

The Supernatural Woman and Wartime Female Agency in *The Foreshadowing* (2006)

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Abstract—Female characters in patriarchal settings must often navigate through society using their own agency. One form of power with which they are sometimes endowed is supernatural power. The *Foreshadowing* (2006) is a children’s novel set in England and France during World War I. Unlike most war-themed children’s literature, the main character is a teenage girl named Alexandra. This novel is also notable for its use of supernatural power as a source of agency. Using a theory on gender hegemony proposed by Schippers [1] and another on female agency proposed by Trites [2], this study examines Alexandra, her father, her mother, Tom, and Jack. We show that the novel is ambivalent in its portrayal of supernatural power in relation to female agency. On one hand, the novel demonstrates that supernatural power is a powerful tool that threatens the patriarchal system represented through the father. With the help of her supernatural power, Alexandra uses her agency to overcome the boundaries placed on her by the gender roles of that era. On the other hand, the novel itself is still limited by the era’s gender roles because it allows no possibility for the female character to take an active part in the war.

Keywords—agency, power, supernatural, war, gender.

I. INTRODUCTION

“By creating the stories surrounding these creatures, women were able, not only to give themselves an escape from endless drudgery... but also give themselves power in a world that granted them none;” thus Piccotto [3] explains why female characters in classic fairy tales are mostly associated with magical power. As such fairy tales and other medieval literature show, women were considered more vulnerable to dark magic because they were seen as inferior to men [4]. Society did not look favorably on magic because it emphasized women’s weakness. Although women who claimed to wield magic were deemed crazy, they were also better able than most to exercise their agency by acting on independent motivation [5]. Thus women’s agency can be either diminished or enhanced by claims of supernatural power.

This study examines how supernatural power relates to female agency in *The Foreshadowing* (2006), a novel by Marcus Sedgwick that incorporates supernatural elements into an otherwise realistic setting during World War I, a setting in which women have to fight to exercise agency. The protagonist is a seventeen-year-old English girl living in the wealthy part of Brighton. Alexandra is not like any normal teenager; she is very different and is even seen as unnatural due to the supernatural power she possesses. The story takes place in England and France in the year 1915. The war has just begun, and Alexandra starts to receive premonitions in which

her brother becomes one of the many fallen soldiers in the battle of Somme.

Previous studies of mystery stories written by female authors such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* have argued that the female characters in these stories get their power from the supernatural and use it to establish themselves as supernatural women as well as to defeat supernatural men [6]. One thing to notice is that these novels by female authors do not associate supernatural women with evil. Previous research on U.S. contemporary film and television has revealed that supernatural women must make sacrifices as they reestablish their “maternal instincts and desires as an immutable component of womanhood” [7]. Meanwhile, in Shakespeare’s plays, groups of supernatural women who, together, are too powerful and too successful at resisting the patriarchal norms are split up in order to keep each woman a submissive wife and mother [3]. Biddinger and Piccotto have both reported that supernatural women are reduced to their domestic roles and predetermined positions in society. In relation to supernatural power and female agency, Kramer [8] posits that the agency of female heroines has evolved in several Female Gothic novels by Elizabeth Lowell. The heroines of these novels solve mysteries using their agency as a form of resistance to the patriarchal ideology and are rewarded with happily-ever-after endings, specifically, companionate marriages. This shows that even these powerful and active characters cannot escape from the notion that they will only consider their lives successful if they take up their preordained roles as wives and mothers.

Likewise, the female heroine’s movements in *The Foreshadowing* are restricted by the expectations and preordained roles that are imposed on her. Because she is so young, instead of a wife-and-mother role she has to negotiate her role as a daughter from a respectable family and a woman in wartime. This study aims to shed more light on the discussion of female agency and women’s position in a patriarchal society through examining the characters in this novel. What sets *The Foreshadowing* apart from previous supernatural stories is that it is set during a war. Whereas war stories typically portray female characters as passive victims of war, Alexandra is given a power that allows her to get to the frontline. In spite of this, the text still appears to conform to the notion that the battleground truly belongs to men and that women ultimately belong on the sidelines. This article explores how the novel is therefore ambivalent in its portrayal of Alexandra’s supernatural power as a source of female agency related to her position in the war. First, we will examine how the main character’s agency and power are limited. Then we will turn to look at the way in which

supernatural power influences the main character's agency and position.

