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The Gendering of Death Personifications in Literary Modernism: The Femme Fatale Symbol
from Baudelaire to Barnes

A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

by

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ABSTRACT

The Gendering of Death Personifications in Literary Modernism: The Femme Fatale Symbol

from Baudelaire to Barnes

by

Amanda McNally

The time of modernity, defined here as 1850-1940, contributed to massive changes in the representation of the feminine in literature. Societal paradigm shifts due to industrialism, advances in science, psychology, and a newfound push for gender equality brought transformation to the Western World. As a result of this, male frustrations revived the ancient trope of the femme fatale, but the modern woman—already hungry for agency, tired of maligned representation in heinous portrayals of skeletons, sirens, and beasts—saw a symbol begging for redemption rather than the intended insult. Women of the nineteenth century infused texture to a two-dimensional accusation that argued the only good female sexuality was one that could be contained. The redemption of the femme fatale is traced in this thesis through Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), Gabrielle D'Annunzio's *The Triumph of Death* (1901), and Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Fatal women are present in every form of literary expression. They tempt Adam in the Garden, they beckon men to fight for their country in WWI propaganda, and they smoke coquettishly from film noir cinematography. From religion to theatre to comic books it seems one constant is the presence of deadly women foiling more thoughtfully depicted male characters. The femme fatale's echoes reach throughout artistic expression for as far back as humanity has record and will likely reach just as far forward; however, what remains to be determined is the point of the epicentral note from which depictions spring forth either maligning or redeeming the femme fatale in an atemporal race for translation. The point of investigation here is not the beginning of femme fatales, but the tipping point in artistic expression when Death transformed from a male grim reaper character to a pale and seductive woman, when death and attraction became an interwoven symbol of femininity, when Baudelaire started writing odes for calculating prostitutes.

The depictions of women rejecting societal norms encapsulate attitudes and, while perennially present, femme fatales are an overwhelming literary presence in the end of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century. This period saw a cultural paradigm shift from overly polite Victorian sensibilities to advances in science and technology, a renewed interest in intellectualism, and friction between the sexes. These turbulent forces created vilified female characters in varying levels of subtlety in very prolific literature and art: vampires, succubi, witches, she-demons, and Death personified, but the period of modernism also saw a budding understanding and promotion of feminism with fatal women that were arguably not fatal at all. In this time period female characters were vilified but also started making great strides in owning their sexuality and holding their male and female counterparts accountable for their decisions.

The progress of the fatal woman in literature is not one of a tidy linear progression, but rather one of continued victories and affronts, idolatry and vilification, worship and revulsion. Redemption of the character cannot be found in a moral concession to society, but rather in the seizing of agency to not reflect any character or culture, to be fully formed with personal motivations for fatality or showing whatever fault unfolds in their literature belongs to those that once called them fatal. Female characters seducing men to their ruin is an ever-present trope, and whether it was actually the female character's fault, or just the projection of guilt from their counterparts, the portrayal of the femme fatale has gone through dramatic changes as women have moved forward to pursue a sexuality that is independent of the obligations of the family structure.

George Ross Ridge writes in "The 'Femme Fatale' in French Decadence" that "decadent writing reflects its social ethos" (352). The Decadent movement is defined as the end of the nineteenth century. The movement originated out of France before spreading throughout Europe and the United States. The movement was defined by its overall skepticism and enjoyment of depicting perverse and crude topics. Critics lamented that the Decadent movement showed societal decay and a move away from morals. Social ethos is defined here as the collective character of a group, community, nation, or time period, depending on the context of the comparison. The femme fatale reflects the collective character of the society the writer belongs to while writing. Charles Baudelaire is an important figure of the French Decadence. He encapsulates a larger attitude that existed during the late nineteenth century towards women that contradicted the restrictive ideas of the Romantic period (1800-1850).

Ridge elaborates further on the femme fatale by explaining, "The natural woman—wife, mother, earth-woman disappears and the *modern woman* emerges . . . with the triumph of

economic man and the artificial society” (353). As addressed more fully later in this project, the emergence of industry and an increase in commerce drastically changed gender roles during the nineteenth century transnationally. The modern woman is born from the societal shift from the passive romantic heroine to a woman that was characterized as turning away from the natural order, i.e. tending to the domestic duties of the home, being mothers, and wives. With this break from the pre-established order, the modern woman is vilified, “She incarnates destruction rather than creativity. She has lost her capacity for love, and with it her function as wife and mother. The new heroine is malevolent” (Ridge 353).

A major convergence point in the portrayal of femme fatale characters is the period of literary modernism, defined here as the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth (approx. 1850-1940), but notably a hotly contested timeframe outside the parameters of this research due to modernism not only being a literary movement but rather a collection of movements. It is also important to note that blatantly misogynistic portrayals of women are not restricted to only that of male writers and artists. Women adhered to the societal vilification of other women and put their effort into separating themselves from the wrong kind of woman. This is not a strictly male issue; the sexism of the nineteenth century transcends gender, class, race, age, and nationality. Eventually, changing worldviews made authors challenge their own perceptions and depictions of female characters, along with a broadening of literature to include not only more female writers, but also writers from different racial, cultural, and economically diverse backgrounds. This phenomenon was due to the increasing cosmopolitan world view caused by advances in technology, communication, and international travel in the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century, making novels like Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* (1936) possible. The paradigm shift of modernity across political and linguistic barriers made countries

susceptible to each other's ailments and successes, and it allows an analysis of one literary symbol to stitch together the works of writers from France to Italy to America. The femme fatale needs no translation.

This cosmopolitan diversification of thought, talent, and cultures caused the destabilization of the misogynist femme fatale symbol, heralded agency, and created ambiguity around a symbol that history previously used to undermine and debase female sexual agency. The progression of the femme fatale can be traced through female depictions in *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) (1857) by Charles Baudelaire, *Il trionfo della morte* (*The Triumph of Death*) (1910) by Gabriele D'Annunzio and *NightWood* (1936) by Djuna Barnes.

Modernism and Industrialism

Marshall Berman, author of *All That's Solid Melts into Air* (1982), writes that modernity is an "experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils" (15). Special attention is given by all three authors in question to time through nostalgic contemplation while simultaneously fighting to find what is new. Modernism is a rupture, a breaking point, from what was so that writers might finally see what is new. The argument is that literature has looked back for too long and with that tie to previous works art cannot move forward. The understanding being that, classical works can inform modernism but only if that information is helping to reinvent what has already been. Modernism is reinventing myths and taking ownership of the past to birth something new. Romanticism is a love letter to the past; whereas, modernism is a challenge that the past can always be improved. The work in question is psychological and self-critical. Modernism is the fruit of an anxiety which fears that the present is on the edge of some dangerous abyss, and this fear has been present in literature and art for hundreds of years. Modern artists are trying to capture the fear and excitement of what is now

and live in the present. Berman expands on the overreaching connections made through modern advances, writing that modern environments and experiences “cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality” (15). Modernism is a unifying experience of listlessness, of feeling that what is now has never happened before and will never happen again, of potential but also a frightening unpredictability, a “maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal” (15). Berman classifies modernity into three phases; from the start of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, the 1790s heralded by the French Revolution, and the twentieth century, the third and final wave. During the twentieth century, “the process of modernization expands to take in virtually the whole world” (17).

Marshall Berman is a contemporary authority. Another famous authority on modernism is Octavio Paz. One thing that is universally agreed upon across the spectrum of modernist scholars is that literary modernism is not without its own contradictions. Octavio Paz writes *in Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde*, “Modernity is never itself; it is always the other. The modern is characterized not only by novelty but by otherness. A bizarre tradition and a tradition of the bizarre” (1). What makes modernism different from previous literary periods is criticism; furthermore, “modern art is not only the offspring of the age of criticism, it is also its own critic” (3). Literary modernism is self-conscious. Texts are always mined and created for newness in theory and ideas as a way to keep up with the fervor of a changing society, to chase the feeling of a newly developing world.

During this time of industrialization, gender roles were already shifting, and WWI changed gender roles even more drastically. An increase of women held jobs and were pushing for new sexual and financial independence as well as the right to vote. Women saw success in the U.S, Canada and most of Europe with two notable holdouts being France, in which female

voting rights were enacted in 1945 and Italy in 1948. These are notable holdouts since the predecessors to feminism addressed here will be a male writer from France and a male writer from Italy. A more thorough analysis of the cultural landscape is needed to fully communicate the changes the world was undergoing, specifically in advancing industrialism, science, and travel.

