Women Revengers in Renaissance Tragedies: Bel-imperia in The Spanish Tragedy and Evadne in The Maid's Tragedy

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UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

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Date: Aug. 11, 2004

Comments (Optional):

An excellent, well-researched paper that combined feminist insights with a sound historic sensibility.

In the Renaissance, women were expected to fulfill a variety of roles in society, including roles to serve their husbands and children. Women were supposed to be beautiful, meek, obliging creatures who deferred to any man, especially their husbands or male family members. According to the research of Theodora Jankowski, author of Pure Resistance: Queer Virginity in Early Modern English Drama:

Perkins sums this up by stating that the wife's first duty “is to submit her selfe to her husband; and to acknowledge and reverence him as her head in all things” (sig. KIV). Her second duty is “to be obedient” and ‘wholly to depend upon him, both in judgement and will” (sig. K2-K2V). (99)

Aristocratic women of the Renaissance time were expected to be well-dressed creations in court, clever enough to stimulate the intellect of the men in attendance, as well as dutiful wives and mothers willing to sacrifice anything in the pursuit of their families' happiness. Bel-imperia from Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy, however, relies on these observations to enact her plans toward revenge for her lost loves, Don Andrea and Don Horatio. According to another Renaissance man of Kyd’s thinking, “A Woman's Love turn'd into
Revenge, is like Wine turn’d to Vinegar, which can never be reduced to its primitive Goodness but will always remain sowre till its dead,” (Ward 24). This is a fitting description of Bel-imperia’s entire devotion to her change in role to that of revenger. Her roles as courtly lady, lover, daughter, and sister, which would normally restrict her autonomy, only feed her ability to carry out her revenge plan against her suitor Balthazar and her brother Lorenzo as an actor at the end of the play. Evadne from Beaumont and Fletcher’s The Maid’s Tragedy, however, flouts her roles as lover, wife, courtly lady, and sister. It is only when the role of killer/revenger is forced upon her by her brother Melantius that anything can undo all of her ambition’s previous work. Evadne’s revenge proves to be her undoing because by carrying out her revenge, she submits to the will of the men she hoped to control.

As a courtly lady, Bel-imperia is often presumed to be an object of political and peacemaking use to the king and her family. Her value in marriage is considerable in both possible dowry and in securing an alliance between the recently battling countries of Spain and Portugal. After the war, there is need of a bond between Spain and the newly forgiven Portugal. Marriage with king’s nearest relative seems the ideal way to mend the break between the two countries, with Bel-imperia as the closest eligible maiden related the king. Upon the Viceroy’s arrival, the king of Spain proclaims that “Already [Bel-imperia] is betrothed to Balthazar, and by appointment and our condescendent tomorrow are they to be married. To this intent we entertain thyself, thy followers, their pleasure, and our peace,” leaving the Viceroy of The Spanish Tragedy with the
final approval of the decision (3.14.16-20). Bel-imperia's father, the king, and the Viceroy have been brought up to believe that women will ultimately recognize their subordinate role in the workings of patriarchal society. They are thus unprepared for any kind of rejection by a lady. Critic Roger Stilling agrees by stating that:

Their [Castile and the king's] colossal sense of their own importance makes it impossible for them to take Bel-imperia seriously as a free agent with her own mind and heart, leaving them unaware of her intended revenge on her assigned marriage partner. (Stilling 35)

During the Renaissance period, a lady of the court would not be thought capable of rejecting her political responsibilities. This assumption is dearly held in the minds of Bel-imperia's royal family of tradition and male power, rendering them unable to believe that Bel-imperia would prove otherwise than their expectations. Their chosen blindness permits Bel-imperia to carry out her blatant refusal to take part in an arranged marriage.

