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Travel Writing on Screen

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In “Travel Writing and Gender,” Susan Bassnett explains how women travelers often had special access to women’s society and how they often focused on “the everyday” (CC pp. 229-230). Do you see these trends in the films for this second part of the class? (*Mystery Train, It Happened One Night, Grapes of Wrath, Spirited Away).* Draw examples from the films and readings.

Trending Women-in-Travel Themes as Depicted on Screen

In her essay Travel Writing and Gender, Susan Bassnett explains that women travelers often had special access to women’s society, and “as a result were able to describe … the normality of women’s customs and practices”, hence a focus on “the everyday” (CC pp. 229). Whereas the typical male European traveler exoticized the Orient and their journey, the typical female traveler “had no desire to reinvent herself as someone else and certainly no desire to see travel as a means of escape from reality of home” (CC pp. 230); female travel writers rejected self-dramatization. Such accounts of women’s society in the 18th and 19th centuries, as offered by the male voice, overly sexualized the everyday women. In contrast, the traveling female voice offered a perspective that refutes the fantastical male accounts of deviance and repressed female sexuality. As a result of a widely established patriarchy, controversial traveling-female opinions were met with swift dismissal. This paper will further examine how particular women travelers had access to women’s society and then analyze the recurring female focus on “the everyday” as depicted in films viewed in the second part of class.

In the film *Mystery Train*, a sleazy hotel in Memphis, Tennessee provides the backdrop for three separate tales: an eccentric Japanese couple, two women displaced by men in their lives, and a trio of inexperienced robbers. The second tale emphasizes Susan Bassnett’s proposed idea regarding women travelers and “the everyday.” The first of the travelers, an Italian widow named Lucia, escorts her husband’s coffin back to Italy. Lucia experiences a mostly mundane and natural visit to Memphis. Her day begins with expected delays at the airport and then progresses to her, a tourist, being conned while in a convenience store. Later, we see Lucia taking long walks and visiting diners for coffee, typical everyday lifestyle choices associated with Europeans. The second traveler, a young woman named Dee Dee, is introduced as broke having just left her boyfriend. On her journey south, Dee Dee is clearly worried for her well-being, a natural response to her financial situation. The two travelers meet in the hotel lobby and agree to share a room for the night. Upon agreeing to share the hotel room, the space becomes exclusively reserved for them. Therefore, the room is dedicated as the area for their women’s society. In their room, each woman is forced to make small-talk with the other who is a complete a stranger from different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. They trade introductions and share stories from their everyday lives while engaging in small-talk, a natural or everyday activity itself. Nearly everything these traveling women do seems to be focused with ways in which people typically act, think, and feel on a daily basis. Their natural reactions to the chaotic events in their lives illustrates their focus on “the everyday.”

In the film *It Happened One Night*, spoiled heiress Ellie Andrews impulsively becomes engaged to the scheming King Westley, leading her wealthy father to command her away on his yacht. After escaping, Ellie encounters the cynical newspaper reporter Peter Warne, who offers to help reunite her with King Westley in exchange for an exclusive story. Amidst Ellie and Peter’s shared journey, Ellie embraces women’s society and “the everyday” when she uses the public washroom. Ellie is forced to stand in line and wait her turn as means to shower. The washroom and its line denote the boundary of women’s society in the film because women exclusively use the space. In this instance, Ellie’s transition into the women’s society returns Ellie back to “the everyday.” Considering the time period and cabin-area location, it was and still is common to have public washrooms. Ellie, who herself is an heiress, is more accustomed to never having to share a washroom due to her extraordinary wealth. Her separation from her father has made her lose influence over others such that upon entering the women’s society—the vicinity of the washroom—Ellie must adhere to the natural ordering of events and wait at the back of the line. Her agreement to do so completes Ellie’s transition from heiress to everyday person. Ellie’s gender-defined access to women’s society allowed her to focus on “the everyday,” by transitioning from a lifestyle marked by the extraordinary to a lifestyle marked by the ordinary.

In the film *Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family is looking for a better life and untold riches in California. After their drought-ridden farm is seized by the bank, the family loads up a truck and heads West. On the road, the Joads meet dozens of other families making the same trek and holding onto the same dream. Once in California, however, the Joads soon realize that the promised land isn't quite what they had hoped. The Joads are met with hardship upon arriving as they realize that California has very limited opportunity for work with the current surplus of cheap labor. Consequently, the family spends their time in a camp reminiscent of Hooverville, a shanty town built by the homeless during the Great Depression, during which the women partake in “the everyday” role of cooking, cleaning, and nurturing the children. Ma Joad and the other female family members put up the tent, and then prepare dinner with the family’s already exhausted resources. A while later, the family provides food to many of the camp’s children, an extremely human reaction to the sorrow that fills the camp. Moreover, the female family members clean the family’s assigned cabin on the peach farm and Ma Joad exclaims that life will not be that bad when their work is completed. The female family members are in charge of cooking and cleaning while the male family members earn wages. The family’s shanty town tent and peach farm cabin act as the haven for the female family members’ women’s society. These locations are one of the few areas in the movie where an aggregate of women live together in a more or less ordered community to act out a particular purpose. It was stereotypical of the time period for women to actively engage themselves in the roles that we see them take in *Grapes of Wrath*: cooking, cleaning, and nurturing. The stereotypes were “the everyday” of the household women in the early to mid-20th century. When the women enter their women’s society, there is a return to their everyday roles. Hence, the access to women’s society has allowed them to focus on “the everyday.”

In the film *Spirited Away*, 10-year-old Chihiro and her parents stumble upon a seemingly abandoned amusement park, acting as a gateway into the spirit world. After her transition into the beyond, Chihiro meets the mysterious Haku, who explains that the park is a resort for supernatural beings who need cleansing as a result of their time spent in the earthly realm. Chihiro must work there to free herself, so she embraces the working conditions of the fellow female servants. The spirit world and more specifically the bathhouse act as Chihiro’s place for women’s society. Chihiro finds herself surrounded by many female servants all working with a shared purpose; they are servants for a powerful witch named Yubaba. Even though Chihiro finds herself in an extraordinary situation, it is clear that she behaves in ways in which people typically act, think, and feel on a daily basis. She is seen working to support herself, so she may return back to the earthly realm with her parents. We see Chihiro care for those around her, even though many are displeased by her presence and act out against her. We see Chihiro display a great sense of maturity when she supports and protects her friends from those who threaten them and when she rejects additional payment from the No-Face spirit. Upon entering the spirit world, Chihiro is in a liminal state. Entering the spirit world and the bathhouse has forced Chihiro to reject her abnormal childish ways seen at the beginning of the film and to instead act with greater normality. Therefore, Chihiro’s access to women’s society has allowed her to focus on “the everyday.”

As we can see, the four films from the second part of the course all have aspects of female characters with an “in” to women’s society. Beyond their inclusion in this group, each character remains focused on “the everyday,” such that each aforementioned female character remained somewhat unchanged by a series of dramatized events and continued to complete normal daily routines. Two women share a hotel room in *Mystery Train*, a group of women share a public bathroom in *It Happened One Night*, a wife and her children cook, clean and provide childcare in *Grapes of Wrath*, and a group of women act as servants in *Spirited Away*. More interestingly, each of these movies and their characters seem to be connected by a harem, a place reserved for wives and female servants. The harem, in combination with their femininity, gives them their “in” to women’s society. Each of these films play on the female role that Susan Bassnett described in her essay, “Travel Writing and Gender.” Therefore, this theme certainly trends in the films for the second part of class.