The reason that increasing feminist sentiments were met with such hostility is because the woman of the previous, dying era was one of a passive role. Bram Dijkstra, author of *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture* cites, “the economic rise to the power of the middle classes. . . [was] an integral feature of the development of the mercantile-industrial society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (5). This was the cause for new social relationships between the sexes. The industrialized man needed to be competitive and cunning to succeed in the rapidly changing economy. Dijkstra writes,

These adjustments, in turn, led to the establishment of a fundamentally new, massively institutionalized, ritual-symbolic perception of the role of woman in society which was, as we shall see, a principal source of the pervasive antifeminine mood of the late nineteenth century—and, by logical extension, the source of a number of elements of sexist mythology which still exists. (6)

During the eighteenth-century women were encouraged to possess traits of “fashionable feebleness” (8), and the new industrialized man could show his wealth by his wife leading a life of passive, consumptive helplessness in the home. As man had to compromise his morality more and more in the world of growing business, the wife maintained their combined virtue at home. This ideal of female delicacy would impede the impending push for equality and arm sexist ideology with ammunition to discredit women for the next 150 years. Western women were now

seen as ‘pale creatures with curved necks and weak knees’ and had become a “prisoner of male symbolism” (Dijkstra 9).

The Femme Fatale

George Ross Ridge writes in “The ‘Femme Fatale’ in French Decadence,” “Woman is a problem for the decadent writer. Whereas the romantic heroine is subdued, invariably passive, the decadent femme fatale is active, even violent” (353). With literary modernism, unlike in the literature of the Romantics, female characters had power, albeit not particularly positive power; however, this distinction between positive and negative power illuminates the modern reader’s tendency to hold female characters to higher moral standards than their male counterparts and is evidence of ingrained misogyny. For a female character to turn their back on domestic roles (motherhood), abandon children, or pursue sexual gratification independently of the pursuit of forming a family structure creates a female villain, but this same behavior inspires much less extreme reactions from an audience when a male character leads a frivolous “Don Juan,” “Byronic Hero” existence. Female literary characters do not need to be likeable; they need to be depicted in truthful and unflattering ways as much as flattering, maybe even more so. The progression of the femme fatale symbol is vitally important in literature because it showcases the journey of the sexually attractive female character transitioning from the cautionary tale of women who brought upon the ruin of themselves and everyone around them by walking a little too close to male protagonists in stories that were not their own, to a symbol of female agency, strength, and accountability.

The femme fatale, or the fatal woman, is seen as a threat to society and the pre-established order, but also as a threat to herself. Conforming to the pre-established order is argued by many to be in her best interest. What would happen to the modern woman without a

family structure to serve? The femme fatale rejects motherhood and highlights the distinction between love and eroticism. She embodies sexuality unfettered by nuptial bonds and loosed upon society, she pursues pleasure as opposed to reproduction through sex, and she denies men the ability “to perpetuate themselves” (Paz, 46). Octavio Paz contends in *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism* that, “All men suffer from a lack: their days are numbered, they are mortal. The aspiration to immortality is a trait that unites and defines all men” (46). Clearly, mortality is not an exclusively male experience, but Paz chooses to gender this claim, perhaps as an oversight to half the population, but more likely to argue that the depth of the insult of the femme fatale is that she does not exist to serve the societal purpose of producing children, extending the male legacy, but rather to exist independently of that role. Artists vilify female characters, characterized on a wide spectrum of subjective attractiveness, and depict only so far as instilling in these characters a desire to bring ruin to their better-defined male counterparts.

The femme fatale symbol is a scapegoat for male want and moral shortcomings. The nineteenth century produced flat and greedy two-dimensional caricatures of the female experience that exist only to reflect a larger plot point or device and to contrast with the ideals of the previous generation. Whether beautiful Death or deadly beauty, the femme fatale symbol embodies larger societal animosities and reflects shifting attitudes towards the emergence of female independence. Sometimes these depictions are obvious in showing women as supernatural creatures of destruction and sometimes the depictions are more nuanced. The recurrence of female Death lacks subtlety but is full of societal implications. Why do writers keep revisiting the image of a sexually attractive Death?

Literature loves beauty and death, but loves best a beautiful death. Edgar Allan Poe writes, “The death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world,”

(107) in *The Philosophy of Composition* (1846). Baudelaire, while working very closely with Poe's work, would surely have taken notice of this attitude and employed it in his own work. Literature until the modern era depicts in perpetuation the death of beautiful women; however, defining cultural events of the turn of the twentieth century changed literary women from the beautifully dead to the deathly beautiful. Hippolyte in *The Triumph of Death* to Robin Vote in *Nightwood* evidences this claim well. This particular shift occurs in the short time period between 1910 and 1936 with Hippolyte as a pale, sick, and passive character to Robin's character of vitality and ruin.

During this time of literary modernism in question (1850-1940) literature saw a shift from benign to malevolent female depictions of death because of the cultural push for gender equality and female sexual liberation. The femme fatale is clearly maligned when portrayed as death herself. Death personified in mythology, folklore, and literature is a lasting and powerful tradition; however, the personifications of Death have varied in depictions among different cultures. Modernism creates the new but also reclaims and repurposes the old. The echoes of mythology reach modern literature, a claim that is evidenced by an abundance of creation and resurrection of deathly beautiful women. The femme fatale archetype shows itself throughout multiple cultures: Delilah, Jezebel and Salome in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Circe, Medea, and Helen of Troy in Greek mythology, Mohini in Hindu Mythology, Daji in Chinese traditional history and literature, and Morgan Le Fay, a character rooted in Welsh mythology. The female personification of Death is multifaceted in its various contexts, whether she be a pale, thin, woman dressed in black, a beautiful angel of death, or a seductress tempting men to their death through song like the sirens in the *Odyssey* or Lorelei the German mermaid who seduces sailors

to wreck their ships on shallow waters. Through depicting female characters in a misogynistic way, Modernists tap into a great and long-established narrative with the femme fatale.

Modernists revisited mythology to contribute to the cult of the new and to take ownership of traditions through recreating them. Through the repurposing of the old, Modernists created something different, but with the same intrinsic properties coursing just underneath. The femme fatale is a refurbished idea from past civilizations. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir writes, "The cult of germination has always been associated with the cult of the dead. Mother Earth engulfs the bones of her children..." (166). In most folk representation, "Death is woman, and it is for women to bewail the dead because death is their work (166). The female imagery depicts not only the flat image of the seductress but also, she encompasses the cyclical nature of life, birth, and death. She is mother and murderess, but also, desire and revulsion. Female death representation is incomplete without considering the full spectrum of the female image to encapsulate so many constructs. Classical mythology used death to explain life, just as in modernity, the perceived decay of society needed a symbol of life to explain death.

Modernism shows the societal focus on the fragmentation and decay of the Western World, which is defined as countries that derive from European influence. By the second half of the nineteenth century, literature turned its focus from Romantic notions of nature to explore humankind's sense and understanding of consciousness and turning allegiance to industry. Oswald Spengler, author of *The Decline of the Western World* (1926) argues that the world can be divided into four main stages, or seasons. The seasons being: the Medieval times as spring, the Renaissance as summer, the eighteenth century as our autumn with the last great artists and innovators such as Mozart and Beethoven, and our winter in what is current. Modernism is "a civilization as distinct from a culture. Here its accomplishments in the arts and philosophy are

either a further exhaustion of possibilities or an inorganic repetition of what has been done. Its distinctive energies are now technological” (Northop 2). Spengler is drawing on a societal feeling of pessimism that all the best of human expression had been accomplished and that Western society was on a decline. There was a present feeling of melancholy at the advancement of industry and a removal from the natural world of old, which was exponentially multiplied by World War I. With soldiers, nurses, volunteers, and others traveling for WWI the influx of cultures in literature and everyday life was accelerated. Writers were no longer intrinsically American, or purely French. Writers developed their craft through international travel and influence like never before with the help of modern advances and technology. These among other cultural anxieties caused representations of death in direct juxtaposition to how one might mentally picture the anthropomorphism of death. The female personifications are depicted as beautiful destructions, fragile strength, giver and taker of life, or, to borrow language from Baudelaire, flowers of evil through to the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2. *THE FLOWERS OF EVIL*: CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

Marshall Berman holds Baudelaire as a largely influential figure in modernism, writing in “All that Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity” (1982) that “if we had to nominate a first modernist, Baudelaire would surely be the man” (133). Baudelaire’s poetry embodies his ideas of addressing the present and shakes loose the French tendency to harken too heavily to what has been and to overlook the complex beauty in what is now. Berman continues arguing that, Baudelaire contends that modernity is the “singular element in every beautiful thing. Thanks to modernity, beauty is not one but many. Modernity distinguishes today’s works from yesterday’s, makes them different: the beautiful is always strange” (91). Arguably, no one does strange beauty as well as Baudelaire. Beauty cannot be easily defined nor can strangeness and both can be found in truthfully capturing human experience more so than just focusing on the positive. He contributes to the movement not only through his poetry, but also through his landmark critical essay, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863). Baudelaire does not depict female characters in a necessarily charitable, or even a fair light usually, but what he does accomplish is capturing contradictions in beautiful ways. In true Baudelairean fashion, he sees “behind the make-up of fashion, [to] the grimace of the skull” (Berman 96) and sings the praises of the bizarre for its multifaceted nature.

Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil 1857) touches on the topics of sex and death, which are topics that are embodied fully through the singular image of a sexually attractive personification of death. Baudelaire himself experienced inspiration in his own life about how to convey fatal women. Rosemary Lloyd writes in *Baudelaire's World* that his longtime lover Jeanne Duval’s “often exasperating presence threads its unpredictable way through the letters right until the bitter end” (93). Baudelaire and Duval spent twenty years

spending Baudelaire's inheritance on drugs, alcohol, and frivolous luxuries beyond their means. While Baudelaire was fond of blaming Duval in his lifetime, this too shows a male lack of ownership of fault. Lloyd continues to say that although Duval's presence in his life contributed to his work greatly, no female relationship was as defining to Baudelaire as the relationship with his mother. The depiction of femininity in Baudelaire's work shows this dichotomy of domestic saint to sexual deviant.

In Baudelaire's poem "Danse Macabre" (The Dance of Death) he personifies death as a prostitute at a dance finely dressed. In lines 13-16, "Her eyes, made of the void, are deep and black; / Her skull, coiffured in flowers down her neck, / Sways slackly on the column of her back, / O Charm of nothingness so madly decked! /"(197). Death is further described as wearing a beautiful dress and handkerchiefs and ultimately being the focus of male attention. Death is not her own character assuming personality traits of her own, but instead, she evokes emotions in others. Baudelaire writes about death as a concept in a dress, but she does not exist herself as a developed character. Death is there for the benefit of the men's interpretation of her, a mirror reflection of societal pressures and anxieties.

In lines 41-44 Baudelaire raises the question, "But who has not embraced a skeleton? / Who has not fed himself on carrion meat? / What matter clothes, or how you put them on? / The priggish dandy shows his self-deceit". Baudelaire is exploring who has not lowered themselves from their lofty ideals to satisfy their base needs? Having a sexual relationship with a skeleton derived of all flesh but instead feeding on carrion creates a deliciously tense juxtaposition. A maigre prostitute that contains none of the flesh forbidden by the Roman Catholic Church for "consumption," she is almost sterile in her bareness. The death personification is a conduct for sin, but not sin without a willing partner, someone willing to "dance with death." This line right

before asking who has not sustained themselves by eating carrion seems to suggest that the sin is not in the flesh itself, but rather in the consumption or act of sexual conquest. The self-righteous and morally superior dandy is even susceptible to the debasement and seductive power of nature. Death and woman are conflated as the natural here. It is interesting that the female death anthropomorphism is a coquette, hetaera, implied mistress or prostitute. Sex is the key to creating life and purchasing it is a perversion of the sanctity of that union. There is also sanctity in death, so this peddler of death and sex, by extension life, is perverting arguably life's most sacred experiences. She's creating a mockery of the human experience.

In "Hymn to Beauty," Baudelaire exalts a beauty he is unsure of and writes, "O Beauty! do you visit from the sky / Or the abyss? Infernal and divine, / Your gaze bestows both kindness and crimes, (lines 1-2). Here is evidenced the contradictory nature, fickleness and unpredictability of beauty in Baudelaire's work. He seeks for beauty in what is real, in places that would not normally be associated with it, and asks if this beauty is for anyone's betterment. Baudelaire writes in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) that "beauty is always and inevitably of a double composition" (3). This is seen plainly throughout the collection of *The Flowers of Evil*. The two elements of beauty are "an eternal, invariable element, whose quality it is excessively difficult to determine" and "a relative, circumstantial element . . . [for example] the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions" (3).

Baudelaire's work definitely encapsulates the eternal element of beauty. He frequently evokes the mythological and archaic, for example, "Your kiss is potion from an ancient jar, / That can make heroes cold and children warm" (lines 7-8). He writes here saying that this mysterious and old beauty has robbed the powerful and given comfort to the helpless. Beauty has no master and functions independently of societal rules. Beauty is a magic or "potion" that has

steered the events of history in a seemingly impartial way. This is further evidenced by lines 11-12, “You scatter joys and sorrows at your whim / And govern all, and answer no man’s call.”

Beauty defies the expectations of man and is defiant.

In the fourth stanza, the poem gets darker. The reader sees the joining of both elements of the “beautiful” having already been introduced to the eternal and atemporal, and now the reader experiences the verisimilitude of the time. Verisimilitude defined here as the appearance of being true or real. The decaying of a decadent society informs the poetry: “Beauty, you walk on corpses, mocking them; / Horror is charming as your other gems, / And Murder is a trinket dancing there / Lovingly on your naked belly’s skin” (lines 13-16). The marriage of the beautiful and the horrific accuse the beautiful, and by extension, the female, of reveling in the destruction she leaves in her path. This beautiful destruction trivializes the pain of men. Beauty dares to exist even in the darkest moments of the depravity of man. Beauty mocks the pain of human existence. Murder is but an ornament adorning Beauty’s skin. If it is understood that beauty represents the feminine, this stanza accuses women of not understanding the suffering felt by men, not understanding harsh realities faced by men in the world of business, politics, war. Women exist in an “othered” place and through their forced ignorance mock suffering, creating a distance between beauty and reality.

Baudelaire further shows the link between beauty and death, love and violence, through the lines 17-18, “You are a candle where the mayfly dies / In flames, blessing this fire’s deadly bloom.” These lines also do an excellent job of conveying the attitude throughout the work of women being the sole perpetrator of man’s wrongdoing. The intellectual male of the nineteenth century was pulled from his lofty ideals like a moth to the femme fatale’s flame, helpless to not respond to the female animal magnetism while simultaneously being superior to his female

counterpart in every way. According to Dijkstra, “In the eyes of many fin-de-siècle males, woman had become a raving, predatory beast” (234), which is evidenced in multiple Baudelaire poems: “The Sick Muse,” “Benediction,” “The Dancing Serpent,” “The Metamorphoses of the Vampire,” and “Beside a monstrous Jewish whore” to name a few.

Baudelaire published his first version of *The Flowers of Evil* in 1857, but would revisit, finesse, and soften poems deemed too profane by publishers for the remainder of his life. His influence was undoubtedly felt by male intellectuals of the nineteenth and twentieth century who identified with his beautiful language and unrelenting misogynist sentiments, “Baudelaire’s writings . . . glorified the image of the godlike male poet as early as the 1850s. To break free and soar above a world populated with mean mothers and commanding wives was his abiding ambition” (234). Dijkstra cites Baudelaire as someone subsequent writers would channel when trying to convey their frustrations and animosities towards the female sex.

For many intellectuals and artists of the years around 1900 it was not enough to portray woman as an empty-headed—or even empty-hearted—burden whose very existence was a regressive influence on man. They wanted to emphasize that she was, in fact, far more dangerous—that in general characteristics and in the nature of her desires she was closely allied with animals. . . —and, worse a veritable connoisseur of bestiality. (Dijkstra 234)

According to Françoise Gaillard, author of “Naked, but Hairy: Women and Misogyny in Fin De Siècle Representations” never has there been such an obsession with the feminine as in the period of fin-de-siècle. Women were the subjects of “medical works, essays in scientific psychology, and treatises on moral philosophy” (168). Gaillard continues to say that this fascination with the feminine came from a “succession of devil-worshipping witches, a parade that includes Salome, Herodias, Judith, Delilah, Messalina, and Medea, without forgetting the

various Omphalos, Cleopatras, Queens of Sheba and Helens of Troy, who all used their malevolent powers to destroy men” (Gaillard 168). The mystification of what is female, even fear, comes from a long tradition of misogynistic legends, myths, and religious texts.