II. METHOD

Using Schippers' theory on gender hegemony [1] and Trites' theory on female agency [2], this analysis examines Alexandra, her father, her mother, Tom, and Jack. Schippers' theory of gender hegemony sheds light on issues of femininity and masculinity in the novel. Gender hegemony focuses on the notion that men assert dominance over women through concepts of masculinity and femininity. Schippers [1] also added that the masculine characteristics that differentiate the genders and that guarantee men's dominance must not be accessible to women or else men's superiority will be threatened.

Trites' theory of female agency sheds light on how the female protagonist in the novel claims and makes sense of her own agency. According to Trites [2], voice is often used as a metaphor for agency. When a female character understands the importance of maintaining and articulating her voice, she can be considered to successfully claim agency. Furthermore, Trites [2] identifies power with "positive forms of autonomy, self-expression, and self-awareness" (p. 8).

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. *The Undermining Father Figure*

Alexandra's father exhibits hegemonic masculinity in the form of the authority that he enforces on his family. This characteristic was exclusive to men in the novel's social setting and ensured men's dominance over women [1]. Alexandra lives in a patriarchal family. She is subjugated under the patriarchy which, according to Bhasin, is a system in which women are dominated by men and are positioned lower with respect to men [9]. Alexandra and her mother have little to no freedom to do what they want. When her opinion is disregarded by her father in a family discussion, she reacts as follows: "I suppose I should have been hurt by Edgar, and Father, but I'm used to their ways. That's just how Father is, with everyone in the house. Not just me. Mother, too." (p. 99). She grows up observing the imbalanced power relation between her parents. Alexandra notes that, "I only know her [Alexandra's mother] as she is now, at Father's beck and call." (p. 99). The word choice of "Father's beck and call" shows that Alexandra recognizes that her mother always obeys her father and never questions his authority.

Thus not only Alexandra but also her mother is a victim of the hegemonic masculinity that the father establishes in order to guarantee his dominant position. This hierarchal relationship "provides a legitimating rationale for men's control of their wives" [1]. When the mother brings up the idea of sending Alexandra to be a nurse, she is reminded that Alexandra's father believes that Alexandra should be subjugated. He derides the idea of "all that sitting, watching. She should have something to occupy her." (p. 96). In this conversation, the mother is talking about Alexandra, but her husband wonders if she is also talking about herself. During that time period, at the beginning of WWI, most middle-class women stayed home and looked after the children while their servants took care of domestic chores [10]. The father responds to the mother's suggestion that they send Alexandra to be a nurse by saying, "Are you talking about Alexandra now? Or do you mean to bring up your own complaints

again?" (p. 96). She denies this and says that she is "content" with everything. We can infer that she has no choice but to be content because her husband expects her to be. The word "again" shows that she has complained about her own life in the past. This is another example of how the father keeps suppressing the women's voices within his household. The mother is evidently in the same powerless position as her daughter, which explains why she cannot help Alexandra as much as she wants to. All of this shows that the husband, along with societal expectations, has shaped her into an 'ideal' housewife who has no choice but to give in to his systematic control of everything within the household.

Yet not only his family but the father himself is also a victim of the patriarchal system. If his family is the victim of the system that he internalizes, then he is a victim of the predominant system in his society. He is subsumed under the concept of an ideal family, which, according to Mitchell, consists of a breadwinner husband, a stay-at-home wife, and obedient children [10].

Alexandra reflects on how the way her family appears in public signals their conformity to social ideals. "What a fine, proud family we must have looked. Mother and Father arm in arm. Father was well known, and respected, and men nodded to him as he walked, with his children behind, me in the middle, Tom on the right and Edgar on the left, in his uniform." (p. 95).

