

NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 20.2 (Summer 2024)

Gilbert, Nora. *Gone Girls, 1684-1901: Flights of Feminist Resistance in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth Century British Novel.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 240 pages.

Reviewed by Marie Hendry, State College of Florida

<1>Nora Gilbert's historical analysis of the novel, *Gone Girls, 1684-1901*, argues for the need to study flight narrative to better understand the domestic plot and the role flight narratives have played in the understanding of the British narrative, female identity, and the evolution of the novel form. Gilbert's comprehensive critique and framework for the history of the novel is desperately needed to help contextualize the multi-faceted ways that the novel has evolved throughout history, continuing to show the problematic effects the male gaze has had on the discussion of the novel's evolution. Featuring prominently in her book is the work of Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles as she also wants to argue that the "messy middle" of fiction is so important in understanding a larger critique of political and social systems. By analyzing the flight narratives over such a large timeframe, she illustrates her argument that the flight narrative is a unique space for female narrative to discuss domestic roles, the nature of love and social structure, and calls for change and freedom.

<2>As Gilbert outlines in her introduction, the work is broken into seven "roughly" chronological chapters under the headings of amatory fiction, sentimental fiction, gothic fiction, the novel of manners, provincial fiction, sensation fiction, and New Woman fiction (11). Each section focuses on several authors from the period, giving a comprehensive and easily accessible history of the flight narrative in the history of the British novel. Before she discusses specific authors, she offers an introduction to each section where she contextualizes her analysis of the authors within the history of the novel through issues of gender, authorship, and narrative choices. For instance, in the introduction to the first chapter, she discusses the importance of female authors under the time of Ian Watt "declared the genre's 'rise' to be an exclusively male-authored affair" (16). Bringing in J. Paul Hunter's discussion of gender, she contextualizes her discussion of Aphra Behn as the starting point of her

analysis. This analysis leads to a discussion of Delarivier Manley and many others use of the amatory runaway narrative, as well how they were viewed in their time as authors. Using gender as her lens, she highlights many authors throughout each chapter, including the most famous female authors to including urban and rural landscapes as places of escape, which leads to the aptly titled chapter five: “Lilith on the Moors, Lilith on the Floss, Lilith on the Heath,” which (of course) discusses the Brontës under one heading and then more in depth individually throughout the chapter. She ends with a discussion of the New Woman, as well as many authors in the period. It is hard to imagine an author that has been ignored in her comprehensive critique, and each analysis is focused and is expertly crafted. Gilbert shows her precision in each section and successfully executes her vision.

<3>As foreshadowed in Gilbert’s introduction, she uses the epilogue to discuss how runaway-woman narrative has extended to film in “Gone Girls in Hollywood.” In the epilogue she points to the intersections between women’s rights and the flight narrative as film began to surpass the novel. She points to the advances in women’s rights, as she does throughout the novel, transforming the runaway narrative that no longer needs to be staged at home or in secrecy. She uses examples from *Roman Holiday* (1953), to *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), to *Psycho* (1960). By ending her work outside her timeframe, she demonstrates the importance of this narrative strategy to the female-identifying narrative and its history. The reader will be pleasantly surprised by this epilogue.

<4>Gilbert adroitly discusses how intersectionality affects the concept of mobility fiction, racism and slave narratives to the concept of runaway fiction, as well as giving a strong basis for why her critical approach is so needed to expand the critical history of the novel. Gilbert’s work is focused and contextualizes the critical history, and her book is a much-needed and expert addition to the study of the important trends in analyzing the female-led narratives in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.