Attitudes towards nineteenth century women, and furthermore depictions of femme fatales, as “other” and inferior come from multiple sources, in fact, far too many sources to write off the prevailing instances attacking female intellect, strength, and morality. The nineteenth century, “although trying to revive her different legendary incarnations, speaks of the woman as if she were her own species, apart and in no way related to men, who have the luxury of being psychologically diverse and for whom one could not use a singular model” (Gaillard 169). This point of view was empowered by emerging science of the time, which argued that “behind culturally modest appearances. . . women are moved only by their reproductive instinct” (Gaillard 169). This reinforces earlier addressed sentiments from Harry Campbell’s *Differences in the Nervous Organization of Man and Woman* (1891) that women were unoriginal or of a less varied type and men much more capable of physiological complexities.

In Baudelaire’s “The Metamorphoses of the Vampire” again the woman is a prostitute, which is a very common theme in his work. The perversion of sexual unions and the ideal woman, the ruin of the household saint on a pedestal were just a few revisited themes of *The Flowers of Evil*. Sexual promiscuity is conflated with monstrosity. Line 1 sees the age-old metaphor of woman as snake, “Twisting and writhing like a snake on fiery sands”. Again, the claim that women are other, animalistic, less on an evolutionary level is evidenced in his poetry. The reader sees all of the usual suspects through Baudelaire’s imagery woman as snake/serpent, mirror, and moon, but also, we see him take the likening of images and women further. He depicts women as vampires, skeletons, vilifying sexual attraction to the point that no level of

female attractiveness is safe or benign. This is not to say that only attractive women were vilified, but rather that femininity as a whole was under attack by the sexism of this time. This sometimes manifests as a beautiful woman in poetry, but as Baudelaire proves, beauty is entirely subjective and in no way limits sexual agency to those only deemed attractive. However, in this instance, sexual attractiveness is a power to be used over men in malicious ways in *The Flowers of Evil*. This surely indicts more than just Baudelaire's sentiments, but those of the social ethos at the time in which he was writing, "—'I have the moistest lip, and well I know the skill / Within a bed's soft heart, to lose the moral will" (5-6). The seduction used here is as a willful skill. It is not the passive attraction of Victorian heroines but a violent and deliberate use of sexual attraction which leads the male of the poem astray.

Anemia and the effects of blood loss play into the larger narrative of the nineteenth century. The "fashionably feeble" (Dijkstra 8) women of the period were depicted as lacking blood through menstruation and a general lack of vitality. Newspapers and literature sensationalized the issue by depicting pale women standing in slaughterhouses waiting for blood to drink for iron that they were lacking. Dijkstra writes,

Given such horrific would-be medical solutions to the problem of anemia among women, and the period's preoccupation with the conflict between civilization and brute nature, it was all too easy to see in the actions of those who drank blood for medical reasons an indication that one could actually acquire a taste for such practices. (338)

The vampire is a powerful metaphor to embody the male subconscious concern that a woman would take from him his power, agency, dominance. In the turn of the twentieth-century the vampire was a popular symbol for the modern woman. It is an ever-present compliment of George to Hippolyte in *The Triumph of Death* (1910) that she looks pale, ill, bloodless

(D'Annunzio 9, 14, 33) and George's preoccupation with the blue veins of her wrists, the story of her "considerable blood loss" after her mother throwing a brush at her and the splinter cutting a vein in her throat (D'Annunzio 389). Blood and lack thereof is an encompassing metaphor for vigor, life, and power in all three of the works in question; from Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) to D'Annunzio's *The Triumph of Death* (in 1910) to Barnes' *Nightwood* (1936). Each fixates on agency bought by blood. From vampires to an anemic woman (Hippolyte) to a woman characterized as violent and a bringer of blood (Robin), blood is an important currency to the femme fatale.

In other novels and poems to come after Baudelaire's "The Metamorphoses of the Vampire," the "vampires" win, but this particular poem is not a victory for the maligned female, evidenced in lines 22-25, "When I reopened them into the living light / I saw I was beside no vampire mannequin / That lived by having sucked the blood out of my skin, / but bits of skeleton, some rattling remains." The female component disintegrated after having seduced the male speaker, having fulfilled her purpose of debasing the male and leading him astray of his moral ideals she served no further purpose. He triumphed through his superior life force or simply his superiority.

One last symbol that needs to be addressed in Baudelaire's collection is that of the female moon, which is heavily interconnected through the three texts in question even more than blood. Each work is dripping in metaphors for women as the pale, iridescent, moon, mirrors, reflections and eyes. In "Sorrows of the Moon" the lines 1-2 characterize the moon as the female, "The moon tonight dreams vacantly, as if / She were a beauty cushioned at her rest". The vacant and mysterious moon is likened to a woman in repose, and not just resting but "who strokes with wandering hand" (line 3). The moon is silent, reflective of the sun, i.e. a metaphor for the woman

being a reflection of her male partner, the moon appearing in darkness, mercurial and changeable through the waxing and waning, as well as the misogynistic connection to women's menstrual cycles to that of the cycles of the moon. The moon reinforces the main portrayal of the female connection to that of death, sin, darkness, beast, and simply the "other". Death personifications of women are fortified by the connection to that of the moon.

The lunar imagery is an essential piece in the progression of the femme fatale through the modernist movement because it is one, if not the only, element that remains throughout the transition to more subtle maligning of female characters. As the period progresses, readers see fewer flat caricatures of perfumed skeletons and dancing serpents, but the subtleness of conflating the feminine to moon imagery prevails even though it is apparent that it is rooted in a sexist origin.

Simone De Beauvoir writes in *The Second Sex* (1949), "In the Night are confused together the multiple aspects of the world which daylight reveals: night of spirit confined in the generality and opacity of matter, night of sleep and of nothingness" (166). Female characters are seen in Baudelaire in the moon, at night, and creatures of the night that cannot enter into society, which was viewed as a male space. In *The Triumph of Death*, Hippolyte is the embodiment of first and foremost Death but also in hues of moon-like white and night skies of violet. The violet of her veins of her iridescent skin are repeatedly cited and will be more fully analyzed in the next chapter. *Nightwood* focuses on night more directly than any of the three works addressed. Night is a center component in the depiction of the femme fatale. The femme fatale is death, darkness, and nothingness, and the lack of knowing that man fears. Beauvoir writes,

Man is frightened of this night, the reverse of fecundity, which threatens to swallow him up. He aspires to the sky, to the light, to the sunny summits, to the pure and crystalline

frigidity of the blue sky; and under his feet there is a moist, warm, and darkling gulf ready to draw him down; in many a legend do we see the hero lost forever as he falls back into the maternal shadows—cave, abyss, hell. (166)

In *The Triumph of Death*, we see George try to reach ideal heights and accuse Hippolyte of dragging him down into metaphorical darkness. This is expanded on in-depth in the next section, but the point needs to be made that the ending of the novel sees a return to the “maternal shadows” (166). The novel ends with him throwing them both off of a cliff into the abyss waiting below. The triumph is not that of George or Hippolyte, but that of the feminine force of death and in the waiting water far below them. Hippolyte is a femme fatale in that D’Annunzio depicts her as bringing death for George, but she also is a vital stop on the journey of the femme fatale to agency and strength.

CHAPTER 3. *THE TRIUMPH OF DEATH*: GABRIELE D'ANNUNZIO

Ippolyte (Hippolyte) in Gabriele D'Annunzio's *The Triumph of Death* (1910) beautifully encapsulates the tipping point where the Victorian Era sensibilities of women being fashionably feeble transmitted into this new area of female vitality. Very early on in the novel Hippolyte snaps at George's prodding that he can never really know what she is thinking by saying, "Only cadavers are dissected" (8). But she immediately regretted reproaching George in this way. She chastens herself, saying the "remark struck her as being vulgar, unfeminine, and acrimonious" (8). This is foreshadowing of willfulness to come. As Hippolyte overcomes her illness, she becomes more empowered and less "feminine" to Giorgio (George) through her gradual loss of passivity.

The Triumph of Death centers on the protagonist, George and his relationship with Hippolyte. He describes her in deathly terms, fixating on her pale complexion, weak demeanor, and general lack of vitality. Hippolyte is the embodiment of both George's sexual desire and his desire for death. George embodies Nietzsche's concept of the superman; he cannot find any way to reconcile his lofty ideals and aspirations and is continually disappointed with the vulgar reality of living. The Freudian concept of Eros (The Pleasure Principle) and Thanatos (The Death Drive) war within George. His desire to achieve his ideal, the Apollonian spirit of creation, logic, philosophy constantly causes him inner turmoil and pain.