Alexandra understands that her father wants to give the impression of "a fine, proud family." By assigning traditional roles to each family member, he ensures that his family embodies the values that were predominant at the time. It can be inferred that he controls his family by internalizing the system, and that, in turn, he gains respect. One of the ways in which he internalizes society's values is his belief that young men should join the army during wartime. He is proud that his son, Edgar, is going to fight in the war, and brings him out in public "in his uniform" in order to strengthen his own good standing in society. Also, he does not allow Alexandra to work outside the home because it does not suit her status as "a girl from a respectable family", as such girls were supposed to stay home until they were married [10]. Alexandra states that she is expected to "just wait for someone of the right sort to marry me. The right sort means rich, and from a good family." (p. 96). As this statement shows, Alexandra knows that her father expects her to marry at a young age but only to accept a suitor from another respectable family. He is the dominant figure in his family, dictating everything, yet he also falls under the authority of the system due to his fear of not living up to society's expectations.

Moreover, the father controls his children with regard to how they are supposed to act in order to ensure that they fulfill society's expectations. He expects that his sons, for example, will enact hegemonic masculinity. He does not accept weak or ineffectual behavior from them as these are considered feminine traits that would be problematic for a man to embody [1]. With reference to Edgar, he says that "'No harm will come to the strong,' Father said. 'The brave.'" (p. 100). He associates his son with the stereotypically masculine characteristic of physical strength, and he believes that joining the war is one way to prove one's masculinity. When his younger son, Tom, refuses to fight, the father gets angry, saying, "You're not falling for all this Socialist nonsense, are

you? I won't have a pacifist in my house!" (p. 99). Pacifism refers to a moral stance against war and violence. In the father's social context, a man's masculinity would be questioned if he declared himself a pacifist [11]. Men were expected to be loyal to their nations and to express their bravery by joining the war. According to British historian Anthony Fletcher, the enthusiasm for fighting among upper- and middle-class British men during WWI "mainly resulted from their wills to revive the old Victorian ideology of masculinity, which declined during the Edwardian era" [12]. Alexandra's father, a middle-class British man, believes that men who refuse to fight fail to embody the heroic concept of hegemonic masculinity. He is not aware that men can no longer show off their manliness in modern war, as WWI is so much larger in scale and more destructive than the legendary wars recounted in medieval stories [12]. Therefore, Tom's unwillingness to fight is condemned as problematic.

As for Alexandra, he requires her to embody certain feminine qualities based on Victorian social ideals. According to Mitchell, daughters were ideally supposed to get married rather than working; as a result, parents put less emphasis on their schooling [10]. Therefore, Alexandra is expected to stay home and help around the house. As a woman, she is also expected to be submissive, passive, and nurturing. The way in which he assigns certain characteristics and expectations to his children based on their genders implies that he conforms to the patriarchal system [9]. He does not allow his children to possess undesirable qualities for their genders, as Alexandra does. Schippers [1] uses the term "pariah femininities" to describe hegemonic masculinity characteristics, such as being authoritative or noncompliant, that are held by women, for whom these characteristics are viewed as undesirable. Through these characteristics, the father's own daughter becomes a threat to his dominance. Therefore, the conflict between Alexandra and her parents regarding her supernatural power derives from the fact that Alexandra does not fit into their standard of an ideal daughter.

It is for this reason that Alexandra's father takes her for an irrational madwoman. This narrative can be explained with reference to the assumption that women who do not subscribe to the standards for womanhood must be crazy [13]. The father confronts Alexandra about her interaction with Evans, a shellshock patient. "You have been living a fantasy life, Alexandra, a fantasy. You have been idolizing the neurasthenic patients like Evans, and filling your head with wild myths from books!" (p. 63). He likens Alexandra to Evans and disapproves of both by saying that they are both crazy. Her father adds, "Did you ever stop to think what effect your childish imaginings would have on someone who'd lost a relative?" (p. 63). The father foresees the possibility of his daughter being taken as mentally ill if she goes around telling people about her premonitions, which he believes are nothing but "childish imaginings". His fear of having any member of his family be publicly shamed reveals that the father is a victim of society's expectations.

