Metaphorical Sadeian Heroine in Alice Thompson's Novels

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Abstract

My intention in writing this paper is to inquire if the character of the 'dangerous woman' in Alice Thompson's *Justine* (1996) and *Pandora's Box* (1998) functions as a vehicle for arousing the awareness of an unequal gender relationship, or is this type presented as a vehicle for psychic revolution? The aim of this paper is to consider the influences that the psychological problem of this type of 'dangerous woman' has produced in relation to different cultural contexts. It focuses upon analysing textual satire with reference to the male abjection of the female body. The central argument is that the conventional concept of a moral self has been re-interpreted by a psychological self. In the cultural milieu, the patriarchal hegemony that is structured upon the philosophical speculation that

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surrounds the symbolic law (the male possession of the female body always obtaining control over feminine virtue, as illustrated in de Sade's *Justine* and in the mythical story of 'Pandora's Box'), is re-examined by looking at a male's passionate subjection to his fetishised sexual objects. This is more socially accepted so that he might secure his masculine identity as against the threat of female body (illustrated in Thompson's these two works). I propose that textual allusion in these two novels linguistically demonstrates the male abjection of his internal Other and that this abjection is critically interpreted through ironic allusions to two different myths concerning male sexual transgression and dominance over female virtue.

Keywords: Thompson, Sadeian Woman, Gender, Sub-text, Body

> Just as every time Noah built up the body, dealt in its
> physical realities, he felt in some way he might get to
> the bottom of the mystery of what it was to be human.
> His life ran in a straight line from beginning to end and
> he walked along it, unaware of the drop on either side.
>
> *Pandora's Box*, 13

My intention in writing this paper is to inquire if the character of the 'dangerous woman' in Alice Thompson's *Justine* (1996) and *Pandora's Box* (1998) functions as a vehicle for arousing the awareness of an unequal gender relationship, or is this type presented as a vehicle for psychic revolution? The aim of this paper is to consider the influences that the psychological problem of this type of 'dangerous woman' has produced in relation to different cultural contexts. At first, I shall introduce the ambiguity of the border of the subject with Julia Kristeva's interpretation. I will further explore men's view towards the role of 'dangerous woman' from the perspective of the male psychological abjection.

This paper contributes to look at textual adaptations from their referential works and connects the discussion of this adaptive relationship to intertextuality in Thompson. As the gender dichotomy argues against concepts of essential and unified identity (that is, against a static categorisation of femininity as weak and masculinity as strong), Kristeva's linguistic critical theory—with its emphasis on the semiotic and more particularly on the psychoanalytic—blurs the binary opposition within gender ideology. The binary forms of masculinity and femininity play a larger role in mental life than in cultural performance. Fantasies of both sexual transgression and subjection to sexual regulations,

are hierarchies that have been culturally structured but that demand mental deconstruction. The mental decoding of both hierarchies remains a gripping spectacle in the parodic adaptations of the works to which these two novels allude: the mythical parable of 'Pandora's Box' and the original French *Justine*. Various methods of performing gender heterogeneity (as are demonstrated in Thompson's two novels) emerge as being extremely different from those expressed in their referential works; consequently, referents with their ideas of gender subjectivity illustrate different social and psychic meanings in the maternal body. This paper aims to address both of these beliefs. Each one is somehow present in the construction of gender hierarchies.

I. *Julia Kristeva's Concept of Abjection*

I certainly do not wish to propose that there is some 'ideal' way of representing women in fiction, or that some 'ideal' female identity exists (against which we can measure) and find other existing images of women wanting. After all, women can never be 'fully represented', nor can they be defined. This conviction lies behind the urge to question and criticise the existing 'dangerous woman' trope, which can have the effect of preventing women from realising a full and necessary identity of their own. As Julia Kristeva has declared:

> On a deeper level . . . a woman cannot "be"; it is something which does not even belong in the order of *being*. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say "that's not it" and "that's still not it". In "woman" I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above nomenclatures and ideologies.[1]

Notwithstanding this inevitably 'negative' aspect of feminist criticism, it may be possible to reclaim something positive for women from the images we find in fiction. Although the idea of the 'dangerous woman' seems threatening because it has the potential to disrupt social order, the need for social change deserves our attention. I consider that women's awareness of the social gender inequality is significant, and their protestations are required. The oppressed self's struggle is necessary, so that the revolutionary thought may result from the discovery of the mental disease. This self's adjustment in gender relationship may lead to a healthier confrontation of social oppression and bring about revolutionary change, which involves a democratic but innovative reaction to patriarchal authority. I propose that the six authors' purpose, on the one hand, is to expose women's patriarchally long-oppressed and distorted minds, inherited from the Middle Ages (such as Judith's powerful

[1] From 'Woman Can Never Be Defined', translated by Marilyn August from the French of 'La femme ce n'est jamais ca', an interview with 'psychoanalysis and politics' in *Tel Quel* (Autumn 1974), in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton, 1981), pp. 137-141 (137).

domination in her gender relationship) and still relevant in the present; and on the other hand, to advocate the illusion of the self's constructed reality. Subjectivity might be mandatory in relation to the subjective treatment of one issue, but may not be requisite between two sexes. Biologically, the sexes may have their own unique life-experiences, but these experiences do not essentially determine gendered identities and stable social positions.

Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) gives us an insight into the problematic construction of subjectivity; that is to say, an insight into the problematic process by which a person comes to see himself / herself as a unique being who possesses his / her own internal borders between the self and the Other. What is denied has a decidedly negative status and is therefore undesired by the subject. This rejection of the abject object, according to Kristeva, forms the ego, and is also the means by which a child separates from its mother in order to guard against the first inclinations towards incest. In order to introduce Kristeva's theory of abjection in terms of these cases, I will divide her concept of abjection into the following two topics for discussion: the border of the subject and mother-child relationship.