George's desire to transcend, or reach beyond the present spirals into suicidal ideation, caused in part by the suicide of his uncle Demetrius (D'Annunzio 14) and also because of his desire to possess his lover, Hippolyte (D'Annunzio 8). Sigmund Freud's concepts of the life instinct and the death drive cause internal struggle within George. The obsession with the traumatic experience of his uncle's death, his self-destructive behaviors and fantasies, and his

desire to return to the inanimate are indicative of Freud's concept of the death drive or death instinct. Smith writes in *Death-Drive: Freudian Hauntings in Literature and Art*, "Freud notes the inanimate world preceded that of the animate . . . – that desire to return to a state of inertia, that wish on the part of the organic to become inorganic – tunes in to the evolution of that species and aspires to reverse it" (4). The death drive is the subconscious desire to find a lasting stasis, to distance oneself from the oppressive nearness that is the onslaught of humanity. Repeatedly throughout the novel George expresses a desire to distance himself from overpowering sensations, evidenced specifically after the intense church service: "The continuity and acuteness of the sensations had overcome the resistance of his organs. The spectacle had become intolerable" (278). The sensations of living were too intense, but Hippolyte had a primitive power over him through her attractiveness. He resented her for keeping him from achieving his heightened state beyond the vulgarities of everyday life. Hippolyte is characterized by D'Annunzio as being dangerous, even fatal, but she is not shown actually possessing any ill will towards George. She is fatal to him through sensuality and vitality. She has turned away from the traditional role of wife having left her husband for George. Because of those reasons, she is depicted as fatal. She is fatal to George's aspirations to ascend. The ideal could "only manifest itself on the crest of waves, in the most elevated beings" (Dijkstra 280), and that's what George is fighting towards.

George embodies the idealism based on texts of science relevant to the time period, predominately Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), concepts that, "join[ed] a virulent hostility for the petty bourgeoisie with an intense fascination with power—a dream of the Nietzschean superman forging ahead ever more securely toward a new state of being in which the mind of man might transcend its physical prison" (Dijkstra 201), thus explaining the

fascination with death as a form of transcendence. Evolution was the scientific fuel white, male intellectuals needed to argue physical and mental superiority. Intellectuals of the nineteenth century saw the ideal that they were looking for in the “supremely powerful musculature of the triumphantly predatory male god of imperialist achievement” (Dijkstra 201). Everything that George is working towards is to achieve a higher state of being.

Nietzsche outlines the dichotomy between the Apollonian and Dionysian spirit as Apollo being the Greek god of rational thinking, logic, order, and prudence and Dionysus being the Greek god of wine and dance, emotions, irrationality; thus, the implication was clear in such a sexist context. The feminine was aligned with the Dionysian in this Nietzschean principle, with chaos and unsettled nature. Everything female is maligned to chaos, nature, and the primitive. George is male and therefore, George is superior to Hippolyte on the basis of sex. He is the embodiment of Apollonian ideals and she is the barely contained Dionysian chaos, moody, distraction, night, the unknown. According to Dijkstra, “The war between the sexes, the war between male and female, between Apollo and Dionysus, was a war between the godly future and the earthly past, between science and sorcery” (332).

George’s desire for life, sex, creation, and collaboration is indicative of his pursuit of the ideal, the Nietzschean Superman, the Apollonian Spirit of higher thinking, and the pursuit of Freud’s Pleasure Principle, but he also reflects the intellectual pursuits that writers were valuing during this time. Both characters are mirroring larger societal expectations. George is the intended focal point of this novel, but not the most compelling. Hippolyte is the intended mirror image in the novel. Through her actions she illustrates George’s flaws and, in a more profound way, the glided and hollow decadence of the late nineteenth into the twentieth century. However, she also steals autonomy from her D’Annunzio and her lover, George. Surely, both would be

disappointed to know that sentiments have changed so radically from the historical context of the novel until now that Hippolyte is the obvious redeeming character of the novel. The novel is not a triumph for George for the twenty first century reader in that contemporary sensibilities cannot, as a general rule, advocate the advancement of a domestic abuser and murderer.

The novel begins with Hippolyte recounting her meeting with George a year previously. George, thinking himself romantic, describes in reverent tones how sick and unwell she appeared. She was so pale from sickness she looked to have a “supernatural pallor, which . . . gave you the appearance of a creature without a body” (33). Repeatedly in the first half of the book, George describes Hippolyte’s beauty through the lens of sickness. As she gets well, he deteriorates rapidly. He develops new stresses and shakes and resents Hippolyte’s sexual appeal calling it evil, “Hippolyte’s beauty is full of seductive power, the kind of beauty which torments men and arouses in them the passion of desire” (11). Even more accusing, D’Annunzio writes,

She bore in the depths of her being a secret malady that seemed at times to mysteriously illumine her sensibility; she had, by turns, the languors of the malady and the vehemence of health; and finally, she was barren. United in her, then were the sovereign virtues that destine a woman to dominate the world by the scourge of her impure beauty. Passion had refined and complicated these virtues. She was now at the zenith of her power” (396).

Hippolyte threatens George because she is no longer the seductive Death of earlier depictions, no longer the anemic and swooning woman of Victorian sensibilities, but vehemently pursuing life to the point that her beauty was perceived as a threat to him. She was dying and he, through suicidal ideation, wanted someone to die with him. The problem was when she seduces him to live in a fashion that makes him feel out of control, he feels the death of his mental capacities. His mental superiority is what he feels separates him from all the other characters, i.e. his

morning visitor hoping to borrow money, Alphonso Exili (17), his mother (131) and his lover throughout. He is mentally superior to the point of being perpetually disappointed with the people around him. Reality cannot support the ideal. Hippolyte is the tipping point from women being depicted as beautiful deaths to possessing deadly beauty. One can also not overlook George's crass way of saying that Hippolyte cannot engage in a family structure, that she is "barren" and that any sexual encounters that they have are not more than the gratification of the moment. George further describes Hippolyte as reverting to an animalistic state later in their relationship saying, "she seemed as if she were evaporating like a vial of perfumes, were losing the ideal life accumulated in her by the power of Music, were gradually emptying herself of importunate dreams, were returning to primitive animalism" (382). The struggle boils down to Hippolyte holding him back from the "ideal" and the ever-present belief that women were of a lesser biological quality.

Hippolyte is an incredibly important character in that she bridges the progression from Baudelaire's caricatures in *The Flowers of Evil* to the female characters written in Barnes' *Nightwood* and even further looking into the twenty-first century, but in truth it is easy to see that it was D'Annunzio's vision that the reader would identify with George and see Hippolyte as support for his journey. Through George's quest for idealization, he proves himself an unbearable character of violent selfishness and arrogance. Hippolyte is a character of far superior moral merit; however, through examining George the reader can better characterize her even in her place as a supporting character. The belief that women were mirror images of their male counterparts was a product of sexism parading as science.

The study of Physiology was perverted during the nineteenth century to assert a sexist agenda, suggesting that men, specifically white men due to the teachings being racist as well as

sexist, were distinctly superior to their female counterparts. A popular text cited by male intellectuals of the time, Harry Campbell's *Differences in the Nervous Organizations of Man and Woman* (1891), states that "in imitateness and lack of originality [woman] stands conspicuously first; indeed, it is essentially in this particular that the masculine intellect shows its superiority over the feminine" (Dijkstra 232). Campbell was not alone in advocating these differences in gender composition. Again, we see the influences of Nietzsche and Darwin on the period. According to Dijkstra,

The popularization of the theory of evolution, and the premium it placed on individuality as a sign of a person's "election" to the most advanced echelons of the intellectual community, to the legions of supermen, had a tremendous impact of the evaluation of artistic achievement during the last decades of the nineteenth century. It is by no means accidental that numerous fundamental innovations in style and means of representation in painting developed during this period. As conservative critics of the time never tired of emphasizing, many artists were beginning to pursue what was new virtually for its own sake, to prove that they were original and not imitative. (207)

This harkens back to the ideas of women as imitators and not original. Any work by female artists of the time was written off for being too similar to the male masters of the period, but anything too new or breaking from tradition and the female artist was accused of not being learned enough in the area. Modernism systematic put women at a disadvantage. The femme fatale is a symbol of a much larger societal problem. Through these sexist depictions of women as death, vampires, sirens, the night and moon, the modern woman is denied her identity simply as a person. Because of this reason, the symbols that women are conflated with need to be

explored. All of the symbols are just different masks placed upon the femme fatale. Each symbol is an insult that falls short of humanity.