Because of this fear, the father also cannot accept the irrationality of the supernatural, as he is a man, and part of being a man is being rational. He uses the word "fantasy" to imply that it is easier for him to understand Alexandra's supernatural power as only part of her imagination. What he means by "wild myths from books" is the legend of Cassandra—a princess of Troy who had the same

foreshadowing ability. He realizes that there are many similarities between his daughter and Cassandra, and he is afraid that she will identify herself with Cassandra and therefore become unable to be rational. Furthermore, he believes that her supernatural power should be kept secret if he is to uphold his reputation. Not only his role as the head of the household but also his role as a doctor demands that he must be rational. Supernatural powers and science are in conflict, and thus the father must remain in denial about his daughter's supernatural ability.

We can also understand that Alexandra's power is seen as a threat to the patriarchal system that her father upholds. When he is confronted with evidence of her power, i.e., when she asks for his acknowledgment of what he sees as a weakness, he punishes her for rebelling. He discredits her power, as when he says, "You knew nothing," Father said (...) "You are a silly girl who is too sensitive to be a nurse. A man has died, Alexandra! Show some respect. Please—go to your room." (p. 90). From his word choice, we can see that he devalues her opinion by accusing her of having undesirable traits such as "silly" and "sensitive". These traits are used to label her and to position her beneath him. The fact that he resorts to such tactics suggests that he is threatened by Alexandra's power and by the knowledge that she knows something that he does not. Therefore, he keeps dismissing her and looking down on her in order to retain his position as her superior. He wishes that the subject of supernatural power had never been brought up in his household. The way the father keeps telling her to go to her room implies that he sees Alexandra as a child and as a person whose voice is not significant enough to be heard. The father gives Alexandra no opportunity to speak up and voice her opinion. Telling a child to go to his or her bedroom serves to remind that child that he or she is under the control of the adults in the house and essentially powerless [14]. Because the father feels threatened, he acts to make Alexandra think that her power is a weakness that could bring shame on the family. By these means Alexandra is forced to keep her power and knowledge under the control of her father, who represents the patriarchal system which has no place for powerful women.

B. Supernatural Power as the Source of Agency

During the story, Alexandra's attitude toward her own supernatural ability changes. Initially, she is encouraged to disregard her ability as she is affected by her parents' negative reactions. She is made to think that her power is a destructive force endangering herself and her surroundings. "And if I show the slightest sign of being difficult or strange, they simply won't accept it." (p. 83). It shows how her parents' negative attitude sets a limitation on her. Under normal pre-war circumstances, her ability is seen as "strange", and Alexandra is seen as not meeting her parents' standards for normal girls. As the war begins, however, her perception of her ability changes. She stops looking at her ability as a weakness and starts to see it as a source of power.

How Alexandra's supernatural ability becomes an empowering force for her reveals an underlying relationship between war and the supernatural. The absurd concept of supernatural power makes more sense in the equally irrational context of war. Before the war, it was seen as something that did not belong in ordinary life, but it finds a place amid the irrationality of war. Alexandra starts to see her own power differently when she realizes what it can do to people. In one crucial scene, Alexandra unintentionally cures a shellshocked

soldier whom she meets in the hospital where she works. “He seemed to have made such a complete recovery from the wrecked shell of a man he had been when I first saw him. (...) I spent the rest of the day wondering what had made him better.” (p. 60). Another thing that war and the supernatural have in common is that neither can be controlled. The supernatural power is something out of Alexandra’s control as it comes and goes. However, she exerts herself to make use of her power to help her make decisions and accomplish her task. Her ability affects her agency as a woman who is trying to make a change.

Furthermore, Alexandra’s process of acquiring agency shows her growth as she tries to break away from being a passive girl whose movements are very limited to become an active agent by articulating her voice. Trites [2] explains that voice is a metaphor for a female protagonist’s agency. Alexandra recognizes the primacy of voice, which means that she understands that she must always retain her voice whether she is speaking her opinion or communicating her wants [2]. For example, the way in which Alexandra confronts her parents about her ability shows her agency. She foresees a soldier’s death and keeps pushing them to acknowledge her power by saying, “But why do you think I kept asking about him?” I turned to Mother... “But I knew it was going to happen,” I said. “I knew.” “You knew nothing,” Father said.” (p. 89). Alexandra recognizes the primacy of her own voice, as shown by her effort to communicate with her parents. Her questions are intended to make them reflect, but they only shut her down. By telling them that she “knew it was going to happen,” she is rebelling against her parents because she voices something that they do not want to hear.

