkest and suppressed thoughts. It is Lizzie’s retaliation that makes her a hero, staring patriarchy straight in the eyes. She stands up for the suppressed and the marginalized, but we are left asking, where would an accused father-killing figure belong in the category of heroes and heroines. This feminine champion fails to fit most of the heroic categories since she fails to follow their path of ideologies that serve the interest of the patriarchal law. Therefore, when placing Lizzie’s appropriate place within the heroic archetype, there is not much room for any choice but one: the Romantic Hero. The problem, however, is that the types of Romantic Heroes are usually male figures. Peter Larsen Thorslev’s *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (1962) lists characters such as Prometheus, Satan, Faust, Cain, and Ahasuerus, who are all male Romantic heroes. However, since tackling such texts with a feminist perspective, any research within such framework is obliged to unveil the gender difference and as Tyson explains, “go against the grain.” (Note 41) By doing so, a feminist concept of gender equality allows us to remove the gender difference and consider both men and woman eligible to enter this kind of heroic ideal as equals and allowing females to also become Romantic heroes. One major factor that grants Lizzie a heroic title is her fight against oppression, and when considering a feminist reading towards *Blood Relations* (1984), Lizzie Borden stands as the spear pointed towards patriarchy. Lizzie resembles Prometheus since she too is in the “fight for liberty against oppression in all form.” (Note 42) Lizzie, unlike other women in the play, speaks out on behalf of the suppressed and rebels against the suppressor. Her actions resemble that of the Noble Outlaw: “fiery [and] passionate” (Note 43); and just like Thorslev describes The Noble Outlaw as being “against society and sometimes even against God,” Lizzie too questions the society and religious conventions, and “is never a hero in that [she] never succeeds in gaining our sympathy with [her] rebellion.” (Note 44) Lizzie’s resistance to accept phallogocentric conventions is not tolerated by her society, and she does not receive any sort of sympathy, even by the oppressed such as Bridget, Emma or The Actress. Conclusively, Pollock’s play has given birth to a brave Romantic hero.

3. Conclusion

What the author has done is allow the audience to enter the heart and mind of Lizzie Borden in order to shed

light on her side of the story. The dramatist also invites the imagination of her audience to construct their own interpretation of the story. The factual incident may leave many to believe Lizzie Borden to be the murderer of the double homicide, and therefore portray her as a villain and a rebel; however, Pollock's work has provided another perspective toward the legend of Lizzie Borden; a perspective that perceives Lizzie as a victim of oppression rather than a villain of society. This research illustrates a brave victim who stands up to inequality and injustice. Pollock's creation plays the part of a Romantic Hero in *Blood Relations* (1984), seeking to subvert Patriarchal domination. Her courage to resist submission to Patriarchal law is what makes her a feminine hero.

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- Note 22. Pollock. *Blood Relations*, p. 101.
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- Note 34. Pollock. *Blood Relations*, p. 104.
- Note 35. Booker. *Practical Introduction*, p. 91.
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