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The Inner Witch: Channeling and Containing Femininity

A Dissertation Presented

by

Marta Kondratyuk

to

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Abstract of the Dissertation

The Inner Witch: Channeling and Containing Femininity

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This dissertation addresses the literary witches in American and Russian twentieth century literatures. It investigates why and to what effect images of witches and witchcraft are appropriated by individual authors in different historical situations. My study focuses on literary witches as personification of conspiratorial female power. Witches come in different forms, shapes, ages and colors. They possess contradictory powers. They can be evil or benevolent, old or young, mythological or historical, powerful or vulnerable, repellent or attractive but one constant remains: they are feared. I closely read the authors' selected texts to argue that literary witches are representations of a desiring, and thus deviant and dangerous part of femininity that is channeled, policed and contained in many psychological, socioeconomic and cultural ways, including storytelling.

Overall, my project on literary witches reveals three trends. First, the witch is a powerful double strategy of containment that attempts to keep repressed material in check but ultimately fails. Second, the authors of the literary works under investigation override the traditional physical and moral monstrosity of the witch and present a nuanced modern version of the witch emphasizing her ambiguity and capacity for good and evil. Third, in their literary works Bulgakov, Updike, Tsvetaeva, and Sexton participate in a reevaluation of the witch as a problematic/positive symbol of femininity and thus anticipate the contemporary proliferation of witches in American and Russian literary and cinematic productions. My prognosis is that the literary witches will morph into a variety of new forms and acquire new meanings as they continue to be symptomatic and symbolic of cultural attitudes toward femininity.

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I am grateful to my committee members and an outside reader: Dr. Donald (Sandy) Petrey, Dr. Krin Gabbard, Dr. Izabela Kalinowska-Blackwood, Dr. Nicholas Rzhevsky, Dr. Gary Marker.

I am grateful to my parents and my daughter for their support and encouragement. Being a graduate student took me away emotionally and geographically from being a daughter and a mother and I hope that I was able to make up for it in many different ways.

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Introduction

A witch is always a woman.
Roald Dahl

In my childhood I wanted to be a pretty princess rescued by a prince on a white horse but now as a mature woman I think I'd rather be a witch. Raised on Russian and Grimms' fairy tales, I used to be scared of witches. They were evil and repellent, frightening and powerful, hungry and envious. When Baba Yaga, an archetypal Russian witch, was outsmarted, or the nameless Grimm's witches got killed, burnt and destroyed, I rejoiced. As years passed, my feelings changed.

Speaking of fairy tales in general and referring to the Grimms' tales in particular, Sheldon Cashdan writes in his book on the hidden meaning of fairytales: "The witch must die for the moral lessons of the fairytale to be learnt."[1] Perhaps, it is also that the witch must die not only in the fairy tale but also in every woman for the restrictive lessons of patriarchy to be learned. But what if the witch doesn't die? What if she survives by turning into "an inner witch", and preserves – what from the point of view of the established social order may appear to be – a desiring, and thus deviant and dangerous part of femininity that is channeled, policed and contained in many psychological, socioeconomic and cultural ways, including storytelling.

As a personification of conspiratorial female power, the witch often claims agency that is antagonistic to patriarchy. She prefers solitude or aligns herself with the existing order's enemies. Her magical agency is antithetical to the glorified image of a knight on a horse. She does not fight her enemies with a sword, but relies on the

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[1] Sheldon Cashdan, *The Witch Must Die. How Fairytale Shape Our Lives* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 45.

performative power of speech, enacting her will with spells and potions, rituals and incantations. Her agency is invisible, subtle, hidden, and manipulative. She stays in the shadow where she recites spells and incantations. She concocts potions that work from inside out or outside in, confusing the body's borders.

The literary transmogrifications of the witch are intriguing and puzzling. Her representations shift and float through ancient Homeric, Euripidean and Biblical narratives, medieval church treatises and Romantic poetry all the way to modern Hollywood productions. In all of these cultural texts, the witch plays out fears and desires, taboos and wishes that apply mostly to women. Writing about the social construction of witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England in the context of gender relations, Carol Karlsen sums up these perceptions in *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (1987), noting that witches are "almost always described as deviants – disorderly women who failed to, or refused to, abide by the behavioral norms of their society."[2] One paradox that emerges from this observation is that casting women as witches simultaneously erases and re-inscribes them. Being called a witch undermines and erases the status of a person as a woman and, at the same time, she is re-inscribed as the witch, an example of abnormal femininity that has to be contained and channeled, destroyed or controlled.

In Western culture the witch, an embodiment of non-reason and anti-rationality, is a mutable sign. Witches come in different forms, shapes, ages and colors. They possess contradictory powers. They can be evil or benevolent, old or young, mythological or historical, powerful or vulnerable, repellent or attractive but one constant remains: they

[2] Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (New York: Norton, 1987), 118.

are feared. Even in modern times the idea of a witch as a transgressive figure persists, despite the fact that most readers have discarded any belief in witches *per se* and literary witches are relegated to fairy tales and popular fiction.