The moon is present in *The Triumph of Death* in a few different ways. The moon, which reflects the male Apollonian sun, is depicted in gendered scenarios where Hippolyte quickly yields to George's viewpoints and values. The pale reflection of male vigor and intellect, the moon is circular, cyclical, and connected to mercurial behavior through its waxing and waning. It is poetic yet insulting, perfect for conveying sentiments for the feminine. George and Hippolyte meet at the fall of twilight. She is repeatedly described as pale and bloodless, and by the end of the novel, when George feels his most threatened by Hippolyte's hold over him, it is twilight. The end of day and the triumph of night. Hippolyte talks excitedly while George is taken again by "vague physical suffering, of heavy and wandering pains, of painful twitches and tinglings" (384) that he seems prone to as the book comes to its own natural night or ending. Hippolyte starts pale and silent, but as she becomes more vital and outspoken, George resents her and views her as less feminine.

Hippolyte tries to engage George physically, but he resists by pushing her away. It is this inversion of power that convinces him to kill himself and furthermore, to kill Hippolyte with him. It is important that this struggle of wills happens at twilight. Hippolyte is characterized as the night with moon and violet imagery, such as when George noticed, ". . . the skin at her wrists was extremely transparent and of a strange pallor. . . And on that fine skin, through that pallor, the veins shone through, subtle, and yet very visible, of an intense azure slightly approaching a violet" (397) Hippolyte's skin is always coupled with the blue of her veins, the night shades against the pale moon of her skin.

George is the high ideal warring against what he perceives as the earthly obstacle of Hippolyte's shadowy grasp. He describes his pain by saying, "Every fibre of his being trembled, like a few moments before when she had clasped him ardently in the room filled with the last shadows of twilight" (399). He lures Hippolyte out to a cliff and throws them both to their deaths under a full moon. The "maternal shadows," to borrow language from Beauvoir, act as a witness to his "triumph" over the feminine person, but the feminine earth triumphs over him through death.

CHAPTER 4. *NIGHTWOOD*: DJUNA BARNES

Djuna Barnes' novel *Nightwood* defies clear classification, but it undoubtedly personifies modernist sensibilities and traits through its ever-changing settings and loose devotion to any linear progression of time. The eight sections, that cannot truly be called chapters, happen in relation to each other and inform each other. However, as each section progresses the reader gets less plot and more atemporal musings about night, displacement, and the pain of human existence. The fifth section of the novel, "Watchman, What of the Night?" happens as a conversation between Nora Flood and Matthew O'Conner all in a night that stands still. Nora laments the destruction that Robin has brought into her life.

Robin Vote is a primal force that leaves ruin and suffering behind her on her fruitless quest for companionship and autonomy. She is bourgeois culture and beast warring inside one skin. She is the protagonist of the novel in that the novel centers on her effect on the other characters. Even if she is not present, she dominates the conversation and, through a primal force of influence, drives the novel forward. She has four notable relationships with four people: (Baron) Felix Volkbein, Nora Flood, Jenny Petherbridge, and (Dr.) Matthew O' Conner. The titles that Felix and Matthew give themselves are completely spurious as neither is a Baron or a doctor. While her relationship with O'Conner is platonic, it is vital to her progression through the novel due to his role as witness and, in parts, narrator. All three romantic relationships fall apart because of Vote's unwillingness to give her partners what they expect from her. She cannot fit neatly into the domestic roles that she attempts for long, she rejects the roles of wife and mother, and even later in the novel, when it is clear that her affection for Nora is genuine, she still cannot reconcile her two halves. Her amphibious nature—somehow between civilized and wild—is a metaphor for the novel itself, which moves from poetic prose to prosaic poetry. *Nightwood*

operates outside the parameters of novels just as Robin operates outside the parameters of high society and general expectations of politeness.

Modern Femme Fatale: Rejection of Motherhood

Volkbein and Vote get married early in the novel and Vote gives birth to a son, Guido. She is unsatisfied with her life and takes to walking the streets at night searching. It is an important element of the novel that all of the five characters are displaced from their countries of origin. Jeanette Winterson writes in the preface of *Nightwood* that “All the characters are exiles of one kind or another—American, Irish, Austrian, Jewish. This is the beginning of the modern diaspora—all peoples, all places, all change” (xi). Barnes captures the essence of modern cosmopolitan worldviews and the interchange of cultures and experiences through her wide range of characters and settings and their individual varying degrees of restlessness and struggles with identity. Volkbein, for instance, longs for a world that has ended. He is fixated on history, lineage, and continuing himself through a son. Barnes writes that he bows down to anyone with a title or sense of nobility. The name of the first section about his upbringing is named “Bow Down,” reinforcing his preoccupation with the old-world order. Petherbridge is also a very complicated character; she lives in a house of antiques, wears someone else’s wedding ring, and speaks in clichés or words she has stolen from others. All five characters have an immense amount of personality to unpack, which is largely a testament to Robin’s power to affect them so strongly.

Vote bounces from Vienna to Paris to New York City in nightly excursions before abandoning her role as mother and wife completely, telling Felix that she never wanted a child. Before leaving she strikes Felix across the face, and “he stepped away; he dropped his monocle and caught at it swinging; he took his breath backward. He waited a whole second, trying to

appear casual” (53). It is important that even after being hit, he does not take this opportunity to reciprocate the violence; furthermore, he does not take the opportunity to blame his reaction on Robin’s actions. This is a very different man than D’Annunzio’s George who refuses to accept blame for his violence because to him any amount of wrongdoing is justified by citing the faults of others. Essentially, George exhibits a “they made me do it” philosophy whereas Felix is not using Robin as a scapegoat to excuse poor behavior. Robin, as a femme fatale is undoubtedly challenging for the other characters to manage, but the characters that surround her possess enough autonomy to be responsible for their own unhappiness and their reactions as much as actions. Robin is a catalyst, but not the sole culprit, of chaos in the novel. Another important distinction from the femme fatales of earlier in the period, while Robin is obvious available for the other characters to cast blame on, they do not. She is not sully ideal intellectuals of the nineteenth century, but instead she is challenging complicated and flawed characters that engage with her in varying degrees of personal accountability. She goes further than just challenging the characters. She leaves destruction and ruin behind her and the other characters have to find ways to find purpose and redefine identities that they built around her presence in their lives.

Robin’s relationship with Felix seems inconsequential to the caliber and depth of her relationship with Nora Flood. Their relationship is the heart of *Nightwood*. She meets Flood in America at a New York City Circus. Both women are seated next to each other when the lioness sees in Robin something kindred and swats her paws at her through the bars of the cage with “her eyes flowed in tears that never reached the surface” (60). Here again, the connection between Robin and beast, nature, the primal is seen. Robin is Nietzsche’s Dionysian Spirit. She is chaos barely contained and the lioness sees something unsettled in Robin. Is the lioness filled with sadness for herself or Robin? Both in that they are both fighting from inside their own cages.

Nora follows a distressed Robin out of the circus to start a tangled love affair that lasts four years.

The characterization of Nora Flood is also compelling evidence to show the overwhelming way Djuna Barnes depicted female characters in comparison to her predecessors. Nora is not described as soft and silent, but rather complicated and searching. She is introduced to the reader promptly after Robin abandons her role as wife and mother in the chapter aptly named “Night Watch,” “The strangest “salon” in America was Nora’s. Her house was couched in the centre of a mass of tangled grass and weeds” (Barnes 55). Barnes describes Nora and Robin’s home in a very positive and warm way, writing, “In the passage of their lives together every object in the garden, every item in the house, every word they spoke, attested to their mutual love, the combining of their humors” (61). Robin “stayed with Nora until mid-winter. Two spirits were working in her, love and anonymity. Yet they were so ‘haunted’ of each other that separation was impossible” (60). It is important to remember that Robin’s relationship with Felix is never characterized in this way. There is no mention of Robin having genuine emotion for him but simply her settling into a relationship that presents itself. There is no mention of motivation through financial need, loneliness, or affection. Even Felix admits that he was surprised to have his offer of marriage accepted (46).

With Nora, Robin is different. She wants to make their union work but cannot quite give up her self-destructive ways. The femme fatale is defined by how men react to her, not necessarily a power unto herself. The modern femme fatale expands in scope to not only affect men, but partners inside and outside of the gender binary, but also to negatively affect themselves. The femme fatale is fatal to others, but also herself in a way that turns the focus away from the common sole male protagonist from literature of the time and shows us different

perspectives and narratives. Robin sabotages her own happiness more than anyone else, and she is the only character in *Nightwood* who is held truly accountable for her happiness or lack thereof.