After her parents turn a blind eye toward her efforts to articulate her voice, she finds another way to exercise her agency by assuming a task. Her agency grows in power when she acknowledges that she is a “strong, independent, and articulate person” [2]. Alexandra risks going ahead although she fails to get support. She receives a premonition in which Tom, the only brother she has left, is going to die soon. She says, “This time is different. I’ve been given time to do something with what I have seen. And even if I am wrong, it makes no difference to what I’ve decided” (p. 51). The sentence “This time is different,” implies that Alexandra perceives this situation as a chance that she has to take. She gains the courage to act, which is one of the traits signifying that she tries to be an active agent [15]. Furthermore, preventing her premonition from becoming a reality is a task that she assumes. Jack Zipes has observed that, in fairytales, the protagonist is often challenged with a prohibition related to the task she assumes [16]. In this story, Alexandra wants to change the future. Neither the risk it requires nor the lack of support will stop her.

Fully recognizing the power that she holds is another form of agency. Trites [2] explains that power requires a positive form of self-awareness. Additionally, this acknowledgment of one’s agency often leads to transcendence. In this case, Alexandra realizes that she can do what she wants and needs to do despite the opposition. To be able to save her brother, she needs to run away from home. “Escape it was. I knew there was no way to tell my parents what I was going to do. (...) It will scandalize them, and their acquaintances, when they discover their daughter has vanished,” (p. 49). This part of the story is where Alexandra decides to chase after Tom.

The line “there was no way to tell my parents” shows that she knows that her mission will most likely be opposed. According to Mitchell, parents in Alexandra’s time did not let their daughters leave home except to go to boarding schools because they believed that daughters required more protection than sons [10]. Alexandra therefore comes to this decision without the support of her family. What she does can be analyzed as an independent action—an action taken independently without permission or support [17]. She believes that her power alone will enable her to pursue her goal.

Alexandra’s decision to escape also shows that she wants to be an active and autonomous girl and does not want to be bound by societal expectations. Her power takes another form. Her efforts to grow out of the passive good-girl role can be taken as a manifestation of her power [2]. Alexandra uses the strong word “scandalize” to show that she is aware that her actions will have negative consequences. She refers to herself as “their daughter” to show that she knows that her success or failure to live up to expectations will reflect on her parents. She also refers to her parents’ “acquaintances” which shows that she knows that the news of her rebellious act will damage her parents’ reputation in the public eye. She enacts pariah femininities by “taking charge and not being compliant” with her parents’ expectations [1]. Her family will become the talk of the town for failing to train and control their teenage girl properly. Even so, Alexandra is willing to take the risk despite the negative reactions.

Alexandra derives the agency required to do this from the knowledge that she receives from her premonitions rather than from any other person’s help. This sense of power thus does not come to her as a gift from a male character [2]. Even though Jack has the same supernatural ability, they both have different understandings of it. This is evident from the following excerpt:

“Try to understand that there’s nothing you can do. The future has already happened. We’re just waiting to live it.” “Well, then,” I said. “In that case, it’s my future to try to save Tom, whether he dies or not.” (p. 31).

Jack perceives his premonitions as depictions of a fate that cannot be changed; he expressed this through his statement that “The future has already happened.” He thus becomes a passive character who is only “waiting” for the future to unfold. In contrast, Alexandra is actively acting in response to her premonitions. She interprets her premonition about Tom’s death as a warning that she should be doing something, as she shows when she says, “it’s my future to try to save Tom.” She believes that she is being given the chance and the hope that she can change the course of someone’s fate. Thus her perception of the nature of her supernatural power influences how she exercises agency. She comes to the realization that her power holds significance for her own situation. She learns how to make use of her premonitions to face both death and the future. Her awakening is all the result of her own perseverance.