II. *The Border of the Subject*

The abject, according to Kristeva, is comprised of the objects that are rejected by a subject and that are defined by the subject's dislikes or feelings of horror. When she first introduces the concept, she uses a specific loathing towards curdled milk as illustration:

> When the eyes see or lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me", who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out. I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself*.[2]

[2] Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 2-3.

This food loathing illustrates the violence by which one jettisons not only that which creates the self, but also that which threatens the self's internal borders. In distinguishing the subject from the rejected object, Kristeva also uses the example of loathing a corpse as an extreme illustration of the antithesis in the construction of the boundaries between subjects. Here the subject jettisons an image of death, but is at the same time infected by that which symbolises life's fragility:

> If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. . . . Deprived of world, therefore, I *fall in a faint*. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away.[3]

The corpse here does not function as an object which can be violently isolated (like food), but as a reminder of the permanent destination of human beings; this scene highlights the border between life and death.

What we might ask ourselves is: has abjection become a powerful source of cultural values? How successfully can the abject hero become a discredited subject as an idealised image of the human condition? To explore these questions, we shall examine how the psychological complexities of abjection result during the growth of an infant.

III. *Interpretative Sub-Text*

The metalanguage resides in the semiotic dimension of language; that is, interpretation derives from the reading of the *style* of linguistic expression, rather than from the interpretation of the contents (the lexical meanings). Susan Sontag writes this about the contemporary tendency of interpretation:

> Interpretation in our own time, however, is even more complex. For the contemporary zeal for the project of interpretation is often prompted not by piety toward the troublesome text (which may conceal an aggression), but by an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances. The old style of interpretation was insistent, but respectful; it erected another meaning on top of the literal one. The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs 'behind' the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one.[4]

[3] *Ibid*., pp. 3-4.

If we view the readings of the semiotic dimension of language as sub-text, then the overt meaning of the narrative, even if it is critical, is nothing more than an access to the *style* of the symbolic language, to what is abjected. In women's fictional narration, we locate a speaker's attitudes towards the feminine through the decoding of the semiotic, since both femininity and the semiotic are located in marginal places: the former in a patriarchal institution, and the latter, in a linguistic institution. What has been denoted in the text is not necessarily the speaker's thoughts and feelings. Whether or not the 'writing subject' intends to situate cultural implications within the realm of the semiotic, the symbolic intention is only one impulse among many that determine meaning; the narrator's (character's) unconscious desire also 'speaks' through her words. Readers may ascribe their satirical tone in interpretation, either to the characters or to the authors. This interpretative pleasure, from this perspective, seems exclusively to pertain to the readers.

As Kristeva argues, 'Writing is upheld not by the subject of understanding, but by a divided subject, even a pluralised subject, that occupies . . . permutable, multiple and even mobile places'.[5] This postmodern condition, in my reading, has specifically permeated twentieth-century Scottish women's fiction. Writing about the 'dangerous woman' might either carry with it a self-conscious parody—a tone of defiance against the patriarchy, or else contain an unconsciously sarcastic tone towards the repressive society. Despite the fact that both writing subjects have different intentions, the writers still leave much room for their readers to illuminate the contra- (different but related to) but not necessarily the counter- (in the oppositional places) ideologies embedded in the semiotic dimension of language. This subjective inscription with unconscious parodic revelation of its contradiction governs the metafictive reflexivity.

The postmodern condition, as Linda Hutcheon suggests, is one particularly sympathetic to the marginal and peripheral, or to what she describes as the 'ex-centric':

> The centre no longer completely holds. And from the decentered perspective, the 'marginal', and what I will be calling the 'ex-centric' (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new signification in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middle class, male heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed. The concept of alienated otherness (based on binary oppositions that conceal hierarchies) gives way, as I have argued, to that of differences, that is to the assertion, not of centralised sameness, but of decentralised community—another

[4] Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. (Vintage: Random House, 2001 [1961]), p. 6.
[5] Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language*. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez. Trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 111.

postmodern paradox.[6]

The position of the 'dangerous woman' is ex-centric in the way that Hutcheon here describes and specifically in relation to the socially expected role of the domestic woman that is present in earlier twentieth-century Scottish women's fiction.[7] Hutcheon's argument would clearly suggest that postmodernism may provide a sympathetic environment in which to reassess certain aspects of Scottish fiction. As for the postmodern concept of the marginal or ex-centric, I will discuss it in the following chapters in relation to the cultural context that surrounds my chosen novels (postmodernism varies with individuality and region).

From the above discussion, we may say that a subject sets the border for its symbolic identity and rejects anything which might threaten its stability, particularly the maternal body or femininity. The first two sections of this thesis engage with the perspectives from women's abjection of femininity, while the later two sections assume an investigation about the male abjection of maternal body.

I will further demonstrate the authors' satirical tone of this abjection through the device of narrative language. I will apply Kristeva's theory of the semiotic dimension of language to the novels and will scrutinise each texts' trans-linguistic arena, deciphering the grammatical signifieds (*genotext*) through a reading of the signifying structures of fixed or closed texts (*phenotext*). I will classify each texts' presentation of *genotext* according to four different categories—Imitation, Quotation, Allusion, and Deviation—and as they relate to the sub-texts towards which they refer. I further provide evidence for gender abjection in terms of intertextuality, by examining how literary plots impact satirical tone.

