

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Background of the Study**

Amid new emerging genres, historical fiction remains the publishing industry's mainstay. Johnson (2002) in the Associated Writing Programs conference stated that historical fiction is a fiction that is set in the past but still emphasizes themes that are relatable to the present times. This means despite the time setting of historical fiction, the theme still should easily arouse an empathetic response from the readers. Regardless of the regulation, the main purpose of historical fiction is to provide entertainment for the readers by portraying a genuine reality of the past (Lindblad, 2018). However, Johnson (2002, as cited in Lindblad, 2018) noted that it is necessary to adjust the storyline of a historical fiction concerning themes relevant to today's society to be considered as 'literary'. Historical events in historical fiction have various roles depending on the author's purpose. It could serve as the backdrop of the story, recreate events of the past with a twist of fictional elements, and serve as a comparison to life nowadays (Lindblad, 2018).

There are several characteristics that a literary work should possess to qualify as historical fiction: provides historical facts, is based on research, aims to entertain, and is relevant to today's society. Due to the setting that sets in the past, the author of historical fiction should provide historical facts as accurately as possible to convince and engage the readers to delve deeper into the period. However, it is important to note that the setting of historical fiction, including its historical facts, should be based on research instead of the memories of the author. Because of this, the event where the story takes place should exceed certain years for it to be eligible for historical fiction (Lindblad, 2018). Lindblad (2018) further added that historical fiction should be written at least fifty years after the event occurred, with additional notes that the author should not have been alive to witness the event as an observer. Despite the demanding requirements concerning the accuracy of historical facts, it should be noted that historical fiction is still under the genre of fiction whose main objective is to entertain. For a work to be perceived as a part of historical fiction, it should aim to entertain and inspire the reader. The theme selection for historical fiction should also be taken into consideration. Johnson (2002, as cited in

Lindblad, 2018) noted that historical fiction should also possess a theme that is relevant to the problem of society today to qualify as literary work.

Despite the demanding prerequisites, historical fiction is still seen as the least prestigious work in the eyes of literary critics due to its questionable authenticity and accuracy. Johnson (2002, as cited in Lee, n.d.) stated that critics, media, and publishers perceive historical fiction as merely literary fiction that is set in the past. They see the genre as the 'pariah' of the literary industry due to the perception that it is done poorly most of the time. However, this does not stop the genre from receiving favor from the public. It has always been a mainstay in the publishing industry which can be seen from the emergence and growth of publishing companies that are dedicated to publishing historical novels such as *Carina Press*, house of *Harlequin*, a renowned historical romance. Several literary awards also grant awards dedicated to the historical fiction genre, such as the *Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction* and the *Walter Scott Prize*, prove that historical fiction has been widely favored by the public. The appearance of its new subgenres such as historical fantasy and alternate history also demonstrate the recognition this genre gets. In the past few years, the popularity of historical fiction, especially historical romance, has escalated rapidly. For instance, *Bridgerton* by Julia Quinn has sold 17 million copies in the United States alone as of 2023 (Talbot, 2023). This led the title to be adapted into a Netflix series that has been streamed for more than 300 million hours globally in April 2022 (Talbot, 2023). Another example of the rising popularity of historical fiction could also be seen in *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon. The historical book series has sold more than 30 million copies worldwide as of 2021 (McLoughlin, 2022). It has also been adapted into a series that has been running since 2014.

There are several reasons for this ongoing popularity. This particular genre maintains its popularity because it offers a sense of nostalgia for readers. It allows the readers to transport into a specific period through the character's point of view, romanticizing history. According to Short (2022), this experience describes the emotions that something is incomplete or imperfect as well as the desire for a flawless alternative experience. Reading historical fiction gives a sense of closure and allows the readers to experience the captivating side of the past while minimizing the dark side of it. It is also popular due to its ability to enable the readers to empathize with the people of a particular era and understand their actions. Usually, a historical novel portrays a realistic situation of the past, explaining from the standpoint of common men and women to make it relatable to the readers. As a fan of historical fiction, Tagliaferro (2022) said that the genre is appealing because it informs readers about our ancestors' strategy in facing real-world