Another part of Bel-imperia's role as a courtly lady includes being an intelligent lady of higher education. She is most likely educated for the purpose of making a suitable match, carrying on conversations with foreign dignitaries, and writing letters to family members when absent. Families who educated their daughters clearly did so on the basis that "Education, in the early modern period, was only available to high-ranking women; and education for these women was regarded as an ornament- an adornment along with beauty and manners, needlepoint, and music," (Jardine 51). Therefore, Bel-imperia's family regards
her education as an additional enticement to the proper kind of suitors. But she soon puts it to better use. Bel-imperia's ability to read and write is a great resource when she is held captive by Lorenzo and Balthazar, allowing her to scrawl a letter to Hieronimo in blood and throw it down to him from her chamber. The letter proves vital in leading Hieronimo's suspicions in the correct path toward Balthazar and Lorenzo, even though he has initial doubt. When Bel-imperia later confronts Hieronimo about the letter, she gains a committed ally in revenging Horatio and Andrea's deaths. A second advantage for revenge provided by Bel-imperia's education is her ability to speak the foreign language of French, which is absolutely necessary for her to read a part in Hieronimo's play. Bel-imperia's study of foreign language is probably intended by her royal family to be a crowning achievement at a ball or social function, but it proves useful in properly confusing the audience while she actually kills Balthazar and herself instead of stage acting. As Hieronimo says regarding his play near the end of The Spanish Tragedy, "And for because I know That Bel-imperia hath practiced the French, in courtly French shall all her phrases be," (4.1.176-8). Hieronimo emphasizes the original purpose for Bel-imperia's education while assigning her a part in which she accomplishes the revenge that would be unacceptable in the actions of a courtly lady.

It is Bel-imperia's role as lover, however, that she manipulates more than any other role she fills in the play. Bel-imperia has Balthazar to blame for the loss of her previous lover, Don Andrea, and therefore wants nothing to do with his amorous advances. Every time Balthazar tries to woo her over the course of
The *Spanish Tragedy*, she responds with wit and thinly veiled defiance, much to the chagrin of her brother Lorenzo, “Alas, my lord, these are but words of course, and but device to drive me from this place,” (1.4.98-9). Unlike many other female protagonists, Bel-imperia refuses to yield ground to the caress of compliments by a royal wooer. Bel-imperia’s resolution to revenge her lost lover has barely begun to form, but she is in no way willing to show mercy to his murderer. She also uses her role as lover to Horatio as a way to frustrate her brother Lorenzo in his intended political match between her and the prince of Spain, Balthazar. Bel-imperia rebels against Lorenzo by showing favor to Horatio in front of him and the man he intends for her to wed:

Bel-imperia’s courtship of a social inferior, Horatio, is deliberately transgressive. She probably stage-manages dropping her glove for him in front of Balthazar, whose tedious wooing she has already mocked, as though to turn her knife in the Prince’s wounded pride and annoy her brother. (Findlay 58)

A woman’s inclination to favor her former lover’s friend and the captor of his killer would not usually be so strong, but Bel-imperia allows herself to fall in love with Horatio in accordance with her use for him in the revenge plot. Bel-imperia’s shows of affection heighten Horatio’s attentions to her and put her in the position to be alone with a man who shares her pain caused by Don Andrea’s death. Her meeting with Horatio in the bower at his house, however unexpectedly, lures Balthazar and Lorenzo to confirm their guilt in the death of Don Andrea. The setup of the bower scene and appearance of the same guilty parties for Horatio’s
murder substantiates Bel-imperia's grievances against the two and allows her to initiate Hieronimo's efforts at public justice for Horatio's death. If successful, the intended legal suit would have also indirectly captured the wrongers of Don Andrea, who go unpunished because Andrea's murder occurred on the battlefield. In the end, though, at least Hieronimo's alliance is gained for Bel-imperia's purpose of unlawful sentencing.

Bel-imperia often takes advantage of being the only daughter of the king's brother. Her father assumes that she will do as she is expected to do as his subservient child and daughter. According to a Renaissance minister, William Gouge, children are supposed to be silent or speak of their parents with respect when they are not present. But Bel-imperia initially ignores her father's decision for her to marry Balthazar and continues to see Horatio. Bel-imperia acts with such subtlety that her father does not respond to her disobedience; he is unaware of it. In the Renaissance, children were considered property of their parents and had to wed in agreement with their parents' wishes. Gouge's interpretation indicates that "Children are as the goods of their parents, wholly in their power, to be ordered and disposed by them," (Gouge 442). This general expectation gives Bel-imperia the opening to act submissive to her father's wishes for her marriage to Balthazar later in the play without causing undue notice to her sudden acquiescence. Bel-imperia has only to convince her family that she has recognized her proper place in society through solemn looks and humble behavior. At the celebration of Bel-imperia's engagement to Balthazar in The Spanish Tragedy, Her father says brightly:
And welcome, Bel-imperia. How now, girl?
Why comest thou sadly to salute us thus?
Content thyself, for I am satisfied.
It is not now as when Andrea lived;
We have forgotten and forgiven that,
And thou art graced with a happier love. (3.14.108-113)

