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Abstract

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is twofold: on the one hand, the book reexamines a phenomenon already studied by different schools of literary criticism, that of the image of a woman reader in the realist and naturalist Spanish novel. On the other hand, the research deals with this figure from new theoretical perspectives, seeking to reveal the complexity of its imagination through a transversal reading of the heroine.

Although many works have dealt with this topic, none has analysed in depth this literary character (or figure) beyond the perspective of the different authors who created them. Drawing on this, my aim is to research the complex network underlying the repetitive presence of a woman reader as a character in the Spanish realist and naturalist novel. In order to achieve this goal, I concentrate directly on the heroine and her ability to overcome the normative discourse, and thus observe her capacity to construct gender through the act of reading. Moreover, I want to discover how the heroines do it, the content of the reconfiguration, and, at the same time, the particularities offered to its realization through reading.

With this objective in mind, I have chosen the work of three canonical novelists, realists and naturalists: Leopoldo Alas Clarín, Benito Pérez Galdós, and Emilia Pardo Bazán. The reason for this selection is based on the need to obtain adequate samples that allow us to decode the various interactions between the book and the woman reader.

The heroines are divided according to how they confront the text, a criterion which forms one pillar of this monograph. I believe that in order to understand how the book acts in respect to the identity of the characters, it is essential to understand the act of the reading itself. Thus, one can understand all the complexity underlying the new form of silent reading with no more actors than the subject and the book. I considered the books from around the last quarter of the

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18th century. Since this disposition will be addressed throughout the study, it is sufficient to note that I distinguish three fundamental forms of the act of reading: *lectura indagatoria* – in which an internal search for identity prevails –, *lectura masculina o emancipada* – in which prevails an assault to the content reserved for the category of male –, and *lectura evasiva* – which includes the act of reading as an escape from an unsatisfactory situation –. This classification is proposed as an analytical tool, not as categorical and closed structure, since the boundaries are ambiguous and diffuse.

It must be noted that this emphasis on the heroine herself implies the assumption of the character as an active reader, not as mere passive receiver of a delivered message. In this respect, different theories about the reader response have been incorporated into the analysis, in order to understand the mechanisms revealed in these works.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that I based this study on various theoretical frameworks, considering this diversity as a tool to decode the character. Starting from the various post-feminist theories to Foucault's analysis, I provided as many conceptual tools as necessary, in order to understand this analysis as a whole, considering the text as a fundamental key.

To fulfill this objective, this research has been structured into four different parts. It also includes an introduction and some final considerations, which address the woman reader in fiction from different thematic aspects.

To conclude, I hope that I have addressed clearly the power of the heroine to reinvent her own generic identity through reading. Through the work of three authors who represent the realist-naturalist Spanish trend, I have explored the character in all their reader's dimensions. Thus, I have tried to demonstrate the relevance of the performative nature of gender identity in the framework of such nineteenth-century novels.

The existing representations of women readers in the Spanish realist-naturalist novel constitute a complex configuration of confronted identities. Beneath the surface there is a portentous character whose unbridled imagination leads to reading and consequently to a bad end in most cases, in a complete gender framework. The selected novels seem to be an interdiscursive space where the relations between the attempt to dominate the necessary femininity to maintain the social order by the normative discourse and the capacity of the heroine to construct her gender identity are rendered visible.