problems and whether their actions turned out successful or unsuccessful. This makes readers understand the mindset of common people in the past and be more empathetic towards historical events. Another possible trait that also aids the popularity of historical fiction is the genre gives a sense of justice. Factual history frequently is written by the winner, and historical fiction projects the story from the account of the victim. O'Grady (2019) in *New York Times* noted that history degenerates everyone except the victors, and historical fiction is present to compensate victims for the "burned or redacted documents", "the missing transcripts", and "the experiences that were never recorded in the first place". One of the popular examples is *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* by Hilary Mantel who gives voice to Anne Boleyn, the second wife of King Henry VIII, while there is not any transcript about her except for humiliating stories.

One of the well-known historical novels is *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) by Taylor Jenkins Reid. Reid is best known for being a four-time *New York Times* Best-Selling author. She majored in media studies during her university years and began her career in film production. She began her career as a writer by being a co-scriptwriter for *Resident Advisors*, which premiered in 2015. She later debuted as a novel writer by publishing her first novel in 2013 titled *Forever, Interrupted*, a contemporary romance novel. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* will be adapted into Netflix series.

*The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2017) is a historical fiction whose setting takes place mainly in Hollywood during the 1950s. Evelyn's story is told in a flashback manner by her seventy-nine-year-old self during an interview with a journalist named Monique Grant. It tells the story of Evelyn, a poor Cuban-American woman who grew up witnessing her mother suffering from poverty and abuse from her father during the marriage. When her mother died, Evelyn's father planned to sell her off by marrying her to some random older men. Evelyn realizes she does not have any skill, but she has her beauty. During her teenage years, she came across a boy who let her take anything from his store in exchange for showing her chest to him. From then on, she realizes that she possesses such attractiveness which she can use to her advantage. Hence, she decides to utilize her beauty to escape poverty by being an actress. During her journey as an actress, Evelyn has taken several actions that were deemed improper during her time which aids her in advancing her career. However, Evelyn continues to do what she feels is right despite the peculiar methods she uses. Until the end of her life, Evelyn is still loved as a renowned celebrity while also being labeled as a controversial woman.

Although the book is published in recent years, the cultural context of the book is set in the 1950s. Throughout the text, Evelyn Hugo is depicted as a woman who has done actions that

are deemed inappropriate for a woman during her time. Her actions are considered inappropriate because they are against American society's criteria of an ideal woman in the 1950s, which is traced back to ideal women's values in the 1800s known as True Womanhood. She married seven times with seven different men as well as seducing and having sex with other men before and in between her seven marriages. She also appeared on the big screen undressed or semi-undressed most of the time. In the house, she dismisses her domestic duties and shows autonomous behavior towards her husbands. True Womanhood is a set of values that dictates the quality of a true woman mentioned by historian Barbara Welter in a 1966 article titled *The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820 - 1860*. It is a cultural belief in the 19th century that dictates the gender roles of white upper-class and middle-class women. Welter (1966) described that there are four values a woman should have: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. If a woman deviates from this set of values, then she would be regarded as corrupt and dishonorable. In this novel, Evelyn Hugo is shown not complying with the values of purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.

*The Cult of True Womanhood*, that was issued by Barbara Welter in 1966, is a criticism against the quality of True Womanhood. It discusses True Womanhood which is a set of values that define the ideal feminine behavior that was on the rise from 1820 to 1860. The ideal regulates white middle-class women for the roles of mother and wife expected to nurture piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (King & MacKethan, 2021).

Despite several studies that have been done on the text, such as *Exploring Intersectionality in Taylor Jenkins Reid's The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo: Age, Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Class in a Hollywood Icon's Life Story* (2023) by Wagner and *The Representation of a Relationship Between Two Women in Taylor Jenkins Reid's Novel The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* (2022) by Roos, there is not a study that discusses Evelyn's behavior in defying certain values that women must follow as well as her underlying intention in defying them. As mentioned previously, being a traditional housewife by following the virtues of True Womanhood was a young American woman's dream in the 1950s. I found it interesting that Evelyn who is also an American young woman whose dream is supposed to be an exemplary housewife decides to defy the values, furthering her from the "ideal life" when everyone else is running towards it. Hence, I am intrigued to find out further about Evelyn's behavior in defying the virtues of the True Womanhood.