IV. *Abridgement of Allusion and Inter-subjectivity*

Pandora's Box and *Justine* both adapt their plots from the traditional myths ('Pandora's Box'[8] and the French *Justine* respectively) to suit modern versions of dangerous women in feminine disguise. The two referential works show the male degradation of the feminine—one within the context of ancient religious beliefs and the other in eighteenth-century erotic literature—and it has been re-examined by twentieth-century criticism. However, in my reading of Thompson's two novels, not only has male subjugation of women (according to earlier social norms) been defamed, but male subjection to the idealised female body has become an object of satire in the modern age. It seems there is a political alternative embedded in the search for inter-subjectivity between male subjugation and subjection to the female body; this aims to break down existing gender divisions in modern society. In other words, textual allusion here aims to defy not only male transgression over the female body

[6] Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 12.

[7] The expected role of the domestic woman is characterised in Nan Shepherd's *Quary Wood* (1928), Willa Muir's *Imagined Corners* (1931), and Nancy Morrison's *The Gowk Storm* (1933).

[8] The mythic tale of 'Pandora's Box' is in reference to Hesiod. *Works and Days*. (London: William Heinemann, 1954).

(patriarchal domination of the female body in de Sade's work and the mythical tale of 'Pandora's Box') but also the male obsession with the female body (male idealisation of the female body in Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box*). Thompson protests against both extremes regarding male treatment of the female body, largely because each involves the male abjection of the feminine Other as associated with the socially restricted female body. If textual allusion offers a positionally neutral subjectivity (as a sword pointing towards both the male domination of the female body and towards the male obsession with female beauty) between that of the referential work and that of its own text, we may need to clarify the definition for the textual allusion.

Allusion has often been employed as a literary instrument to referentially connote various associations. These associations may either agree with the thought that is alluded to or they may denigrate the stratagem of the alluded concept. However, besides the benefits and drawbacks of using allusion, William Irwin suggests that the associations aroused by an 'intended indirect reference' may 'go beyond mere substitution of a referent'.[9] In other words, whether the subjectivity in a referential work appears either supported or interrogated by a referring work, the thoughts of this subjectivity may work as an apparatus of cultural or social manoeuvre. This manoeuvre demands objective evaluation by a different, though not necessarily opposite cultural milieu that somehow benefits from critical distance.

Let us take the broad meaning of allusion into account by looking at how the referring work gathers up many inferences that point towards the referent. Mary Orr takes into account Pasco's view regarding the nature of allusion, indicating that allusion, by alliance, 'suffuses and extends meaning'[10] and refuses metaphoric integration. She concurs with Pasco that allusion 'does not suggest the combination with another image (or text) that will permit the metaphorical relationship'.[11] I contend that Thompson's reinterpretation of the referential texts involves an intentional transformation and revolution of an earlier cultural notion. In literature specifically, this notion manifests itself as a textual fabrication that signifies an entire social world. What we must ask is whether or not this intentional resistance is exclusive to the author of the referring work.

In order to clarify the validity of authorial intentions in literary criticism (not only in this thesis but also in more general situations concerning objectivity), we might first look at Roland Barthes (New Criticism) who attributes most interpretation right to the readers and who considers the different ages and cultural backgrounds of particular readers and authors. In 1968, Roland Barthes proclaimed

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[9] Irwin considers that allusion should have been a crucial topic involved in the theory of interpretation, and that it is particularly important to any discussion of intentionalist and anti-intentionalist theories. Irwin, William. 'Against Intertextuality'. *Philosophy and Literature*. (Oct 2004): 227-242. p. 227.

[10] Orr, Mary. *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 139.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 140. Pasco's view. Pasco, A. H. *Allusion: a Literary Graft.* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1994).

'the death of the author'.[12] His view regarding 'the death of the author' argues for an 'equivalence [between] . . . writing and reading'.[13] He regards the author as a 'scriptor' who may or may not understand his scribe and who certainly does not authorise his scribe to practice the task of meaning-making.[14] The reader then is left free to trace the relations between the scribe and any associated allusions. The authorial intent, therefore, is not as significant as a reader's understanding of the text and its references.

A reader's double-edged interpretation of the referent and its references implies an author's parodic play with generic form, as well as and with a reader's meta-commentary on the author's work. While the author replicates the generic form by adaptation that somehow stabilise his/her meaning, the reader then subverts this stability by means of his/her alternative cultural reading. Mary Orr regards this textual abridgement of allusion as a vehicle of textual 'cyclification':

> cyclification may restructure oppositional movements as a double helix—pulling out one loop links it more firmly with the others in the strand—or as further amplification of the one authority undergirding all their forms. . . . Quotation's tacit marking of belief or unbelief systems thus remains the underlying authorisation that will determine how cultural productions are sustained, maintained and renewed within a heritage. It is to the constant modes of this authorisation that quotation's abridgements and cyclical bridging return, the span of its operations.[15]

This textual cyclification allows no room for parodic authority, and at the same time, broadens the span of literary interpretation. It marks the synthesis of two seemingly, but not exclusively, contradictory energies, scrutinises them by reduction, and decodes them by transformation.

We then may be curious about the linguistic role in this double-edged textual interpretation. Regarding the distinction between meaning and significance, Kristeva asserts that 'the dialogue word or utterance is double-voiced, heteroglot, and possesses a meaning (A) at the same moment that it possesses an alternative meaning or meanings (not-A)'.[16] Kristeva considers textual meaning as a container of the signified, indicating that textual meaning (represented by the symbolic signifier) does not go against the law of non-contradiction. The significance of ~*x* can be deciphered through textual signifiers, which are precisely what the text denigrates. With regard to language politics, the

[12] Barthes, Roland. 'The Death of the Author'. *The Death and Resurrection of the Author?* Ed. William Irwin. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002), pp. 3-7. ; 'La mort de l'auteur', *Manteia 5* (1968): 12-17.
[13] Barthes, Roland. 'Theory of the Text'. *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*. Ed. Robert Young. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 31-47 (42).
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Orr, Mary. *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), p. 145.
[16] Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 43.