Robin takes a mistress in Petherbridge. Again, the novel's strength is not in its plot progression, but rather in its reflective soliloquies. The character of the "doctor" Matthew O'Conner facilitates a lot of these conversations, acting as a sounding board for Nora on several occasions. *Nightwood* is a celebration of how prose can be written in opposition to just what is written, it is poetic and thoughtful in every description. Vote is clearly not a character built for the easy approval of readers, but no good character is ever easy, and her character's complexity is proof of the progress femme fatales have made in literature. No one would describe Baudelaire's female symbols or D'Annunzio's Hippolyte as complex. They react, they mirror their male counterparts, but those female characters do not tell genuine female experiences. Positive advancement is not always reached through positive behavior. It is of little consequence that Robin is not overly likeable.

Robin is difficult and restless, but unapologetic in her pursuit of her sense of self. The characters repeatedly describe Vote as something just beyond explanation. Upon the reader's and Felix's introduction to Robin, O'Conner is called to investigate a woman who has seemingly fainted. They find, "On a bed, surrounded by a confusion of potted plants, exotic palms and cut flowers, faintly over-sung by the notes of unseen birds. . ." (37). Robin is repeatedly characterized as "other." Here she is in the middle of the city of Paris, but in a manmade wilderness, in a "jungle trapped in a drawing room" (38) in the palms and flowers in her hotel room. She's described not in terms of having fainted, but of a state of "threatening consciousness" (37-38). She is more in a state of a trance, a sleepwalker's repose. The section in

which she is introduced in is titled “La Somnambule,” French for “the sleepwalker,” which is vitally important to understanding her relationship with the night, a force that reclaims her from every attempt at domesticity. She is wearing trousers and high heels in this first moment, an androgynous mix of feminine and masculine representations, but more than that, she is a mix of human and beast. Robin is a femme fatale susceptible to the same character flaws of her predecessors, but much better defined. The femme fatale is not redeemed through a lack of fatalness, but rather through representation and development. Woman as beast harkens back to themes of Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1871), Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), and Harry Campbell’s *The Differences of Nervous Organizations of Man and Woman: A Physiological and Pathological* (1891).

The Animalistic Woman

Bram Dijkstra writes in *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin de Siècle Culture*, “In the nineteenth century, the ‘century of progress,’ one of the favorite dualistic ploys to inhibit real change was to trample on the rights of woman and to make her out to be the beast of the Apocalypse” (210). By mid-century, politicians were already advocating the dualistic nature of women. French politician and philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon saw woman as ‘courtesan or as housewife; . . . [with] no inbetween” (210). He publicly advocated that ‘the road to progress was masculine aggression, the road to destruction sappy effeminacy” (211). These attitudes are submitted as evidence to support the argument that sexism was a cultural phenomenon that could be felt on a global scale and has had lasting effects on gender relations in the Western World.

Proudhon and others of the first half of the nineteenth century were added to by Charles Darwin’s work with evolution, which armed prejudices of multiple fashions. In particular,

Darwin “unhesitatingly accepted the notion of the natural inferiority of woman, and also began to stress the dangers of ‘reversion’ in the development of the species” (211) in *The Descent of Man* (1871). The fear was that there needed to be clear distinction between the sexes, and the blurring of the two would cease civilization as the western world knew it. Women functioning in the same capacities threatened the natural order, and science of the time gave legitimacy to this unfounded and sexist fear. Darwin cites the fall of the Greek empire saying that they might have “retrograded” in part “from extreme sensuality” (212) blaming the feminine component of society of using their sexuality to overstep their boundaries and enter sectors of society where they were not welcomed; furthermore, he characterized that sensual power as a regenerative one that caused a collapse of ancient Greek ideals.

Dijkstra describes this anti-feminine rhetoric as culminating in most evolutionists deciding that feminism “was the clearest example of this form of masculinizing degeneracy” (212). Feminism of the late nineteenth century was perceived as an attempt to become masculine by those that opposed the movement, because masculinity was associated with higher thinking, business acumen, strength in character and body, and independence of domestic labors.

The beginnings of the feminist movement in the Brontëan prison of the mid-century’s idealized mother-woman had a formidable impact on the thinking of the late nineteenth-century male. In the dreams of the evolutionist idealists he found the perfect counterargument to the intellectual aspirations of women. Starting in the late 1860s, a crescendo of chants, which by 1900 had become a thundering Wagnerian chorus of experts, pointed to the degenerative impulse behind feminism. (Dijkstra 213)

The ideas of female independence and degenerative sub-human creatures intertwined as an attack and caution to feminism. More than the femme fatale being a dangerous force tempting

the nineteenth century intellectual male from reaching his Nietzschean ideal, feminism was characterized as a pursuit that would unravel the very fabric of society by dragging women back into the regenerative recesses of far-gone evolutionary origins. Dijkstra expands upon this saying that “the artists of the turn of the century were fascinated by the notion of the masculinized woman as savage” (213).

If the only possibilities afforded to the modern woman were either courtesan or housewife, Robin Vote would have struggled within the narrative of *Nightwood* (1936). She is not comfortable with either, so she must find some area of gray that is considered uncharted territory in the recent past. She is, however, consistently described as overly connected to nature, and in animalistic terms. One cannot ignore the complicated ending of the novel when Nora witnesses Robin in the chapel on all fours barking back at a dog in a fit of hysterical crying and laughing before she and the dog settle on the floor. Has Robin succumbed to the regenerative power of her own ambition, or has she gone mad? Has Nora interrupted a dark ritual, or does the novel strive to express a feeling more than an outright cathartic end? *Nightwood* does not want the reader to know, but it is safe to say that the end does express the feeling of Robin’s struggle with her identity, with her amphibious nature, with being human and at the same time beast. Robin is confused, conflicted, and unsettled, and so is the reader, which is the beauty of such an emotionally driven narrative. Robin is desperate for autonomy but simultaneously terrified of being alone. The novel can be conveyed through a quote from Doctor Matthew O’Conner when he tells Nora, “I have a narrative, but you will be put to it to find it” (Barnes 104). The reader is hard pressed to follow the narrative.

The evidence of Robin’s animalistic qualities is again demonstrated through other descriptions of her. When Felix encounters her sleeping he describes her as having an

“effulgence as of phosphorus glowing about the circumference of a body of water” (38) and describes her eyes as having “the long unqualified range in the iris of wild beasts who have not tamed the focus down to meet the human eye” (41). Robin is best described in her most primal and animalistic terms by Felix when he describes,

Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human. Such a person’s every movement will reduce to an image of a forgotten experience; a mirage of an eternal wedding cast on the racial memory; as insupportable a joy as would be the vision of an eland coming down an aisle of trees, chapleted with orange blossoms and bridal veil, a hoof raised in the economy of fear, stepping in the trepidation of flesh that will become myth . . . (Barnes 41)

Conveyed here are the concepts of woman as that of the earth, the old, and the myth. Felix cites the racial memory, drawing of the generational memory of past humanity, causally flexing newfound psychology, and communicating how Robin’s otherness does not fit with his mental idea of what a bride should be. He nonetheless pursues that very outcome.

Once Felix and Robin are married, he describes her as being other or having a supernatural power over him, "Her hand lay still, and she would turn away. At such moments Felix experienced an unaccountable apprehension. The sensuality in her hands frightened him" (46). Felix also describes how her clothes othered her, "Her skirts were moulded to her hips and fell downward and out, wider and longer than those of other women, heavy skirts that made her seem newly ancient" (46). Here the woman is written by a female writer but being described by a man. There is still that presence of the undefinable, a mystic power that is just out of reach by the male understanding. Vote turns her back on domesticity and pursues personal and sexual fulfillment while seducing and wreaking havoc for the people in her life. She is unabashedly the

femme fatale but filled out in character development where she is not just the scapegoat for male depravity.