### **1.2. Statement of the Problems**

In this study, I want to analyze how Evelyn Hugo defies the virtues of True Womanhood and in what way her defiance gives her the agency to decide her course of life.

### **1.3. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to discuss the ways Evelyn Hugo defies the three virtues of True Womanhood which are taking ownership over her own body, rejecting the societal norms, and claiming personal autonomy. This study also aims to find out the ways her defiance gives her the agency to decide her own life which can be seen through her obtaining her financial independence and self-reliance

### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

The significant finding of this study is that Evelyn's defiance shows that she is a character who lives ahead of her time. In the modern world, a female character like Evelyn who fights for freedom and independence is common. Yet, since the cultural context of the text is the 1950s, Evelyn's character seems controversial because she does not live according to the 1950s' norms that restrict women's conduct according to the values of True Womanhood. By defying the rules, Evelyn also shows that she has agency in deciding her life. The gender roles that are described by *The Cult of True Womanhood*, as stated by Welter, act as the structure that limits Evelyn yet enabling her agency. This study also found that as an agent, Evelyn is successful in making significant changes in deciding her course of life.

### **1.5. Theoretical Framework**

Throughout history, women have suffered from oppression. The fact is further enforced by Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2015) who in her book, entitled *The Second Sex*, argued that women have been stripped of their autonomy due to oppression from men. The oppression itself is by the characterization of women as *the other* in opposition to men. De Beauvoir states that characterizing women as men's *other* is equal to invalidating her humanity. Unfortunately, this oppression has been around since the earliest years of human history, leading society to

conform to men's standards and turning it into the default society which is the patriarchal society. This kind of society believes that masculinity is the default, and the non-masculine is inessential and inferior. Hence, it creates a concept that further maintains the inferiority and the incompleteness of women called *womanhood*. The concept of womanhood itself has given birth to several values or rules that must be followed by women to be accepted by the manmade society.

In 1966, Barbara Welter issued an article titled *The Cult of True Womanhood* that criticizes a set of values that dictates how the white upper and middle-class woman should behave in the 19th century even as far as calling it True Womanhood. Although Welter's theory is addressed to 19th-century society, the theory is still relevant in the time setting of *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo*. The set of values that was said to be the benchmark of how a woman should act in the 1800s is still used to evaluate women during Evelyn's era. Therefore, the criticism will also be used to analyze the ways Evelyn defies the traditional gender roles.

### **The Cult of True Womanhood by Barbara Welter**

*The Cult of True Womanhood* is a criticism of traditional gender roles that used to be called True Womanhood. In True Womanhood, a woman "judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors, and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter, 1966, p. 152). Without them, a woman's life was deemed in vain despite all her accomplishments. The goal is to divide women and men into their territory: men in the public sphere and women in the private sphere. Although this idea was popular from 1820 to 1860, True Womanhood ceased in the 1860s due to the Civil War. According to Woloch (1994), the impact of the war forced women into the paid labor force until the 1920s. The values of true womanhood later made a comeback post World War II during the 1950s where women were expected to be the suburban housewives to create a conducive household. The consequences of economic depression and war forge an American society that longs for a stable and secure life in a prosperous environment. To create an exemplary environment, women and men were expected to fulfill their pre-war traditional gender roles: where men get back to the paid labor force and women fulfill the conventional wife's role. Women were re-educated to be the perfect suburban housewife by re-embracing the virtues of True Womanhood: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. This event shifted back women's outlook on their roles, making the role of the perfect suburban housewife the dream of young American women (Woloch, 1994).

