

Introduction

At the peak of Rita Dove's accomplishments, Thomas and Beulah (1986) is a major contribution to her family history. Rita Dove has acknowledged that her ambitious work moved from a series of snapshots for a family album to more imaginative characterization. Renee H. Shea, in "Irresistible Beauty': The Poetry & Person of Rita Dove," writes "A Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for Thomas and Beulah, a sequence of poems inspired by her grandparents' lives. Both lyric and narrative, these poems led Dove to learn more about her family history and her hometown of Akron, Ohio, to arrive at a 'truth' that emerges from the alchemy of fact and imagination" (9). She never bothered to ask her grandmother Georgiana about her grandfather Thomas after he had died. Among the changes necessary for her poetry is an alteration of Grandmother Georgiana's name to Beulah, which suits the meter. The action accounts for the lasting marriage of two nobodies: Tennessee-born Thomas wed to Beulah, a Georgia native whose family settled in Akron, Ohio. In "Rita Dove: Crossing Boundaries," Ekaterini Georgoudaki mentions that "Dove's focus on the underside of history, on the overlooked events, on 'things which no one will remember but which are just as important in shaping our concept of ourselves and the world we live in as the biggies,' and on the 'small people, these nobodies in the course of history,' is one way in which she expresses her distaste for conventional hierarchies and interpretations" (2). She herself must have been in the shoes of discrimination before yielding to the fact that she is an African-American woman.

Talking of the relationship between her second book Museum (1983) and the third book Thomas and Beulah (1986) in Camille T. Dungy's "Interview with Rita Dove," Rita Dove once commented that "After all, the theme of Museum—the idea of bearing witness to people and deeds forgotten by history—was an essential part of what's going on in Thomas and Beulah: This couple's lives were significant to those close to them, but their story would

never appear in the history books. In that sense, they belonged in Museum as well, but now they had their own book” (1033). The poems are written as two sequences, the first for Thomas, and the second for Beulah. Like her caged canary, Beulah is bound by her wife-mother roles and has very little space of her own within which to move. Unlike her caged canary, in the poem “The House on Bishop Street,” which expresses itself outwardly and charms people with the beauty of its song, Beulah keeps secret her inner quest for beauty, order, and meaning, because of the race, class, and gender restrictions in her social environments. Compared with her, Thomas has greater freedom. By playing the mandolin, and singing gospel, Thomas expresses his feelings, asserts his black male identity, and thus manages to survive in a hostile society. Moreover, he preserves and conveys to the next generation of blacks their rich cultural heritage and the communal values which many of them lost when they migrated from the rural South to the industrial North.

Walt Harrington in “The Shape of Her Dreaming—Rita Dove Writes a Poem” notes that “She once wrote these lines: ‘He [Thomas] used to sleep like a glass of water / held up in the hand of a very young girl’ . . . Rita loves the image, although she doesn’t know exactly what it means or even feel the need to know” (24). The brief lines above actually come from the poem “Straw Hat” and already indicate what a Lovelace Thomas is, which proves that Thomas does have greater freedom than Beulah even in sex. Besides using images, Rita Dove in Robb St. Lawrence’s “An Interview with Rita Dove” admits that “Quite a few of my poems are almost dramatic monologues. I say ‘almost’ because the poem may not be spoken by the protagonist—in the case of Thomas and Beulah, for example, even though every poem is written in the third person, there is a first-person feel about the book, a sense that you are in their skin, utterly” (82). Although the voice in the poems switches from the narrative third person to the protagonists or someone else with the tone of the first person in a sentence or two, most of the time Rita Dove maintains as a narrator and those sentences

spoken from others' perspective impress readers at the moment. Rita Dove also concludes the series with a plausible but convincing chronology of events that stand out in an otherwise unremarkable family history.

Thomas and Beulah which won Rita Dove the Pulitzer Prize in poetry not only focuses on the experiences, feelings, aspirations, and thoughts of lower-class blacks who have usually been ignored by the mainstream American society and its official historians but Rita Dove also imagines and conveys the feelings, thoughts, dreams, as well as the important events in the life of lower class black women growing up in the early twentieth century, by recreating her grandmother's life story. Actually, Rita Dove's focus on women's experience happens to be the threshold of the claims of the second-wave Feminism. Rita Dove presents both points of view—male and female—and pictures an era when men have the right to dominate over women. Yet it is not hard to gather the implications and connotations of what she emphasizes on the politics of reproduction, women's experience, sexual difference and sexuality as a form of oppression toward women. In a sense, Rita Dove already sets a foothold in the second-wave Feminism.

While the first wave was activated from the late 19th century to the early 20th century, the second-wave Feminism recurred during the late 1960s and 1970s. Among the variety of feminisms, the “big three” are supposed to be Liberal Feminism, Marxist/Socialist Feminism, and Radical Feminism. In this thesis, what I would like to go further is make Marxist/Socialist Feminism as a whole and supplement it with parts of the thinking in Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, French Feminism, Black Feminism, and Materialist Feminism. Rather than criticizing the similarities and differences among them, I would like to point out the universal question that all Feminists put emphasis on—the oppression that women suffer. For Radical Feminists, analyzing women's oppression is the utmost, the emergent, and the biggest problem; however, it does not emphasize the severity of the problem. Why are

women oppressed and how are they oppressed? Is this oppression different from other kinds of oppression? Juliet Mitchell's discourse Women's Estate (1971) well explains that women's oppression differs from other forms of oppression. The reason why women's oppression is different from that of other oppressed tribes is because the population of women occupies half of the whole human beings. Thus, in many situations, their exploitation and oppression are similar to those of labors and blacks. Before industrialized revolution happens, women's labor condition is totally confined to men's world becoming the possession of the problem of male labors. Women are endowed with a universal burden, that is, their family. In Women's Consciousness, Man's World, Sheila Rowbotham once said, "The family maintains us in the interior world and the class of our man gives us status in the exterior. We reflect the position they attain. We are social attachments in capitalism" (286). Women can never represent themselves or live on their own for they are like either mistletoes or parasites.

What is the family? What role do women play and fulfill in it? In Juliet Mitchell's point of view in Women's Estate, "Women are offered a universe of their own: the family. Women are exploited at work, and relegated to the home: the two positions compound their oppression" (297). Associate women with the family and take the family as the only way out of women, which is the concept ideology shapes. For Juliet Mitchell, "What is the family? And what are the actual functions that a woman fulfills within it? Like woman herself, the family appears as a natural object, but is actually a cultural creation" (297). Whatever forms and roles, the family does not mean an inevitable system. In Juliet Mitchell's point of view, "She argues instead that women's total social situation results from their position in four social structures: production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialization of children" (296). Mitchell's theory happens to be the categories that I would examine further with Rita Dove's grandparents Thomas and Beulah, and their names happen

to be the title of the book of poetry. According to Juliet Mitchell, she regards production as housework and work as well, which is fine with me but I would prefer to divide the discussion of interior work and exterior work into two different chapters because the exploitation of the former comes within the private sphere and the exploitation of the latter from the public sphere. Now that I clearly emphasize the distinct realm of family and workplace, I would further combine Juliet Mitchell's last category the socialization of children with reproduction, since after all these two have a lot to do with children. While Juliet Mitchell divides the field of children into two categories, I prefer to divide her category of work into two and examine further the reasons why women are oppressed and exploited. Thus, my chapters are as follows: Housework, Children, Husband, and Work.