Night Walks and Moon Imagery

Robin Vote is described as having a primitive power, being othered, untamable. She has an affinity with the moon and nighttime. She is described as recalling myth, like modernist scholars are quick to point out is a characteristic of modernity. Octavio Paz argues that we can speak of “a modern tradition without contradicting ourselves because the modern era has eroded, almost to the point of disappearance, the antagonism between the old and the actual, the new and the traditional” (*Children of the Mire* 5). Because time is of little importance or relevance to literary modernism, the argument can be made that myths of ancient times are suitable inspiration to recreate the old as new. Ginette Paris writes in *Pagan Meditations* that “for a long time, we have had no representation of absolute femininity, that is, one defined neither by relationship to a lover (Aphrodite), nor to a child (Demeter or Mary, Mother of Jesus), nor with a father (Athena), nor with a husband (Hera)” (109). Robin Vote represents a femininity who refuses to be defined by her relationships to others. Robin is an Artemis-like force in this novel. Both push against the stereotype that says when a woman withdraws from society she is perceived as “a pariah, a sorceress, or a crazy woman” whereas men doing the same thing may be viewed as “sages . . . or simply solitary men” (110). Again, we see female representation through creatures, monsters, and other unflattering anthropomorphisms.

The moon is a central symbol in *Nightwood*. Robin is introduced in the “La Somnambule” (The Sleepwalker) section. She cannot rest at night and must take to the night to walk under the moon. According to Dijkstra, author of *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, “it was no wonder that the moon had come to stand for

the essence of everything that was truly feminine in the world. The moon, too, after all, existed only as a “reflected entity.” It had no light of its own, just as woman, in her proper function, had existence only as the passive reflection of male creativity” (122). The moon was just one more symbol in the never-ending arsenal of symbols that accuse women of the period of being unoriginal and somehow less civilized. The moon was Artemis to the male Apollo sun. Dijkstra elaborates writing, “As usual, the late nineteenth century adapted elements of classical mythology in a manner which, while shaky in the realm of historical scholarship, perfectly suited the symbolic relationships expressive of its contemporary cultural ideology” (122). Classical mythology informed art and literature of modernism to satisfy the insatiable need to recreate the old, to prove their intellectual superiority through a large scope of scholarship, and to feed the “ideal” that modernists held classical works to be.

According to Paris, “Artemis. . . thus comes to sanctify solitude, natural and primitive living to which we may all return whenever we find it necessary to belong only to ourselves. An Amazon and infallible archer, Artemis guarantees our resistance to a domestication that would be too complete” (110). When examining Robin Vote as a modern Artemis addressing the difference of chastity is warranted. Robin embodies the same need to belong to herself, to not be defined by her relationships to others, to turn to the primitive, to exist under the presence of the moon and wander over the modern forest, a landscape of industry. An ecological fall from the purity of drinkable water sources, the trees cut down to feed the insatiable need for commerce and dominance as the world became more industrialized. Women were, and still are, compared and conflated with nature. Mother nature, virginal forest, and raping of the land are all phrases of the modern coupling of nature with women’s sexuality or lack thereof. The modern woman is a fall from the “chastity” of the Virgin Goddess just as people of modern times lamenting the fall

of nature. Artemis is “protectress of flora and fauna, she is the figure most directly concerned with the contemporary ecological debate and its related social choices” (Paris 110). Couple this with one of the chief stresses of moving from the romantic period to the modernist period being the result of industrialism on the land, and one sees an undeniable relationship between anxieties of feminism promoting promiscuous behavior and the land losing its “pure” status.

It is unequivocally sexist, but the connection between the feminine and nature cannot be denied and is evidenced from the literature and art of the nineteenth century. Robin is a modern Artemis haunting a forest that has been stripped of its resources. The symmetry of purity has been broken, leaving Robin free to pursue sexual relationships with whomever she chooses. Modern society has released the fatal woman through moral depravity. Robin is a modern-day Artemis without a purpose or permanent setting.

Female representation is an epic and expansive endeavor to try to unravel, but one truth is evident. Female representations through literary movements tells us a great deal about the attitudes of the societies that inspired them, and modernism is no exception. Robin is not perfect, but she is a long way from the two-dimensional characters that haunt Baudelaire’s poetry. Where Hippolyte immediately apologized for reproaching George, Robin struck Felix across his face. She lives without fear of repercussions and challenges authority. Robin Vote complicates a very simple narrative. No longer is the femme fatale a clean-cut figure of female depravity. She has texture and proper motivations of her own. Djuna Barnes created a character that takes in stride the accusations against the feminine of the period and owns them. Robin Vote is wild, promiscuous, and unapologetic but also scared, lonely, and unhappy. Through her humanity the symbol becomes a woman.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

The femme fatale is a symbol that has a complicated past but shows potential for a better future. Karl S. Guthke writes in *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature*, female harbingers of death are in Aztec mythology, Tlaltechtlī and Coatlicue both represent “maternal fertility and death” (17). In Slavic culture Death is primarily a woman. In Russian folklore and fairy tales “Death is the witch-like Baba Yaga . . . in Czech folksong she is Smrt; in the popular superstition of other Slavic countries she may be a white woman with green eyes known in mythology as Giltine, goddess of death” (17). As well as in Indian, Spanish, and Germanic mythology there is a prevalence of female death figures and goddesses. Moreover, Persephone in Greek mythology stands for death and renewed life. Kali in Indian myth symbolizes fertility and death; the Great Mother of several mythologies is also the goddess of death. So, it is evidenced that there is a clear correlation between female representation as not only the giver of life but also the taker of life. The way women are characterized throughout history holds a mirror to the society responsible for the depiction. In folktales and myths, female death personifications are terrifying but nurturing, both the beginning and the end in a cyclical presence, and are both deadly beauties and beautiful deaths.

Death and, by extension, fatalness have been a “woman’s work” for at least a few thousand years. From Circe to Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene’s* Acrasia to Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and Zola’s *Nana*, fatal women find their ways into narratives of all different respects. Fatal to others and herself, whether she is seen as Death incarnated, some other creature, or as a modern woman, the femme fatale is a catalyst for societal accountability. Instead of blaming the feminine allures of seductive female characters, characters are now acknowledging their own roles in pursuing dangerous beauties. Nora in *Nightwood* is a solid

example of just that growth. In her nocturnal discourse with Matthew she asks, “what will become of her? That’s what I want to know” (109). She still shows how much she cares even through the betrayal of Robin’s affair, even through her own pain she does not hold Robin responsible for her feelings. She sits and laments and thinks about what she could have done differently, and Matthew has an answer for her question, he says, “To our friends,’ he answered, ‘we die every day, but to ourselves we die only at the end. We do not know death, or how often it has essayed our most vital spirit. While we are in the parlour it is visiting in the pantry” (103). In the doctor’s true fashion his answer does not in fact answer the question even indirectly. He contemplates death quite naturally when the subject of conversation for everyone else is Robin. Death, like Robin is just outside of everyone’s understanding. While Nora waits in the parlour, Robin visits elsewhere. Our spirits are incommunicable; thus, trying to foresee what will become of Robin is useless.

Literary modernism is an ever-shifting collection of movements, but for what it lacks in easily tamed plot it more than makes up for in scope and intensity. The period of approximately 1850-1940 saw an innumerable amount of societal changes in attitude, agency, industry, travel, linguistics, science, politics, and psychology. From Freud to Nietzsche to Campbell to Darwin, men produced some very isolating and derogatory texts against the plight of every sex, gender, and race that was not their own. Such texts gave rise to ideas of eugenics, race supremacy, and sexism. Again, while the forerunners of science and psychology are remembered as male, that does not mean that this was a strictly male issue or an all of mankind issue. Sometimes women were advocates of their own oppression and adhered to the status quo that was afforded to them. Mrs. E. Lynn Linton published a 3-part essay denouncing “wild women” in 1891 quoting Vogt and Darwin among other female writers that fought against feminist rhetoric (Dijkstra 213).

The battle of the sexes during the second half of the nineteenth century was not evenly divided, just as it is not today. Some women encouraged the narrative that society depended on the moral preservation of women in the home and away from the modern world. Surely, male animosity for female advancement would be instigated by the thought of competing against women for jobs and income, but female defectors had the added resentment of wanting to separate themselves from the “wrong kind” of woman, i.e. those viewed as promiscuous, vulgar, indelicate. Women are no longer encouraged to be feeble for the fashion of it and it is a lot harder to publish manifestos calling women unoriginal and inferior.

Female representation continues to be a fascinating topic of discussion, from female Death in mythology to the deadly feminine of modernity, the femme fatale preserves a march toward agency and unapologetic ownership of sexuality. Tracing the journey of the femme fatale through *Les Fleurs du mal (The Flowers of Evil)* (1857), to *Il trionfo della morte (The Triumph of Death)* (1910) through *NightWood* (1936) shows flesh being added to Baudelaire’s skeleton, blood given to D’Annunzio’s Hippolyte, and wild spirit embraced through Barnes’s Robin Vote.

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