Her father, brother, and the king are easily led to believe that Bel-imperia has
been unable to resist any longer and she has given way to her natural place in
the ruling patriarchal system. Another misguided expectation Bel-imperia gives
her father is that she will stay under supervision of her own accord. This
assumption allows Bel-imperia to secretly meet with Horatio in his family’s bower,
an event which the play never mentions her father having discovered. Any other
maiden would have been more closely supervised, yet Bel-imperia has managed
to secure her father’s belief that she will act as an obedient child and safeguard
her reputation, leaving her with plenty of time to carry out her plans for revenge
against her lovers’ murderers.

Bel-imperia has more difficulty in acting her role of a submissive sister to
her brother when he is so involved in Balthazar’s actions, but she eventually
tricks him into believing that she has seen her mistakes and will now do as he
instructs by marrying Balthazar. Lorenzo is solely focused on the honor of the
family and the political connections that would be furthered if Bel-imperia would
marry the inept son of the Portuguese Viceroy, Balthazar. During the
Renaissance, men of the royal families often used their sisters as political tools in
marriage with the leaders of other countries to accomplish their own plans. Mary
Tudor Brandon, Queen-dowager of France, wrote her brother Henry VIII, "Sire,
your grace knoweth well that I did marry for your p[leasure a]t this time, and now
I trust that you will suffer me to [marry as] me [liketh fo]r to do," when she was widowed as expected by her ailing husband and hoping to marry Charles Brandon, duke of Sussex (Green 211). Bel-imperia's brother is determined that she take part in a similar marriage, but she soon learns how to make them believe she has agreed in order to give them a false sense of security in her intentions toward Balthazar. To appease Lorenzo and set the stage for her final actions in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Bel-imperia pretends to be considering a marriage with Balthazar. "To love, and fear, and both at once, my lord, in my conceit, are things of more import than women's wits are to be busied with," she says, claiming that she innocently fears leaving her former life as a child behind her (3.10.93-5). Bel-imperia follows through with the proposed engagement and Lorenzo relaxes his guard, believing that she has been mollified. Bel-imperia then proceeds to aid Hieronimo in convincing Lorenzo to take part in the play that will end his political ambitions and his life.

Bel-imperia's role as an actor in Hieronimo's play proves instrumental in carrying out her final revenge against Balthazar for the deaths of her two former lovers. When Bel-imperia joins the action of the play, she takes on the role of Balthazar's imaginative and literal murderer. Women were not allowed to act in public, but usually performances in front of family or the select of the court would be seen as harmless. The decision to perform before the two kings sets up a way to kill Balthazar in front of his father and father-to-be, completely rejecting all of the men's expectations for her life in the political and personal arenas. Bel-imperia plays her part with such relish that, unaware of the reality of her actions
at the end of *The Spanish Tragedy*, her future father-in-law comments after she is done that, "Were this in earnest, Bel-imperia, you would be better to my son than so," (4.4.70-1). By also taking her life in the play, she removes herself completely from the control of the patriarchal system which has tried to choose her path for the whole of her life. The play that Bel-imperia performs in is a reproduction of her mourning a lost love taken unfairly, her situation of a forced suitor, and her revenge taken against her love's enemy. The play merges with her own death at the end. At the public plays, "Female spectators of revenge tragedy could see their hearts' clandestine desires for vindication played out in the public arena of the theatre," especially since those women had no legal, governmental voice, but ironically, the women's parts were still being played by boys (Findlay 57). Bel-imperia, however, is given the privilege of being allowed to act out her desires more than many of the other women who lived in the Renaissance period. One critic argues that "It is fitting that she should die in the play within the play- which Hieronimo stages to effect his own revenge- for she remains a role rather than a character," (Ingram 213). Bel-imperia does play several roles, yet she is not confined to the role of secondary revenger in *The Spanish Tragedy*. She is a character who manipulates everyone else so that they unwittingly aid her in carrying out her final goal of revenge. Bel-imperia utilizes her role as an actor to carry out her revenge openly, yet it is only one of the many roles she fulfills as a full-fledged character in the play.