intertextual severing of the text can be thus motivated by different subjectivities as represented by the signifier and the signified. From this perspective, we may note that Thompson's intertextual severing is motivated by a subjectivity that satirically refers to the symbolic signifier, *x* (male sexual exploitation of the feminine as appearing in de Sade's *Justine* and in the mythical tale of 'Pandora's Box'), and that simultaneously exposes the semiotic significance of ~*x* (the male fear of suffering subjugation for being too feminine in the symbolic world of gender relationships as they appear in Thompson's *Justine* and *Pandora's Box*). I contend that Thompson's purpose here is to show the psychological alternative surrounding man's fear of his internal Other. Men may transform their fear through the reverse presentation of subjection to the idealised female body and this ideal-female-body fetishism may then induce a decentred subjectivity wherein the violation of the female body can stand in opposition to a more symbolic subjectivity. The seemingly opposite symptom about the male fear of the feminine Other in Thompson's two novels ironically does not obliterate man's fear of the Other, but rather makes him lose his desired power in the capture of fetishised female beauty embodied by the dangerous women.

Kristeva argues for the significance of a decentred subjectivity that is embedded as an unconscious drive beneath the veneer of a conscious symbolic positioning through language.[17] For Kristeva, the unconscious, semiotic dimension of subjectivity can be traced through the 'somatic aspects of language; she also asserts that 'this pre-self experience of the semiotic is non-gender specific'.[18] Since this pre-self experience has nothing to do with gender, why does Kristeva use it in place of the mother? This gendered categorisation of the semiotic as the maternal is regarded in opposition to the patriarchal symbolic order of the linguistic 'system's official[ly] *made* ideal of the "centred, self-directing agent"'.[19] Kristeva's analysis of this repressive positioning of the semiotic by the patriarchal symbolic order of language, shares an affinity with the oppression of women in modern culture. The disruption of the symbolic order not only renounces the male symbolic subjectivity, but also forces subjects to confront their ideology.

Regarding the relationship between the text and its referential work, we may rest assured that the inter-subjectivity between the referring work and its referent is worth pondering. This particular dimension of inter-subjectivity is concomitant with Kristeva's 'subject-in-process'; it not only denigrates the symbolic, patriarchal, and textual order, but also inspects the semiotic, maternal, and counter-textual order so that any mysogynistic tone is parodied. This double-edged investigation (of the symbolic and of the semiotic aspects of language) challenges the partialities of symbolically overt

[17] Elliott, Anthony. 'Kristeva on the semiotic foundation of feminine sexuality'. *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition: Self and Society from Freud to Kristeva*. (Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 219-230.
[18] *Ibid*., pp. 221-222.
[19] *Ibid*., p. 223.

subjectivity and of the semiotically hidden subjectivity. Thompson's textual allusion articulates a feminist reaction to the myths surrounding de Sade's sadomasochistic daughters and the male-created female figure of Pandora. In both cases, the idealised female body falls prey to a patriarchal domination while ironically exposing a masculine fear of the female body and a masculine obsession with the idealised female body. This exposure ultimately makes them the victims of female seduction. Although the patriarchy of the referential works provides a counterpoint to Thompson's works, it indirectly proves the existence of the male symptom concerning cultural representation of the female body: the mythical legacy of victimised femininity produces a social shadow of the Other; this is a role that men do not want to play but that they nevertheless desire to control.

V. *Refusal of Authorisation*

Allusion, as discussed above, does not simply authorise the creation of a meaningful, symbolic counter-point. The ironic tone of rebellion, even against the counter-dimension, is well articulated in semiotic aspects of fictional speech. I propose that in Thompson's two novels, man's gender terror (veiled behind his obsession with the female body) is used as a satirical point to off-set the aggressive violation of the female body in 'Pandora's Box' and in de Sade's *Justine*. Although both forms are satirised, they are expressed in two radical passions (subjugation and subjection): both are symptoms of male psychic fear that emerges when the man is confronted with the female body. This fear is expressed as male self-illusion of a rational, scientific identity in *Pandora's Box*, which refers to the suppressed position of woman in the myth of 'Pandora's Box'; this fear is also illustrated in the male terror of castration in *Justine* which refers to the sexual transgression in de Sade's *Justine*. In the two novels and in the novels to which they allude, the female body becomes the icon of the feminine and marks those sites of repression whereupon the inequalities of gender treatment cannot find conscious articulation and are displaced onto a linguistic reading of the unconscious textual fabric.

VI. Redeeming the Nature of Curiosity

In *Pandora's Box*, the discovery of a rigid ideology behind a gender dichotomy releases more blessings than woes to Dr. Noah. This occurs despite the fact that his discovery of a 'rational obsession' (with the scientifically created and idealised female body) produces a degree of melancholy. Pandora's curiosity to discover the meaning of her existence in Noah's scientific world, as indicated by the anonymous letter reading. 'DO NOT BE AFRAID OF WHAT YOU WANT' (35) runs concurrent with the nature of curiosity in the myth of 'Pandora's Box'. Although the mythical Pandora activates all the plagues on earth when she opens the infamous box, she also brings enlightenment to the earth, releasing a certain understanding of the mixed nature of beauty and danger, of pleasure and torture.

