

Indiana: A Textual Analysis of Facial Description

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During the last decade, a new interest in George Sand has prompted a number of interesting sociological, biographical, and psychological studies.¹ Although a few articles have focused on detailed textual aspects of Sand's work,² much more needs to be done to assess her specifically literary achievement. In this textual study of the placement and semantic content of physical description in *Indiana*,³ my aim is to show that Sand is worthy of the close attention received by such major writers as Flaubert. Through references to that author's *Madame Bovary*, published twenty-five years after *Indiana*, I will suggest some of the ways in which Sand's descriptive practices intersected, prefigured, and perhaps even influenced those of her celebrated friend and correspondent.

An examination of placement of descriptions⁴ in *Indiana* reveals, on the one hand, the complexity of Sand's achievement, and, on the other, striking similarities with Flaubert's own descriptions. Her achievement lies in that, not only does she use the descriptive codes available at the time, as established by Balzac and other novelists earlier in the century, but she also breaks out of these codes in ways which shed a new and striking light on the major female characters. First, classical portraits⁵ are kept to a minimum and reserved for

¹See Wendy Deutelbaum and Cynthia Huff, "Class, Gender and Family System: The Case of George Sand," in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 260-80; Naomi Schor, "Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand," *Poetics Today*, 6.1-2 (1985): 301-10; and Janis Glasgow, ed. *George Sand: Collected Essays* (Troy, NY: Whitston, 1985).

²For Example, see Pierrette Daly, "The Problem of Language in Sand's *Indiana*," in *George Sand Conference Papers*, ed. Armand S. Singer (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 1981) 22-27; and Françoise Van Rossum-Guyon, "A Propos d' *Indiana*: La Préface de 1832," in *Colloque de Cerisy: George Sand* (Paris: SEDES, 1983).

³George Sand, *Indiana* (1842; rpt. Plan de la Tour: Editions d'Aujourd'hui, 1976).

⁴Here, I follow the example of Philippe Hamon, "Qu'est-ce-qu'une description," *Poétique* 12 (1973): 465-85; and Claudine Gothot-Mersch, "La description des visage dans *Madame Bovary*," *Littérature* 16 (1972): 17-26.

⁵This notion is used by Gothot-Mersch and refers to full-length portraits as in Balzac or even in La Bruyère, where a godlike author presents an all-encompassing view of the character, usually when he or she is first introduced.

minor characters. In *Indiana*, Colonel Delmare is presented in a classical description at the beginning of the novel (18). The Creole servant Noun is also described in one major block (45) as a contrast to Indiana, and the details of Noun's description are repeated only in passing (79, 82, 187).

In contrast, there is no systematic description of the main woman character, a fact which paradoxically makes her all the more striking and significant. Her description is disseminated in the text, woven in and out of the narrative. Indiana is presented in clumps of details all through the novel in twenty-two occurrences (similarly, in *Madame Bovary*, Emma's face is described in twenty-four different places). So it would seem that the more central the characters are, the less systematic and more disseminated is their description. In other words, if the classical description corresponds to the idea of a portrait painting, in *Indiana*, the reader is not allowed to see the major woman character as framed by boundaries within the novel. By not framing her, Sand succeeds in enhancing and liberating her influence in the text.

Another noticeable trait of these descriptions is that the disseminated shreds of description are justified by a variety of points of view, including those of the narrator and several characters. Thus, the female character is liberated from the exclusive control or dominance that the omniscient male narrator usually exercises, for instance, in Balzac's novels. First the character is described by the narrator to the reader, and then she is seen through the eyes of other characters. Indiana is seen by Ralph and Raymon, and interestingly, not by her husband. Far from leading to "the destruction of the object"⁶ as one critic has claimed, the dispersion of the heroine's description makes her inseparable from the narrative and, in my view, places her at its very heart.

Sand's treatment of male characters is also very skillful and "feminist"; they receive very little description and are thus subtly devalued. Ralph, another major character, is described sporadically only when he is in contact with the heroine: his description is focused through his association with Indiana. This incomplete and episodic description is also typical of Flaubert's treatment of Emma's lovers, Rodolphe and Léon. The lack of description of male characters and the strategic placement of the existing descriptions reveal that male characters do not control female characters. Moreover, the description of major characters presents an anomaly in that it can be conspicuously absent. All we learn about Raymon, for instance, is that he has black eyes. This striking lack of description of a major male character indicates another aspect of Sand's mastery: she uses the character's nondescript status to reveal what his narrative status seems to conceal; namely that his narrative destiny will not ultimately be linked with that of the heroine.

Thus the placement of description of characters separates them into three categories: (1) those given block description; (2) those given disseminated

⁶Gothot-Mersch 16. My translation.

description and thus paradoxically permeating the narrative; and (3) those given almost no description. The less systematic the physical description is, the more central the character is; and if a male has the status of a sporadic, but specific description (e.g., Ralph), he is likely to be linked significantly with the central female character. In addition, the placing of description gives a privileged "spreading" status to the central woman character, which frees the heroine from a classical portrait.