Most women of the Renaissance allowed their dictated roles to control them, but Bel-imperia from Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* skillfully manipulates her
duties and the expectations of men to fulfill her revenge for a lost lover. All of those around Bel-imperia believe that she will ultimately give in to the demands of her roles as daughter, sister, courtly lady, lover, and private actor, yet she forces them all to yield to her ultimate, chosen role of revenger of the wrongly murdered Don Andrea and later, Don Horatio. Every action that she completes, every planned show of submission is a part of her plan that remains undetected until her final objective has been achieved and she is beyond the control of the remaining men.

Evadne, on the other hand, ignores duties in nearly all of her roles and uses each of her roles as lover, wife, courtly lady, and sister to her advantage until she becomes a revenger, one whose revenge is forced upon her by death threats and accusations of sin from her brother. She succeeds in her arranged plot of killing the king, but by doing so she loses all sense of her former ambition, power, and warlike personality, becoming little more than a rejected servant of her brother and her husband before she kills herself. Revenge against the ruling patriarchy proves empty for Evadne because she kills the only means for retaining her social power in a vain attempt to atone for her sins, failing to redeem herself in the love of both her brother and husband.

Evadne initially uses her role as the king's lover to grow strong with latent power and confidence, but she makes a grave mistake when she discards him and her safety by killing him in a vain attempt to regain the love of her husband and her brother. For most of the play, Evadne uses her involvement with the king as a shield against any and all threats and fears. When she is being
prepared for her wedding bed by servants and the deserted Aspatia, she feels none of the anxiety or excitement of a virgin bride because she has already experienced the act of sex numerous times with the king. She can thus unaffectedly spar with Dula about her raw sexual humor and she goes so far as to have Dula sing:

I could never have the power
To love one above an hour
But my heart would prompt mine eye
On some other man to fly
Venus, fix mine eyes fast,
Or if not, give me all that I shall see at last. (Beaumont 2.1.83-88)

The lyrics of the song accurately describe Evadne's fearlessness when it comes to controlling her lovers as well as her belief in the uselessness of love for anything more than a tool for upward social mobility. Evadne is a creature of pride and newly realized influence in the Renaissance court where her beauty can be bartered for every favor imaginable. Evadne has complete confidence in her power over men even up to the person of the king. When the king accuses her of being untrue to their affair by consummating her marriage with Amintor, Evadne declares to him:

I swore indeed that I would never love
a man of lower place; but if your fortune
should throw you from this height, I bade you trust
I would forsake you, and would bend to him
that won your throne. I love with my ambition,
not with mine eyes. (Beaumont 3.1.183-188)

Evadne brazenly states that even the king himself can be replaced and that she is loyal to his crown and power, not to him personally. The king would probably execute anyone else who would dare to tell him such traitorous thoughts, but
Evadne now has such influence over the king that as long as she does not love another, he will bow to her wishes.

In her ambition, Evadne horrifies and humiliates her husband Amintor as she uses him for a shield against the eyes of society, only to return to him later to beg for his love and acceptance. Evadne comes into the marriage with the full expectation of remaining the king's mistress. She fends off Amintor's teasing requests to go to bed on their wedding night and refuses to consummate their marriage, knowing full well that Amintor has remained a virgin in anticipation of his wedding night. In addition to this most basic of rejections, Evadne then proceeds to tell him that she is already sexually experienced and she will never have sex with Amintor because she has already chosen another man to receive the embraces of her passion. She fiercely declares,

I sooner will find out the beds of snakes,
And with my youthful blood warm their cold flesh,
Letting them curl themselves about my limbs,
Than sleep one night with thee. This is not feigned,
Nor sounds it like the coyness of a bride. (Beaumont 2.1.209-213)