Before patriarchal mythology transformed Pandora into a fair woman showered with gifts from ‘all the gods’, she was created out of clay by Hephaestus; given life by Athena; decked with jewellery by the Graces and Peitho, with flowers by Horace, with beauty by Aphrodite, and with treachery by Hermes; was given ‘a gift, a sorrow to covetous man’.[20] Hesiod says, ‘I will give men as the price of fire an evil thing in which they may be all glad of heart while they embrace their own destruction’.[21] Zeus tells Hermes to take beautiful Pandora to earth, as a snare and a plague to men and in order to seduce Prometheus’s brother, Epimetheus (Afterthought). Prometheus (Beforethought) warns his brother to reject any gift from Zeus but Epimetheus, due to his lust for feminine beauty, still takes the gift. What he receives is not only that which he appreciates, feminine beauty, but also that which he abhors and that which will destroy all he owns. Laura Mulvey illustrates Warner’s view that the figure of Pandora is one of ‘artifact and artifice’, and is one that combines the temptations of a beautiful body with the dangerous consequences of betrayal.[22] The clay-made artifact, as a beautiful pleasure object and as the deceptive artifact of a wicked trick, condenses the mixed nature of femininity. Pandora, as a curious and mischievous temptress, opens her jar to unleash misery for the benefit of men.

This benefit derives from the recognition and revision of distinct binary oppositions. While Hesiod emphasises the disease and suffering brought about by the reception of Pandora as a gift, he also stresses how Zeus gives Pandora to man as a punishment for the crimes of Prometheus (Prometheus had stolen a tiny flame from Zeus in order to give life to mankind).[23] Zeus hides men’s sustenance because he is angry with Prometheus: ‘Zeus devised miserable sorrows for mankind; he hid fire’ (*Works and Days*, 49-50). When Prometheus then returns the flame, Zeus becomes angry and says that he will give ‘a huge burden’ to Prometheus and to men of a future age (*WD*, 56). Pandora, this woman of clay is used therefore as a weapon of war; she stands in the centre of a power struggle between male gods and falls victim to their warrings. Epimetheus ignores his brother’s warning about the gift. Rather than sending it back ‘so that nothing bad might happen to mortals . . . he took it, and then understood [the consequences] only when he had the evil creature’ (*WD*, 88-89). To accept Pandora meant that he had also to accept the jar from Zeus: female curiosity cannot be separated from the nature of her existence. As a result, feminine beauty has been equated with the jar of evil; femininity has been victimised. Pandora has been embodied as a patriarchally compliant figure that offers neither a counter-attack nor any reconciliation between male gods.

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[20] Hesiod. *Works and Days*. (c. 700BC) (London: William Heinemann, 1954), p. 8.
[21] *Ibid*.
[22] Mulvey, Laura. *Fetishism and Curiosity*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 55. In her reference to M. Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form*. (London: Picador, 1985), pp. 214 and 239; Warner quotes Froma I. Zeitlin’s description of Pandora as an ‘artefact and artifice’ to delight as well as to deceive.
[23] Lefkowitz, Mary. *Greek Gods, Human Lives: what we can learn from myths*. (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 25.

Although Epimetheus is the indirect victim in this war triggered by Prometheus, he also transgresses for his inner passions towards feminine beauty. Various forms of the plague, such as 'Old Age, Labour, Sickness, Insanity, Vice and Passion'[24], rampage the earth and only Hope is left in Pandora's jar: 'thousands of sorrows wander about among men; the earth is full of evils and the sea is full. Diseases come upon men by day, and the night they travel about, uncontrolled, and bring suffering to mortals in silence, since wise Zeus took away their voices' (*WD*, 100-105). All negative passions against virtue are forfeited for the price of desire for feminine beauty; Hope is left in the jar and represents one of Zeus's plans. Hesiod is speaking of a bad kind of hope since the unavailable hope can spur men to action and console them in misfortune. Zeus, who can fulfill his will and has no personal need for hope, denies hope to 'silenced' mankind. *Pandora's Box*'s allusion to this male war of outwitting deception and to the desire between male gods becomes a counterpoint to the male domination of the female body, wherein the male subjugation to the idealised female body has been satirised to the fullest extent here.

The male treatment of the female body proceeds in an opposite direction in *Pandora's Box* from that of the myth: male subjection to the object of feminine beauty, rather than male use of feminine beauty as an object in war. This marks the climax of the seduction of the dangerous woman. In the myth, Pandora's curiosity is the source of all her trouble. The tale is patterned on the Genesis story in which Eve is warned not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In Thompson's *Pandora's Box*, the anonymous female figure named Pandora by Dr. Noah, is artificially constructed. Noah's self-deception constructs his own scientific world of reason rather than emotion:

> She lay still, wrapped in bandages apart from the section Noah was
> studying, as if unaware of his attentions. She was like a stone goddess being
> worshipped by a pagan, anointed and bathed, offered sacrifices, but always
> remaining impassive. (*Pandora's Box*, 11)

Noah's love of a cold empirical world, where only the visually perfected object might exist, stands in sharp contrast to the fire image which evokes Noah's passion and which is illustrated in Pandora's burnt body when she stands before him in his door:

> Flames were licking the edges of the sky in front of him and it took him a
> moment to realize that there was a fire burning on the doorstep of his home.
> It took him a further moment to make out the shape of a shadowy figure
> standing in the midst of the flames, making a star pattern with its limbs. (3)

Noah's interest in the fire-burnt woman merely stems from his professional interest in the rectification of the corporeal pattern. This is evidenced through his obsession with his re-creating Pandora's body.

[24] Graves, Robert. *The Greek Myths*. Vol. 1. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960 [1955]), p. 145.

This figure image is fully ridiculed in contrast to the myth: Pandora's perfected body is endorsed by Noah and brings pleasure to male satisfaction of his ideal of feminine beauty, whereas Pandora's beauty is utilised as a weapon of war and brings disaster to men.

Pandora's silence and housework also scorns the perfect world that Noah considers her to embody. When Pandora stitches a tapestry on canvas, the landscape she creates is 'like the backdrop of a classical Greek mosaic in the colours of the bright yellow, whites and blue of the Mediterranean' (28). This foreshadows the destruction of the earth that occurs in the 'Pandora's Box' of Greek myth. Later, Pandora again foreshadows this destruction.