Whereas Alexandra has the upper hand due to her more optimistic way of understanding her premonitions, Jack desires to be a hero. He sees Alexandra as a girl who needs to be saved. When Alexandra is detained by the military, Jack helps her run away. As Alexandra reports, he says that “‘it wasn’t chance. I came to find you.’ That surprised me for a

start, but I should have known. He had planned everything.” (p. 18). Jack comes to Alexandra as a knight in shining armor. Yet Alexandra is not completely helpless given that she successfully saves the two of them from wandering aimlessly in search of signs of Tom. She interprets the clue because she believes in her power, unlike Jack. “Now I know what the raven means, (...) It means death. It means High Wood. It’s where Tom is going to die.” (p. 7). This quotation shows that it is Alexandra, not Jack, who figures out where Tom might be through her visions. The raven, which symbolizes a messenger, gives Alexandra clues. In response, Alexandra actively exercises agency by taking action against the premonition and leading the way.

Jack and Tom, the two male characters supporting Alexandra’s agency, are marginalized by gender stereotypes. They are attacked with “stigma and social sanction” as people around them question their manliness [1]. Unlike Alexandra’s father, who embodies hegemonic masculinity, both Jack and Tom enact hegemonic femininity instead. They are stigmatized as “wimps” who are considered problematic and feminine because they do not take on the hegemonic characteristics supposedly aligned with their gender [1]. For example, Jack is looked down on as an irrational man for believing he has a supernatural power. Yet it is this same power that allows Jack to assist Alexandra. In the case of Tom, his stance as a pacifist puts him in an inferior social position. Tom’s weakness and ineffectuality are supposedly feminine characteristics; his nonconformity to gender roles explains his marginalized position in relation to masculinity [1]. He is seen as a coward. When he refuses to let Alexandra help him, he is hoping to prove his solidarity with his older brother. Ultimately, he is saved along with his sister and Jack. This shows that the text is on the side of the marginalized characters, even those who are men. The text still portrays Alexandra as a woman who cannot survive without the help of men: it gives her a powerful supernatural ability that successfully takes her to the frontline, but once she arrives there, she is told to hide and let the men solve the problem for her. The text also implies that women do not have a place at the frontline when Alexandra’s emotions get the best of her, allowing Tom to get shot. As a result, he is not able to partake in the Battle of the Somme where he could have died. In one sense, this outcome means that Alexandra has achieved her goal of saving her brother. In another sense, the fact that she accomplished this through coincidence and error instead of according to a plan highlights her weakness and lack of agency. It implies that she fails to exert her agency to its maximum potential for the final task. Right after Alexandra shoots Tom, their location on the frontline is bombarded by artillery shells. As a result, she loses her foreshadowing ability forever although Jack’s ability remains. The story ends with Alexandra going back to be a nurse on the sidelines of the war, leaving no opportunity or new possibility for women to join men and take an active part in the war.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Foreshadowing seems to show ambivalence about its own portrayal of a supernatural woman as an empowered and active agent. On one hand, the text gives Alexandra a power which she can use to rebel against the dominating patriarchal force represented by her father. On the other hand, the text still puts Alexandra in a position where she needs help from men. The text also allows women to be involved in the war only as

nurses or other supporters, not as fighters. Alexandra sacrifices her safety and her life at home to seek out a dangerous battleground because she is driven to ensure her brother’s safety. This finding supports previous research about how supernatural women make sacrifices as they reestablish maternal instincts [7]. Our findings are also in keeping with those of Kramer [8], who found that female heroines who solved problems through agency were rewarded with marriage as their happy ending. This novel, similarly, gives Alexandra a happy ending in which she supports the war effort from behind the scenes as a nurse, i.e., a nurturing figure. This shows that, even in contemporary children’s literature, female characters cannot escape their preordained roles as caretakers for others, whether in marriage or on the sidelines of a war. Another point worth noting is that this text differs from previous supernatural stories in that the female character with supernatural power is portrayed as a savior instead of a wild and unruly figure, and thus is still controllable according to gender norms.

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