Having fully cast off her sexual duties to Amintor, Evadne then gives him minor comfort by promising not to reveal her absence from his bed to anyone so that he may retain a semblance of his former honor. She uses Amintor for protection from public scrutiny while leaving him open to misery and pain. Evadne admits that she chose him for his good qualities and favorable reputation, so she pitys him, but she will not allow him to die or else she would need someone else to take his place. Evadne keeps up the charade of being the blushing bride the next morning with all of their friends to keep her and Amintor's secret, but only as
long as it serves her purpose. When the king refuses to believe that she has not consummated her marriage bed with Amintor, Evadne breaks her promise and forces Amintor to admit that she has rejected him in order to please the king. Thus Evadne uses Amintor to retain her position as the king's mistress even if he is dishonored in the process. Ironically, it is this very same Evadne, changed by her brother's revenge, who later returns to claim her position as beloved wife when she believes she has relieved her husband of shame. Accordingly, the author of *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* states:

> The same opaque sense of moral values which led to her adultery, sends her flying to Amintor in the firm belief that her bloody expiation has washed her white as snow. When Amintor turns from her in loathing, normality is restored and her suicide follows as a matter of course. (Bowers 175)

It is only when Evadne attempts to embrace the role of wife she initially rejected that it is denied to her. The ambitious Evadne is too strong to remain subjected to anyone, thus when she does not obtain what she desires, she kills herself to remain in control of her place in life.

Evadne performs the surface requirements for filling the role of a respectable courtly lady well, but she also succeeds in wielding the best weapons for disreputable social warfare. In the days before her wedding to Amintor, Evadne dresses herself in the finest attire at court, relying on the financial gifts she receives from the king for his lovely lady. She maintains the court's affection for her by continually bringing focus to her prized beauty and
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stately grace. Confident that her charms would make any man forget that he ever loved another woman, Evadne soon makes Amintor forget his promise of love to Aspatia, her power waning only temporarily when he sees Aspatia grieving. Soon after, Evadne stands partially undressed in plain sight on her wedding night as if to remind Amintor of the reason why he broke his promise of love to Aspatia. According to Cora Hicks, author of *Suicide in English Tragedy*, “Evadne is shallow and morally insensitive, a woman whose beauty is wholly exterior and who lacks the soul which would have given tragic depth.” (Hicks 168) Evadne does not lack soul, she just chooses to use her beauty as the weapon that it is. It is because Evadne is morally insensitive that she is able to gain the power that she does in social circles and win the heart of the king. Skilled in matters of social battles, Evadne also knows the rules for affairs and understands the need for adequate protection of her reputation in the eyes of the court. She agrees to taking a husband for show and helps the king choose the correct man for her to marry, Amintor, despite the fact that he is already engaged to marry another woman. When a desperate Amintor later asks why Evadne married him if she would not love him, she cites one of the understood rules of courtly society, “Alas, I must have one to father children and to bear the name of husband to me, that my sin may be more honorable,” (Beaumont 2.1.316-319). At least, that is, Evadne must have someone to pretend to be the legal father of her children if she becomes pregnant from her affair with the king.

Evadne’s role as a loving sister to her ambitious and war-strong brother Melantius is fitting for her place as the king’s mistress until she hurts Amintor,
Melantius's best friend. Evadne stays in the position of loving and beautiful sister to Melantius, profiting from his honor as a seasoned warrior and esteemed leader of the king's fighting men. She loves him as a role model, one whose physical power is equal to her social power and charm. Evadne is at her most prominent public moment when he makes an appearance on her wedding day, drawing attention to the conquests in war he has just made as well as her social victory of the marriage. Later, when Melantius first accuses Evadne of whoredom and treachery, she scorns his implications and claims that the tale-bearers lie to smear her reputation. Evadne then attempts to hide behind her previous threats of a champion, but finds that her words have come to no avail against a man of action such as her brother. When Melantius remains unaffected by Evadne's threats of retribution, for the first time Evadne succumbs to feelings of terror and self-doubt when faced with the merciless sword of a superior warrior. Faced with the sacrifice of either her pride or her life, Evadne regretfully relinquishes her pride and power to Melantius in order to maintain her soul's survival. Evadne has no choice but to bow before the will of the only man in the kingdom that will not fall before the power of her charm, her own brother. Lenora Brodwin, author of *Elizabethan Love Tragedy*, supports this theory of Evadne's surrender to Melantius:

*Evadne has never before been brought to her knees and it is this fact, rather than any ethical agreement with her brother, which alters her feelings. She understands that all her emotional control and royal support have not, in fact, rendered her invulnerable and*
that it is precisely this course which is now proving most dangerous for her. (Brodwin 137)

Melantius’s influence is so severe upon Evadne that she begins to believe that she should die at knifepoint for her methods of gaining social power. Evadne is stunned that the power of the king and his position does not dissuade Melantius from insisting that she kill him. She accepts the role of scapegoat for the dishonor Melantius claims that she has brought upon the family from her affair with the king. Driven to hysteria by her near death experience, Evadne believes that she will be able to regain her power to be loved as a result of a human sacrifice, namely the king. Eyes glazed with disbelief for her position as revenger of her family, Evadne declares:

Gods, where have I been all this time? How friended, That I should lose myself thus desperately, And none for pity show me how I wandered? There is not in the compass of the light A more unhappy creature. Sure I am monstrous, For I have done those follies, those mad mischiefs, Would dare a woman. O my loaden soul, Be not so cruel to me! Choke not up The way to my repentance! (Beaumont 4.1.179-187)

Evadne is convinced that she needs to carry out his revenge for her honor, blind to the possibility that he could be using her to keep his own reputation from being destroyed by the deed. She only knows that she is guilty of sin and believes she has been endowed with a perverse kind of power to change it. In her state of frenzy, her newly twisted logic leads to the conclusion that cleanliness can be regained by the new sin of murder.

Evadne’s only role that she takes on unwillingly is that of revenger, the
one role that manages to undo all that she has strived to obtain in her other positions.

Women acting alone are almost invariably shown to be doing so in response to the actions of men. The female version of revenge for "honour" is revenge for loss of "reputation"; that is, a woman's honour is utterly dependent upon how society views her sexual status, her adherence to or her falling off from the prescriptions governing female chastity. (Ingram 218)

This is the need for revenge that Melantius instills in Evadne. She does not feel herself wronged before his threats, she even claimed to enjoy the power and the passion involved in being the king's mistress. It is only after Melantius threatens to kill her for the sin of adultery and convinces Evadne that she has wronged Amintor and been sullied by the king, thereby sullying Melantius. Her position of revenger is adopted wholly under the influence and command of Melantius. Killing the king is against her own interests and contrary to all of her ambitious social moves. Once she has her mind set to it, however, she readily uses all of her advantages that she has gained in her position as mistress. Evadne is aware that the guards know her and suspect nothing because her evening visits are far from unusual. The affair has been going on for some time when Evadne decides to kill the king, so she easily gains admission to the king's chambers when he is asleep and completely vulnerable. Evadne has no difficulty in binding the king to the bed long before he suspects it is anything more than a love game. The king is so at ease with her presence that he asks, "What pretty new device is this,
Evadne? What, do you tie me to you? By my love, This is a quaint one. Come, my dear, and kiss me." (Beaumont 5.1.47-49) He sees it as an erotic game, believing her incapable of ferocity. Thus Evadne is able to secure the king and then kill him in the secrecy normally intended for their bedroom occupations. The guards are then left to admit to everyone that the king was killed on their watch by a woman, leaving them to blame for his safety and possibly his murder.

Both Bel-imperia from Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy and Evadne from Beaumont and Fletcher's The Maid's Tragedy were unusual models for aristocratic women of the Renaissance period, manipulating or ignoring the common expectations for their assigned roles as beautiful servants of society, family, and relationships. Bel-imperia achieves her desire to carry out revenge for her lost loves in the role of an actor by relying on men's social expectations for her fulfillment of her roles of courtly lady, lover, daughter, and sister. Bel-imperia's planned revenge and suicide succeed in overcoming the bounds of male control, carrying out her will until the very end. Evadne satisfies her ambition for power, often displaying disdain for her roles as lover, wife, courtly lady, and sister, but the revenge she takes on in the position as killer of the king is her brother's. Though she is able to carry out the murder satisfactorily, it removes the king, who was the base of her power and social success. It is only when Evadne attempts to please the men in her life, namely her husband and her brother, that she loses control of what she values and kills herself for lack of it. Thus the two women define themselves outside of patriarchal society's expected standards for their lives, one succeeding in separating herself from it
while the other is drawn into it.
Works Cited