> Pandora had added on to the faceless woman's pubic area [of the canvas Tapestry] a huge phallus, surrounded by coarse, dark, pubic hair, each hair beautifully stitched, the tip of the erect penis stitched soft as red velvet. (29)

Such sexual involvement as reflected by the perfectly human form awakens the masculine desire to sexually violate the female body. Noah's search for Pandora's box[25] is the search for her sexuality. The fact that Noah cannot live without the presence of Pandora and her box suggests that his existence relies on his ability to dominate the sexually subjugated Other. What deserves our attention here is that the symbol of danger is displaced onto the figure of a witch (Venus). Just as the name signifies, the 'Goddess of Love' serves as an irony to Noah's passionate search for what he once created but has now lost. This search has no foundation in love, but in the destruction of love. The wild woman evokes torture and introspection in Noah's journey to discover Pandora's body and her box. When Noah trails her into the desert, he 'felt he was following her into the centre of the hottest place in the world' (71):

> They reached a mountain of boulders. To his surprise, Venus started to climb them. She moved with agility, crawling hard-backed and deftly between the crevices like an insect. He watched her disappear over the mountain of boulders that tottered unevenly up into the sky. (71)

Venus' purposefully abandons Noah in the desert, her existence hindering the use of her supernatural, visionary powers. In this abandonment, Noah experiences fits of distraction: 'each manoeuvre [of climbing up the mountain] required a concentration of thought the heat seemed bent on preventing' (72). In opposition to Noah's empirically rational speculation, Venus' 'psychic world had no room for the real' (79). Her surreal association with the waves and messages that she receives from ghosts emerges as a sharp contrast to Noah's practical worldliness.

The mixed nature of good and evil is embodied in the figure of Venus through a search to discover the secrets in her box and through a search to reveal Pandora's killer. Such displacement, from the corporeal, clay-made Pandora and her jar to the connection between a scientifically

[25] Box is slang for vagina.

re-moulded woman and the half mortal, half-divine woman in *Pandora's Box*, disrupts the deeply rooted topography of the feminine. Feminine beauty does not necessarily associate the external with virtue and the internal with vice. The characterisation of Venus does not fall into the bond between body and object; instead, she plays a reluctant mentor directing Noah to discover his killer within (his contradictory intents to uphold the ideal of feminine beauty, and to destroy it for its hovering haunts in the conscious).

The reality of the empty box is a cruel but liberating truth for Dr. Noah; his deepest fears can now be recognised and released. When Noah sees the glass box held by Venus at Lazarus' temple, he felt surprised that the lid opened easily:

> Letting the lid fall shut again, Noah fell down into the fountain, on his knees, the water up to his neck and for the first time since Pandora's death he surrendered to grief. He wept, as if his heart was breaking. . . . Venus, from her pedestal stared out, sightless, over his head, as if she had known what he had discovered, all along. That she had known, all along, that the box would be empty. (135)

The box's emptiness suggests that female sexuality is unknowable to men. It remains a mystery. As a foil to the impact of vicious disease dispersed out from Pandora's jar in the myth, the emptiness of Pandora's glass box in *Pandora's Box* signals a fact that Noah's desire to create a female body of his own ideal is caught in an oscillation between his erotic obsession with the female body and his fear of losing his masculine, rational identity (in other words, the fear of facing a castrated masculine self). It is this fear of castration and the subsequent disavowal of the lost idealised woman (who has a controllable body) that Freud treats as the cause of male fetishism. The profound horror to face the burnt (in the symbolical sense, murdered) body is displaced onto the horror of discovering the secret of the box. While the fetishised body is highly cherished, the box contains everything that fetishism disavows. This is ostensibly evidenced in Noah's psychic identification. Noah feels comfort in the company of Lazarus (because he favours keeping women in his studio and moulding them into statues) even at the moment of finding the truth. As Noah indicates: 'to feel like oneself again, [is] to feel risen from the dead' (127). He demands Lazarus's adept nature if he is to awaken his imaginative manipulation over the female body. Only the self's alter ego may wreck the fear veiled behind the form of obsessive subjection to the female body: 'Lazarus was nothing without his victims and he needed them in order to be born again' (143). Gilles Deleuze, when consulting Freud's interpretation of sadism, suggests that the weakness of the masochistic ego 'is a strategy by which the masochist manipulates the woman into the ideal state for the performance of the role he has assigned to her'; on this condition, the sadistic superego has its displaced pleasure with his expected state of the female

role.[26] From this perspective, if we regard Noah's masochistic ego as a displaced pleasure (referring to his sadistic superego), we may then say that Noah's identification with Lazarus (his feeling that man is 'nothing without' the imaginative manipulation over the female body) helps him to discover that his masochistic ego involves a sadistic desire. Although he suffers from the torture of addicted obsession, his male identity relies on female femininity being internally projected towards his scientific creation—thereby sustaining the pleasure of his sadistic superego.

As the surname of Dr. Noah 'Close' implies, Noah's obsession with his idealised female body reflects his male indulgence in the scientific world. He believes in a science that can create everything, even the human body. This blind belief causes him satiate both his male narcissism and his desire to subjugate the female body through a gendered relationship. His subjection to the female body is just an unconscious mask hiding his desire to subjugate women. We may say that Noah's subjection to the fetishised object discloses the horror of losing his own identity. This arises in turn from the certitude of a dichotomic ideology to which the fearful subject clings. Fritz Graf claims that a myth is the representation of the central values of a society such that any analysis of myth must dissect the mythical signs against their specific cultural milieu.[27] In terms of this allusion, *Pandora's Box* stigmatises the patriarchal use of women as agents of power, proclaiming that Pandora's divinely created beauty presented a tricky betrayal in the myth. This has perhaps vulgarised the nature of the feminine and has degraded the social position of a female body. Nevertheless, in opposition to the aggressive manipulation of the female body in the myth, the obsessive possession in *Pandora's Box* is reified as a psychological symptom of the fear of castration—not of the body, but of the identity itself—and of losing identity as it relates to subjectivity. My intertextual reading aims to denounce the partial treatment of both texts with regard to femininity.

