

The Woman's Metamorphosis: A Time-Traveling tale of Image and Text

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Abstract

This project explores the evolution of female identity and portrayal in visual art through the lens of direct quotes from renowned, male British authors spanning the 18th to 21st century. Using the Midjourney image generation, a series of images was generated in response to the quotes. The images were then analyzed and compared across time periods to identify trends and differences in the depictions of women. Metrics such as the frequency of certain colors and the presence of specific compositional elements were used to quantify the visual changes in the representation of women. The results suggest a progression from objectifying and often idealized depictions of women towards more diverse and nuanced representations. Overall, this project suggests the power of language and art in shaping perceptions of the female gender, bringing text to life. However, given the results of this project, times haven't completely changed. The results certainly show dramatically different depictions of women, but there seem to be some facets that remain the same, pointing to a larger issue at play when it comes to the female image.

Introduction

Throughout history, women have been portrayed in a myriad of ways in literature, ranging from docile and submissive to strong and liberated. Despite the progress made towards gender equality, certain stereotypes and biases towards women have persisted, and it is important to examine and challenge them. This project seeks to explore these stereotypes and biases by generating images based on quotes from renowned British male authors from the 18th to 21st centuries. The aim is to use Midjourney's generative capabilities to visualize the attitudes towards women expressed in the selected quotes.

It is particularly interesting to focus on the subject of women as they have consistently been scrutinized and subjugated to the male opinion and gaze. Midjourney, being trained on data mostly composed by men, provides an opportunity to analyze these stereotypes and biases in depth and measure their impact on society—how much has really changed?

Methodology

To begin my data collection process, I consulted with a professor who specializes in 18th-19th century literature. The professor provided me with a list of names to explore, and I also employed random sampling from Chat GPT by requesting prominent British male authors from the selected centuries. I then chose three authors per century, with the exception of the 21st century, where I used two authors. Next, I requested Chat GPT to generate quotes from each author's novels that reflected their attitudes towards women and different aspects of femininity. I thoroughly fact-checked the generated quotes and inserted them verbatim into my analysis without any additional text prompts. From there, I varied any images that appealed to me, usually creating an average of 2-3 variations. In some cases, I didn't even need to make any variations as they came out beautifully. I saved all of the photos I generated and displayed the most prominent ones

Ethical Considerations & Bias

When analyzing the generated images, it is important to consider the ethical concerns that may arise from the data on which the machine was trained. It is noteworthy that all the women depicted in the images were portrayed as white, thin, and frail, indicating a potential lack of diversity in the dataset used for the model. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the purpose of this project was to examine the historical and cultural representations of women, including the negative and harmful stereotypes that have persisted for centuries. Therefore, it is not surprising that the generated images reflect these stereotypes, even though they do not represent all women. While it is crucial to recognize and address issues of bias and diversity in artificial intelligence, in this particular context, the focus was on exploring and critiquing historical gender stereotypes rather than creating a diverse and representative dataset.

Analysis

Based on the images generated from the Midjourney algorithm in response to the quotes from 18th and 19th century male British authors such as Henry Fielding, Samuel Richardson, and John Cleland, it is evident that women were depicted as objects of pleasure and physical satisfaction for men during that time period. The women are depicted as pale, frail, and childlike with messy hair and their nudity and cleavage exposed. The color palette used consists of pastel blue, ivory, blush pink, and red, with the color red becoming more prominent in the 19th century images. The women's heads have something unique or particular about them, suggesting a focus on individuality rather than just a generic representation of femininity. Overall, the images suggest a continuation of objectification and idealization of women during this time period.

The images generated in response to quotes from 20th century British authors reveal a significant shift in the depiction of women. Rather than being objectified and idealized, as seen in the images from the 18th and 19th centuries, women are now depicted alongside men and wearing red dresses. However, there is still an element of subversion and rebellion evident in their facial expressions, which convey a hint of anger and defiance. Interestingly, the images in this period still feature the haze surrounding the women's heads, which was a consistent element throughout the project. Additionally, some of the women's heads are destroyed or transformed into gear-like brains, which could be interpreted as a commentary on the objectification and commodification of women's bodies. It is worth noting that men are also depicted in the generated images from this period, despite the quotes used not involving men. Moving into the 21st century, the images show a shift towards a lighter color palette, with hues of ivory, peach, ginger red, and shades of blue being used. The women in these images are depicted as liberated and in motion, suggesting a newfound sense of agency and empowerment. The quotes used from Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro may have influenced this shift towards a more positive portrayal of women, as their works often explore themes of agency and empowerment for female characters.

Overall, the images generated in response to quotes from British authors across the 18th to 21st centuries reveal a progression in the depiction of women from objectification and idealization to a more diverse and nuanced representation.

Results



Some of the sample quotes:
- "Women are ever in extremes, unreasonable in their demands, impatient of opposition, averse to advice, fond of flattery, addicted to pleasure, and have no sense of decorum" -John Cleland
- "Women are like summer fruits, in that they are at their best when they are young and fresh, but soon turn sour and unpalatable as they age." -Cleland
- "I have a heart to be stabbed in or shot in, I have no doubt," said Estella, "and of course, if it ceased to beat, I should cease to be. But you know what I mean. I have no softness there, no - sympathy - sentiment - nonsense." - Charles Dickens
- "Women are often seen as mere objects to be possessed and controlled by men, rather than individuals with their own thoughts and desires" - Thomas Hardy

Conclusion & Future Directions

Overall, the images generated through this project suggest the confinement of women, depicted as sad, unliberated, and malnourished. It is worth noting that in most cases, the women were portrayed nude and objectified, with enlarged sexualized body parts. However, as we moved closer to the 20th century, we started to see women depicted as individuals, often with a haze surrounding their heads or with altered heads. This raises the question: why did it take so long for literature to portray women in a more realistic yet somber light, acknowledging their struggles and sense of confinement? Perhaps, it reflects the slow and gradual changes in societal attitudes towards women.

This project aimed to explore the persistence of stereotypes and biases towards women in literature over the past few centuries by using image generation to reflect the attitudes expressed in quotes from renowned British male authors. By generating images using Midjourney, a machine learning model trained on a dataset that may have its own biases, we were able to visually recognize and analyze the patterns of bias towards women in literature. The images produced reflected a stereotypical and restrictive view of women, often portrayed as sad, unliberated, and malnourished, with objectification and sexualized body parts. However, we also observed a shift towards a more realistic yet somber depiction of women as individuals. By utilizing image generation to visualize the attitudes expressed in literature, we gained a deeper understanding of how these biases have persisted and evolved over time.

References

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CHAT GPT

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