

Sara Langevin
Professor Rimstead
ANG553
April 17 2009

A Review of Elizabeth Hardwick's
Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature

Born in 1916, Elizabeth Hardwick has lived through many great changes in our society. A prolific writer, she has published many books on subjects that moved her. She died in December 2007. She inserts herself in a movement of women writers from the 1960's and 1970's that wanted their conditions to change. They were not satisfied with their role in society, just like women writers of the past had protested in their own way. It is only natural that Hardwick decided to write a collection of essays on the women of literature that questioned the model of what a woman is supposed to be in society. The result was *Seduction and Betrayal*. Elizabeth Hardwick read the essays that make up her book in a series of lectures at Vassar College and Princeton University in the early 1970's.

The essays are divided into four major categories. She begins the book with a collective monument in the story of women writers, the Brontë sisters. She continues on with three different essays on characters developed by Henrik Ibsen, a great Norwegian playwright. The next section is composed of three essays on great women figures: Zelda Fitzgerald, Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf. She then adds two essays on Dorothy Wordsworth and Jane Carlyle, that she calls "Amateurs". The last section is an essay entitled "Seduction and Betrayal".

Each essay relates to the other because of the different themes that she explores. She analyzes the relationships that women have throughout their lives. Women interact

with other women; they interact with men, and they interact with the expectations that society has of them. The real women and female characters she chose are faced with the conundrum of choosing their identities in each situation.

All of the Brontë sisters were very self-identified according to Hardwick. She admires that they “seized upon the development of their talents as an honourable way of life and in this they were heroic” (29). Their influence on women’s writing is undeniable.

Elizabeth Hardwick wrote in a very direct style. However, this means that the reader often senses a moralizing tone. Nonetheless, it is understandable because the texts were written as lectures for, most probably, female American students. She concludes her study of Ibsen’s plays by questioning the moral in his plays: ““they have any moral it is that, in the end, nothing will turn out to have been worth the destruction of others and of oneself” (Hardwick 83). Women’s collectivity is thus very important to her.

The section entitled “Victims and Victors” is particularly relevant to the title. Her descriptions of the life of Zelda Fitzgerald and Sylvia Plath are very evocative of the challenges these women had to face. They were seductresses in their own right, but they had to betray the expectations society had of them to be able to live their lives in their own way.

In my opinion, these last collections of essays as well as the book’s title essay, “Seduction and Betrayal”, are the elements that best convey the title’s image. Seduction and betrayal are such evocative themes, most often used together regarding women. I was a bit disappointed that the dichotomy was not more used throughout the book.

By Sara Langevin

Works Cited:

Hardwick, Elizabeth. *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*. New-York:

Randomhouse. 1974.

Links:



<http://www.nytimes.com/books/00/07/30/specials/hardwick-audio.html>

A complete guide or reviews by Hardwick in *The New York Review of Books*, which she co-founded: <http://www.nybooks.com/authors/67>

Hardwick's death announced on the CBC:

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/story/2007/12/04/elizabeth-hardwick.html>

Seduction and Betrayal reviews:

http://www.nybooks.com/shop/product?usca_p=t&product_id=259

<http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/26/specials/hardwick-women.html>