VII. Polarised Forms of Male Lust for Feminine Beauty

In Thompson's *Justine*, female sexuality slips into a 'to-be-looked-at-ness' at the forfeiting to male obsession with the feminine beauty. Alluding to the Marquis de Sade's work of the same name, the novel sneers at a society in which sexual violence ruins the dignity of the feminine and in which immorality applauds the sexually aggressive, masculine woman, Juliette. What we may feel interested in is the discrepancy between these two works, wherein the twin sisters of the French original do reproach male sexual violation. The twin sisters in Thompson's work, however, stand in an alliance that exposes man's illusionary subjection to the idealised female body (this through the use of Justine's

[26] See Deleuze, Gilles, and von Sacher-Masoch, Leopold. 'Sadistic Superego and Masochistic Ego'. *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, *Venus in Furs*. (New York: Zone Books, 1991), pp. 123-134 (124).

[27] Graf, Fritz. *Greek Mythology: an introduction*. Trans. Thomas Marier. (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 55.

body as painted on a canvas). Justine has a twin sister (Juliette), and it is the male narrator who is increasingly unsure as to the identity of the woman he truly desires: the idealised but inhumane sister (Justine) or the relatively more intimate but emotional one (Juliette). We might want to ask if the story is about a man's obsession with a single woman, or if it is about a man's obsession with two women? Is it that the male narrator demands Justine's feminine beauty as a possessive object for his own psychic displacement (to assure himself of his masculine identity)? Is it that he requires Juliette's zealous passion for psychic compensation in order to effectively recapture the lost maternal love of his childhood?

De Sade's *Justine* contours a world of desires that expresses themselves in the form of perverse pleasures and that ultimately result in the corruption of innocence. The narrative background is located in a decadent world of pre-revolutionary France. Although de Sade's tale is an exploration of concepts that verge into fantasies of sheer excess, it exposes a corporeal world in which the actual flesh rules the revolution of nature: not only the nature of life, but the nature of humanity. The analysis of de Sade's original intentions in fabricating this eighteenth-century work, however, is not the primary focus of this analysis. If horror illuminates the darkness of the de Sade's sexual world, it is a similarly perverse pleasure that Thompson's *Justine* wants to flout; *Justine* aims to repudiate, through the modern sexual relationship, this pinnacle culture—this decadent history at a certain age. The feminine virtue that is embodied in the figure of Justine can never win as much appreciation as the masculine subordination that is embodied in the figure of Juliette. Femininity is therefore an imperative issue in discussing the trigger behind the crime.

The question of femininity again emerges as an ambiguous topic for the struggle that surrounds the ideology of gender dichotomy. What deserves our attention is the problem that comes into play when femininity connects with female beauty. Women need to compensate for being born into a patriarchal world and do so by entering the world of men, specifically the world of the rich, in order to prevent poverty.[28] In Angela Carter's view, it is not one side of the gender divide that oppresses women, but the material advantage that one group has over the other. As Carter indicates:

> . . . the moral Juliette's life suggests the paradox of the
> hangman—in a country where the hangman rules, only the
> hangman escapes punishment for his crimes.[29]

In Carter's analysis of de Sade's *Justine*, women are the sacrificial victims of men, particularly when it comes to issues concerning economic power. Such economic exploitation can be discerned in de Sade's *Justine* when both girls are cast out of a nunnery for lack of funds. Juliette turns to prostitution,

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[28] Carter, Angela. *The Sadeian Woman: an exercise in cultural history*. (London: Virago Press, 2000 [1979])., p. 78.
[29] *Ibid*., p. 99.

thieving, and eventually, murder; Justine, on the other hand, refuses to compromise her virtue and is rewarded with abuse and betrayal. Juliette's poor moral scruples are rewarded with a life of luxury.

From this perspective, viewing the marriage of social wealth with sexual exploitation, we may say that the economic subordination of the female body helps the reader to understand the male narrator's obsessive passion with Justine's body in the painting. The revelation of his obsession with the painting, and of his quest for Justine's physical company in the London gallery, charts the border between contempt and desire. When observing the portrait of a female figure, he revels in:

> Her hard pale eyes, set wide apart in her face, contained the knowledge that nothing was of any consequence outside of how she looked. Her gaze did not look directly at me, but coyly, to one side. This meant I could look at her to my heart's content. By looking away she put herself even more on display to me. This oblique sacrifice of herself sealed my love. (*Justine*, 10)

The male narrator's opium-seasoned hallucinations generate his male passion for a silent female beauty. The image of silence symbolises a corporeal castration, even though it permeates the air rather than the body. This psychic subjection serves as an ironic denial of the lady's real existence: 'She did not know that in reality she needed me in order to exist, that without the concentration of my thoughts she was just a phantom' (18). Readers can discern how the narrator's ego glows and how, in this psychic state, he stands upon uneven ground: he is actually quite afraid of the aggression brought about by the female body. He says, 'She had a smudge of red paint on her cheek near her left ear, that looked like blood' (21). 'The left' symbolises the aggressiveness of a castrating body that may both murder and be, itself, brutally murdered. 'The left' is a Latin word that suggests the political transgression of social rules as well as the sinister subversion of social taboos. Female aggression is obscured by her expected social performance but is expressed through her seduction; because of her actions, men are forced to confront their own subjugation.