First of all, piety is regarded as the most important virtue women should have. It is stated that “religion or piety was the core of woman’s virtue, the source of her strength” (Welter, 1966, p. 152). It suggests that a woman’s moral strength and ability to cope come from her strong faith and commitment to her religion. Piety is seen as essential for women to fulfill their roles as moral guardians of the family and maintainers of societal values. Being pious is not about personal beliefs but a key part of how a woman fulfills her roles in both her family and in society as a whole. In her family, piety helps women to be wise and caring when guiding their loved ones morally. In society, it guarantees that a woman is fundamental in delivering important moral values that hold communities together. Hence, piety here is not merely about a woman being good but also about how a woman contributes to guiding her family and making society a better place by nurturing good morals and unity.

Second, society regards purity as the second most important thing a woman should maintain. Welter (1966) noted that society regards the absence of purity as unfemininity, “without it, she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order. A “fallen woman” was a “fallen angel,” unworthy of the celestial company of her sex” (p. 154). For a young woman, being pure is as important as being pious. Society demands purity from a woman or else, she will be seen as something lesser and be called “fallen”. A person, especially a woman, who is called “fallen” is looked down upon, like she has done something bad. This shows how society expects women to be pure, and if they are not, they will be judged and treated poorly.

Third, submissiveness is deemed as the most feminine among the virtues. Instead of acting and feeling autonomously, a woman should submit to a man. Welter (1966) noted that “the lesson of submission is forced upon woman.... to suffer and to be silent under suffering seems the great command she has to obey” (p. 162). This means that society believes that women should suffer by giving up their autonomy and independence, and should just listen to men, mainly her husband. She must perceive herself as someone who needs protection due to her demure and frail nature. She should also be quiet and invisible. This concept says that women should see themselves as weak and needing protection due to their fragility. It also mentions that women should stay quiet and not draw attention to themselves. Over time, women have come to believe and embedded this concept in every part of their lives, believing that just how they should behave. Godey’s Women further states that women should obey the rules given to them despite their suffering. At the same time, she should not complain about it. Hence, the idea of submission is deeply rooted in society, and it restricts women from speaking up, or worse, disagreeing with men.

Lastly, society also prefers domestic women. Welter's (1966) findings also suggest that society believes domesticity is the most prized virtue even among women. The excerpt from her articles below will further explain the popularity of the values.

Therefore, domesticity was among the virtues most prized by women's magazines. "As society is constituted," wrote Mrs. S. E. Farley, in the "Domestic and Social Claims on Woman," "the true dignity and beauty of the female character seem to consist in a right understanding and faithful and cheerful performance of social and family duties" (p. 162).

This means that society sees the role of women merely within the home and family. Women's values and beauty are judged based on how well they take care of their family and household tasks. In society's view, a woman's dignity comes from being able to handle her social and family responsibilities well. A woman or a wife should only concern themselves with domestic affairs and be forbidden to voice her opinions on her husband's matter except when asked. Her only job is to make a home and become a comfortable and cheerful refuge for her children and husband. This shows that society expects women to focus on their duties at home while finding happiness and respect in doing it.

Society believed the virtues that dictate the role of women were given by God and cannot be changed. It is forbidden to interfere with it. Welters even discuss how society preserves them by calling them True Womanhood. Welters (1966) further added in her critics that the society is convinced the virtues that make women must not be tampered or opposed: "If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic" (p. 152).

Welters suggested that if a woman or man dared to act against the virtues, then they were seen as going against God, civilization, and the country. It suggests that society believed in these values strongly and under the impression that they were important for how things should be. If women do not follow the roles, they will be seen as not being a true woman and challenging what society and religion thought was right. Hence, anyone who does not follow these values will have to face the consequences of being rejected by society and criticized by religion.

To make it easier for the reader to recognize the characteristics provided by the theory, I will provide a table consisting of characteristics of ideal femininity according to True Womanhood below.