The examination of the semantic content of physical description should also indicate Sand's dexterity in regard to female characters. Let us turn to the description of faces, since the face is the part of the body that authors focus on for its obvious expressive and thematic value, especially in their treatment of women. It is self-evident that the characters are determined by the physical elements the authors select to present. In *Indiana*, as in *Madame Bovary*, three elements are described the most often: eyes, hair, and facial complexion. Eyes are described thirteen times, hair fifteen times, complexion fifteen times.

The mouth and lips are also part of a complex descriptive code which Sand successfully uses to restrict desire and assertiveness to male characters, while suggesting for women a softer sensuality. First, the word "lèvres" is used more than twice as much about Raymond than it is for Indiana. Interestingly enough, when applied to the female character, "lèvres" is modified by a descriptive adjective: "lèvres blanches" (29), "lèvres roses" (165), "lèvres sèches" (222), "lèvres bleues" (314), expressing the subject's physical reactions without implying an assertion of power; whereas, for Raymon, the reference to lip is accompanied by a verb form in the passé simple or present participle emphasizing aggressiveness. For example, "il porta la petite main d'Indiana à ses lèvres" (65); "imprimant ses lèvres sur celles d'Indiana" (73); "trempa ses lèvres" (82); "effleurant de ses lèvres" (150); "un sourire terrible erra sur ses lèvres" (309); etc. Surely it is this implied link between the active movement of lips and desire that prompts Jean-Pierre Richard to note about Flaubert, that "percevoir, penser, aimer, c'est donc d'une certaine façon dévorer."⁷ The lips are precisely the part of the face through which the characters first apprehend the object of desire. Also, Sand hardly mentions Ralph's lips but if his "lèvres calmes" (189) suggest a more subdued or mastered desire than Raymon, it is worth noting that Sand is describing Ralph's portrait, thus emphasizing that it is an idealized, fictive description. The word "bouche" is rarely used, but it is not surprising since Sand already used "lèvres" in such a way as to convey opposition. When used, however, the word is applied for a positive description of women: for instance, "la vertu de votre bouche" (225) about Raymon's mother, and "sa bouche sourit" (359) about Indiana.

Sand also uses eyes to valorize women characters and her system of description is complex. There are sets of oppositions, but they are not exclusive. The following sets of opposition appear: blue/black, and large/small. The

⁷Jean-Pierre Richard, *Littérature et Sensation* (Paris: Seuil, 1954) 122.

value, be it positive or negative, of each color, however, seems to change according to the element to which it is opposed. For instance, Raymon's eyes are just "noirs" (139) whereas Ralph's and Indiana's are blue, but not just any blue. Here the color blue is described with modifiers unmistakably positive. Ralph's eyes are "clairs" (139), "bleus comme la mer" (352), "calmes yeux limpides" (19). Indiana's eyes are "grands" and "bleus" (23), "limpides et calmes" (165), "transparentes" and "pénétrants" (186). Here blue is associated with clarity and limpidity; the eyes of these positive characters are the mirror of pure souls. But the limpidity of the blue is opposed to the inscrutability of black. And it is no chance that the eyes of Noun, Indiana's maid, are also black and disquieting.

But only women's eyes are large. Indiana's eyes are called "grands" twice (131, 134) and so are Noun's (45, 82). The adjectives "grand" and "large" are used to valorize the color of women's eyes. Large eyes have a positive value but the only main character who does get what she desires or needs, Indiana gets Ralph, is the female character endowed with both large and blue eyes.

Next to eyes, the second important element in the description is hair. Hair is a physical characteristic that has acquired the status of fashion. Thus three aspects of hair can be relevant: color, quantity (expressed in terms of length or mass), and arrangement, a particularly developed trait where description of women is concerned. Thus Sand again succeeds in using description to change the code and valorize women characters. Remarkably, the main women characters all have long, dark, or black hair, and the description of hair is repeated several times throughout the texts. Indiana and Noun have black hair, but this color, which suggests intensity, depth, and perhaps danger, is qualified in two ways. Indiana's blackness takes on tinges of blue. We are told that her hair had "des reflets bleus qui les faisaient ressembler à l'aile azurée du corbeau" (187); Flaubert will also use this ambiguous blue-black reference to Emma's hair. Here we start with the intensity of the black, but it is then softened by the tinge of blue; the heroine is not an example of destructive seductress, as the cultural stereotypes of the black-eyed lady would suggest. In *Indiana*, the characteristic of black hair seems to make use of the seductive connotation of black without its corollary of danger. It is absolutely clear that, when applied to hair, the color black is part of a positive description. The heroine's hair is labeled black in connection with other positive determiners: "flottants" (150)—we have already seen the positive value of the sea—and "bouclés" (140)⁸ As for the crow metaphor, which might seem infelicitous, it is simply that "noir-corbeau" (raven's black) has been a dead metaphor in which the negative connotation of crow has been superseded by the blue tinge's positive ingredient.

