

Abstract by Susan White

“George Sand and the Political Poetics of Fiction”

This thesis is concerned with the theory of language and signification developed in the works of George Sand. Reading Sand as a key junction in debates on politics and post-structuralism, it investigates language exchange by her characters in relation to the production of meaning, and discusses this in its implications with narrative representation.

Previous criticism has addressed the status of Sand’s writing in relation to Realism, but in general it has done so only in terms of realist sub-genres or a difference in ideological content, rather than any structural investigation of the formal features of her writing. Yet Sand’s reception as a writer belies the theoretical modernity of much of her writing which takes her far beyond the Realist paradigm. Many of Sand’s novels demonstrate a level of formal self-exploration vis-à-vis the representational nature of fiction and a degree of reflexivity which draw attention to their formal production. The main focus of this study is the way in which several of Sand’s novels foreground their own medium, language, or more especially women’s use of language. In each of the novels studied, the use of language by female characters is explored as a means of intervening in and challenging the power structures which narrative representation depends on for the production and control of meaning.

The starting point for this is Sand’s conception of language and semiotics which forms the cornerstone of Sand’s theory of fiction. The first chapter examines Sand’s rewriting of myths of origin as reworkings of the Fall, and studies the implications of this for language and meaning in Sand’s works via readings of *Le Poème de Myrza*, *Les Amours de l’âge d’or*, *Evenor et Leucippe*, and *Legende antédiluviennne*. The second chapter explores Consuelo’s relationship to language as a nomadic polyglot and examines her racial identity as a gypsy in relation to narrative imperialism. Chapter three is an investigation of women’s difficulty with language in *Rose et Blanche* and *Jeanne* and the alleged stupidity of the main female protagonists as a function of male economics of mimesis. Chapter four discusses the gift of the name between the two female protagonists in relation to the representation of a prostitute and the demand for narrative in *Isidora*. Chapter five explores Lucienne de Valangis’ narrative quest for her rightful name in *La Confession d’une jeune fille*, and in particular the semiotic politics of the name in relation to the problem of female adultery and narrative origins.

Through these readings it will become clear that Sand’s female characters engage with language in ways that challenge and delegitimize the political power and authority of narrative as an organized system of signs and meanings. Through their conflict with narrative authority, the female characters are in effect, working towards a different political system of narrative production and the liberation of the novel.