<b>The Qualities of True Womanhood</b>
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<b>Piety</b>	Should be religious
<b>Purity</b>	Should not be physically too close to a man.
	Should be reserved.
	Should maintain chastity until marriage.
<b>Submissiveness</b>	Should not feel and act for herself,
	Should be obedience.
	Should be weak and timid
	Should be dependent
	Should be conscious of inferiority
	Should be grateful for men's support
	Should stay away from the thought of money and ambition
	Should occupy only with domestic affair
	Should not give advice in important matters
	Should not respond to abusiveness
	Should avoid controversies
	Should accept destiny
<b>Domesticity</b>	Should provide comfort and cheer at home
	Should nurse the sick family members.
	Should do the housework
	Should get married but not for money
	Should experience motherhood willingly.

I will use these characteristics to analyze the ways Evelyn Hugo defies the three virtues of True Womanhood. However, I will only focus on discussing three values that keep women in their sphere: purity, submissiveness, and domesticity because Evelyn Hugo only shows signs of defying these three characteristics.

After answering the first statement of problems with Welters' theory, I will also use the concept of agency by Anthony Giddens which will answer the second statement of the problems. In the second statement, my purpose is to find out how Evelyn's defiance gives her the agency to choose her course of life.

### **The Concept of Agency by Anthony Giddens**

Agency is the capacity of individuals to act on their own and make choices that lead them to their own course of life as well as the social structures around them. Giddens (1986)

emphasizes that “agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place” (p. 9). This means agency focuses on one’s autonomy in doing things rather than the goal. Autonomy highlights the freedom or choices owned by individuals to make decisions that line up with their values and preferences when faced with various choices to shape their own lives.

When talking about agency, it is inseparable from the exercise of power. Giddens (1986) notes that “to be able to ‘act otherwise’ means being able to intervene in the world or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs” (p. 14), means having agency let individuals change the status quo, whether by doing something or choosing not to do it. He further added that agents will stop being one if they lose “the capability to ‘make difference’”, which is equal to exercising power (p. 14). This means that individuals are said to have agency if they have a certain amount of power that can influence or change their own lives and the lives of others. When individuals lose the ability to make a difference, then they are no longer agents due to loss of power to influence events. Power here means the capability of taking action, making impacts, and bringing off change. The sources of power itself can be varied depending on the individuals. Having power is not only having the ability to say no but also means being able to say yes and do things to achieve what individuals want (Giddens, 1986). Therefore, having an agency means being able to choose and make a difference in individuals’ lives and what is around them; it is about being able to do things and having the power to change them.

To be considered as agents within social structures, individuals must have two essential capabilities. First, agents should possess motivations or reasons that drive them to do actions, providing a foundation for their behavior. Second, they must possess the ability to explain their motivations when questioned. Giddens (1986) highlights this requirement emphasizing that for individuals to be an agent is that they have “reasons for his or her activities and are able, if asked, to elaborate discursively upon those reasons (including lying about them)” (p. 3). In other words, individuals must have self-awareness and understand the motivation behind their actions. This suggests their awareness and ability to reflect upon their actions. While some rules can cause limitations, they can also give opportunities for them to exert their agency. Some rules can limit individuals from doing certain things while enabling the agency at the same time. Such as how the True Womanhood limits Evelyn’s autonomy, yet driving her to gain her autonomy at the same time. Hence, norms not only decide what actions are allowed but also affect how much freedom individuals have in society.

Giddens' concept of agency is applicable to answer my second statement of the problem: in what way Evelyn's defiance give her the agency to choose her course of life. In this context, the values or rules for women in the 1950s according to Welter's criticism serve as the structure that both restrains Evelyn and enables her agency to reach her goal as well. The values dictate what Evelyn can and cannot do, yet they also give her the chance to make her own choices.

#### **1.6. Organization of the Study**

For this study, I will organize it into three chapters. In the first chapter, I will talk about the background of the study—including the genre, author, text, and topic, statement of the problems, purposes of the study, significance of the study, and theoretical framework. The second chapter will consist of an analysis. In this chapter, I will provide an analysis that consists of two sub-chapters with three arguments for the first sub-chapter, and two arguments for the second sub-chapter. In the third chapter, I will provide the conclusion of the study. I will sum up the analysis I have done and explain the findings I have provided in the significance of the study.