The descriptions of hair for male characters differ from the women's in that the color opposition is much less relevant. Sand, thus, skillfully diminishes

⁸These observations about the positive connotations of abundance expressed in thickness and curls are also applicable to other authors, See Roland Le Huenen and Paul Perron, *Balzac: Sémiotique du personnage romanesque: L'exemple d'Eugénie Grandet* (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1980) 71; and Jean-Pierre Richard in *Études sur le romantisme* (?????????) 19.

the male character's power through description. What seems important is the abundant/short opposition. But even so, it is worth noting that Raymon, like Flaubert's other seducer Rodolphe, has black eyes and black hair. This blackness is unmitigated by any modifiers. So the man who seduces and abandons women is an example of the "beau ténébreux." As for Delmare, who has "des cheveux grisonnants" (19), the discoloration (from an unspecified color) registered by the present participle "greying" emphasizes the progressive loss of color and thus of hair. So although the color of Ralph's blond hair in *Indiana* is mentioned only once, its thickness is mentioned several times: "riche de cheveux" (87); "riche chevelure d'un blond vif" (19); "favoris bien fournis" (19). On the other hand, Indiana's husband Colonel Delmare is described as having a "front chauve," and "une moustache grise" (18).

The structure of description of hair for women and men corresponds for length, but the color black/blue becomes positive for women, negative for men. Whereas Flaubert will describe in detail the way Emma's long hair is arranged, Sand is satisfied with the signifier "long." As Elisabeth Gitter has summarized in "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination": ". . . folk, literary and psychoanalytic traditions agree that the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness."⁹ Sand's complex, yet restrained treatment of female hair may be another example of the power of women's hair in the nineteenth-century imagination; but, unlike Flaubert's detailed hair description, her restraint may also suggest her reluctance to yield to such power.

In contrast to hair, some elements of the face are not as prominent. Curiously, the shape of the nose is never mentioned. This lack of interest in nose description might be explained by its relative lack of thematic value. It would be difficult to suggest opposition of characters or personalities through shapes of the nose (although, in some contexts, nose descriptions can be used to suggest race, character, or attractiveness). The last component of the face which is of importance is complexion. It is used in two ways: first, as a sign of a general physical state (e.g., health, coarseness, or fineness) and second, as a physical reaction to exterior events (e.g., turning pale or blushing). Again Sand skillfully uses complexion to devalorize male characters and to suggest with subtlety differences between male and female characters. Only Indiana's husband has a complexion, used as a sign of physical condition, which is unmistakably unattractive: Delmare has a "teint flétri" (19), and interestingly enough, Bovary's first wife will also be endowed with a similar complexion. It is striking that the two spouses die, though perhaps not because of their bad complexion; it may be inferred that they had bad complexions because they will die. Here again the descriptive axis overlaps the narrative one.

Then, too, the combination of pale skin and rosy cheeks is valorized. Indiana, who is described many times as pale (19, 20, 29, 58, 129, 306) becomes

⁹Elisabeth Gitter, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination," *PMLA* (1984): 936-54.

very attractive when she regains some color: ". . . ses joues avaient déjà retrouvé leur teint purpurin" (140) and her cheeks had a tinge "comme celle d'une rose du Bengale éclose sur la neige" (54). Also Ralph is both "blanc et vermeil" (87); that is, he benefits from the distinction that white brings and from the attractiveness of color. He is the only male who shares the positive female combination of color. So here again, the descriptive system is embedded in the narrative.

Secondly, skin color is obviously used as a way to register the characters' reaction to events or encounters with other characters. In general, it is women who tend to blush or turn pale, but the change of color has different meanings. Indiana colors but for two reasons: when she is happy (69) and when she becomes angry (103); that is, every time there is an influx of energy.

If blushing appears to be a female characteristic, so is its opposite, turning pale, again with only a few telling exceptions, for instance, when Ralph thinks that Indiana is dying from falling from a horse or when Raymon is excitedly waiting in Indiana's room. Males's complexions are generally not described as expressing a change of feeling as they are for women. The fact that signs of emotion are more prominent among women characters does not simply show that women are betrayed by their faces and that they do not control or repress their physical reactions as much as males do. It points to the inadequacy of a social code which interprets women's blushes, for instance, as expressions of shyness or of embarrassment. As we have seen, they are more often a show of anger. In the end, Sands seems to call into question the convention at work, which reserves blushing or turning pale for women characters.

What an examination of facial description in *Indiana* reveals is the complexity of Sand's enterprise and the subtle valorization of her women characters. Even in her early work, Sand shows an astonishing control of literary codes of description. The strategic insertion of the descriptions in the text, the particular elements she selects for the descriptions, the relations of these elements all suggest that she is "breaking the code." Her descriptive practice, through which she achieves a masterful reevaluation of the status of women characters, makes her worthy indeed of the serious attention that her "cher vieux" Flaubert has received as a matter of course. Our claims about Sand as a precursor and a feminist can and must be supported by the careful analysis of her literary achievement as it is revealed in her oeuvre.