

Abstract

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Gender and Power in the Poetry of Susan Howe

Poetry is a product of both semiotics and symbolism as argued by critic Julia Kristeva (1941 -). Meaning is created in discourse through the chora pattern of non-expressive totality that expresses itself through the tension of the fluidity in semiotics sign meaning as well as the one-to-one correspondence between meaning and symbol in symbolism. As such there are mechanics of power involved in all discourses and poetry. Susan Howe's (1937 -) poetry displayed the mechanics of semiotics to produce its experimental and poststructuralist form and it also presented the relationship between power and gender politics. "Hinge Picture," "Fallen Jerusalem Island," "Articulations of Sound Forms in Time," and "Bed Hangings I" portrayed Howe's engagement with a discourse of gender politics. In this study, Kristeva's use of semiotics to identify gender politics served as a bridge for the linguistic and historically deconstructive quality of Howe's work with the discourses on gender politics. This study also showed that the clearly artificial aspects of the fragmented and semiotic forms of Howe enabled her poems to engage in the discourse of gender and power. Furthermore, the motifs of disappearance and displacement were evident in Howe's portrayal of the female identity. Howe's poems discussed in this study reflected the motif of loss and fragmentation of the female identity and the imagery she employed was full of violence and transformation also associated with the displaced female identity. For Howe the female has been absent in history, hence she advocated fragmentation and destruction as the means by which the feminine can be manifested both in history and in language. Finally, she has also established the artificiality of the male dominance in her poems.