The figure of Juliette (in the French original) is characterised as a childish woman: 'Juliette's child-like movements and disturbed sexuality' release 'the smell of burning wood' (22). When discussing a mural with Juliette, the narrator remarks upon 'the extraordinary power of women over men. Women are without question the more dangerous sex' (27). Juliette replies, 'Men *make* women dangerous' (27). This response mocks the figure of Juliette in de Sade's work, wherein Juliette's perversion is the result of a wealth-worshipping society and her prostitution is a form of victimisation by men. Thompson characterises Juliette as an ardent woman searching for passion and Justine as a wounded bird who lacks her sister's energy for life: 'Transferring the bird to the tight grasp of a single hand, with the other hand, Juliette began gently to stroke the bird's neck' (31-32). The narrator

comments upon Justine's existence: 'Her only way of living in the world was to be locked up inside it. Imprisonment was form of rescue for her' (32). The narrator praises the lifeless existence of Justine and despises the human liveliness of Juliette:

> Already I could see that what lay beyond Juliette's desperation, her clumsiness, her seriousness, was her encroaching self-consciousness. It crippled her identity, deformed it, crystallised and then shattered it. She was like a cracked mirror, always self-reflecting an image that was deformed. (35)

Juliette's lust for worldliness plunges her into a life of crime for fun and profit. This again plays upon criminal patterns of behavior that define Juliette in de Sade's work. The irony climaxes when Justine writes her first novel *Death is Woman* (40). Falsely speculating upon Juliette's mind, the narrator thinks that Juliette 'perceive[s] herself as the failure and Justine as the success. Each needed the negation of the other' (42). However, readers know that this is a male prejudice that is oppressing the maternal liveliness and pleasure.

This perverse appreciation for deadly life exists not only in the narrator's mind, but also in the mind of an entire modern society. The narrator observes the following:

> I blocked out the letter from my memory. However, over the next few days London's violence seemed to intensify accordingly, became its very heartbreak. The tensions in the streets had been normalised by the words of the letter, become part of a larger pattern. Everywhere I now looked I saw the imagery of death. On television, in newspapers, in film. As if the imagery of the world had come up to meet my own private world. (85)

The ruthlessness of the outside world reigns in the aesthetic pleasures of the narrator's inside world. Nevertheless, the wealthy collector's addled brain, starting to introspectively examine relations between the external and internal world, begins to recognise that his self-justified knowledge about the twin sisters is as falsely structured as Jack's:

> It was Jack who was the true monster, not the abductor. It was Jack who was incapable of passion. . . . The abductor shared with me an overwhelming passion for Justine. Jack, however, had retained total self-control. He was not made vulnerable by the power of his obsession. He was not one of us. How could *his* cursoriness compete with the concentration of our ardour? *He* was the one that should be punished. The realisation had come suddenly but had crept over me with the inevitability of the truth. (92)

This realisation deepens while the narrator admits that 'My desire, once consummated, would justify reality' (110).

But how is this desire produced? It derives from the disdain of the mother for her son's deformity and from the withdrawal of her maternal love. The narrator traces his own falsification:

> My anger was a reclamation of my identity: my rage fought against the
> world of Justine that I slipped into, had been slowly sliding into like
> quick sand from the moment I had first seen her. (124)

The resentment towards his mother and his hesitancy to confront her decaying beauty, both control his emotions towards Justine: 'I thought at first it was Salome. Justine was wearing a black veil which transparently clothed her naked body' (130). He confesses that he '[I] hung on to my anger against her. But my anger only reinforced my desire' (131). This 'blissful emptiness of surrender' (132) effectively covers his fear of corporeal castration, that fear by which his self-dignity has ironically been destroyed.

Conclusion

The two novels attempt to disrupt the border between virtue (femininity) and
vice (masculinity) by alluding to beliefs as held in the ancient mythologies of 'Pandora's Box' and *Justine*. In order to defy the patriarchal view that renders Pandora's curiosity a criminal action, Thompson's *Pandora's Box*, re-claims her curiosity in order to trace the meaning of a woman's existence in a patriarchal society. This reveals prejudiced gender divisions and an understanding of the woman's body as it has been used in masculine power struggles. At the same time, the female body is adored in *Pandora's Box* in order to reveal the patriarchal desire for a rationalised masculine identity. Pandora's mythical jar and Pandora's box in Thompson's work, both destroy that particular gender dichotomy (virtuous / feminine, vicious / masculine) wherein gender identity is performed rather than born: both present a dangerous, subversive woman in the disguise of feminine beauty. The nature of female curiosity does not lead to a devastating destruction of the male world, but to an intellectually pleasurable fall.

The narrator's terror of evoking his memory of his childhood trauma is also masked by a more symbolically accepted patriarchy—by his obsessive subjection to a feminine beauty presented in a painting. The narrator's existential anxiety is rekindled by the appearance of the painted woman, Justine, and, as Anderson suggests, leads to certain 'conventions of [the] Sadeian Gothic'.[30] These conventions, however, are borrowed in order to satirise sexual perversion as it is nurtured by a French

[30] Anderson thinks that Thompson's *Justine*, following Carter's lead, engages with the constructions of femininity. Anderson, Carol. 'Emma Tennant, Elspeth Barker, Alice Thompson: Gothic Revisited'. *Contemporary Scottish Women Writers*. Eds. Aileen Christianson and Alison Lumsden. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 122.

decadent world. Thompson ridicules Sadeian gothic conventions (specifically those that expose the ‘terrifying feminine’) through the use of modern customs that appreciate femininity through the lens of fetishism. Ultimately, because there exist two subjectivities that permit different treatments of the female body, readers may be assured that there exists an inter-subjectivity that denies any form of gender-divisive ideology.

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