It is tempting to define the witch exclusively as a product of patriarchal misogyny. However, such an approach deflects attention from the fact that she also functions as a controversial figure that empowers and victimizes, glorifies and denigrates women at the same time. On the one hand, the witch is a figure of resistance, one of the "few means for realizing and expressing their residual anger"[3] and resentment at patriarchal oppression or limitation. On the other hand, the witches' condemnation ensures women's loyalty to a patriarchy that restricts their participation in the distribution of resources mainly through men. The patriarchy is built upon a social contact, which Simone de Beauvoir described in the following terms:

> Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance.[4]

[3] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women" *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 50.
[4] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 16.

Following the logic of the quote, it's possible to suggest that the witch pursues "the metaphysical risk of a liberty"[5] and, if for de Beauvoir Woman is the Other of Man, then the witch could be understood as the Other of Woman. It's only fitting that in her quote, de Beauvoir refers to femininity as "a mysterious and threatened reality"[6], a description that also could be applied to the witch.

A denigrating and negative term "witch" retains some appeal for women who, as Diane Purkiss argues in *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (1996), also invest in "… a fantasy which allowed them to express and manage otherwise unspeakable fears and desires." [7] In a similar manner, in *A Skin for Dancing in: Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film* (2000), Tania Krzywinska suggests that the witch allows women to fantasize about being "mad, bad and dangerous to know."[8] Exploring and analyzing witches in history and witches in films, both Purkiss and Krzywinska arrive at a similar proposition, suggesting that by fastening on fears and desires the witch provides a symbolic language for articulating hidden and unspoken, contradictory and dangerous desires.

As the repressed material embodied in the witch can derive from different source, her appearance and functions change. She stands for different things for different people at different times: heresy, fear of parental abandonment, an external threat, fear of sexuality, altered states, madness and hysteria, the disruption of language, maternal

[5] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 16.
[6] Ibid., 11.
[7] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2.
[8] Tania Krzywinska, *A Skin for Dancing in: Witchcraft and Voodoo in Film* (New York: Flicks Books, 2000), 212.

hostility, forbidden words and knowledge. This ambiguity and duality makes a literary witch a sign of repression and expression at the same time.

My project involves prose, films and poetry: *The Master and Margarita* (written in 1940, published in 1968) by Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) and *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008) by John Updike (1932-2009); film adaptations of *The Master and Margarita* (Andrzej Wajda, 1972; Aleksandr Petrovic, 1972; Maciej Wojtyszko, 1989; Yuri Kara, 1994, and Vladimir Bortko, 2005), one film adaptation of *The Witches of Eastwick* (Miller, 1986)*;* and also some selected poems by Anne Sexton (1928-1978) and Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) that employ witchcraft imagery and patterns as literary means. The literary texts are read and examined in their original language: two novels by John Updike and the poetry of Anne Sexton – in English, the poems, prose and diaries of Marina Tsvetaeva and the novel, letters and diaries by Mikhail Bulgakov – in Russian. Studying these authors' literary witches in a comparative fashion and exploring them as the products of individual and collective repression and wish fulfillment offers new insights into the literary works of all four authors and their representation of femininity, as well as insights into trends in twentieth century Russian and American literatures and cultures.

By comparing and contrasting the witchcraft imagery in these works, I identify specific fears and desires projected onto the witches to further define and interpret the strategies of channeling and containment that each author applies to the femininity. If Jacques Lacan defined a woman as a symptom of a man, then I seek answers to a number of related questions. Whose symptom is the witch? What urged these four authors to turn to the image of a witch? What is the latent meaning of their witches? What fears and

desires do they represent? To explore those questions, I employ psychoanalysis and feminism as methodological tools to interpret the repressed material (collective and individual) that shapes the literary witches in the novels of Bulgakov and Updike and the poetry of Tsvetaeva and Sexton.

In addition to the methodological tools of feminism and psychoanalysis, I use Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious in general and his concept of "the strategy of containment," in particular, to read the roles assigned to witches in the texts discussed in the following chapters. In *The Political Unconscious* (1982), Fredric Jameson defines "the strategy of containment" as a narrative frame that "allows what can be thought to seem internally coherent in its own terms, while repressing the unthinkable which lies beyond its boundaries."[9] In my view, the literary witch meets the criteria for the strategy of containment on two levels – as a character and as a narrative frame. As a figure of repression and expression, the witch represents that part of femininity that has to be ideologically contained and narratively channeled.

Focusing as it does on the witches in the literary works of the above-mentioned authors, my project does not claim to be an exhaustive study of literary witches. Rather, its more modest goal is to explore and define the psychoanalytical and feminist implications of the witches in the prose of Mikhail Bulgakov and John Updike and in the poetry of Anne Sexton and Marina Tsvetaeva. Aside from simply loving their works, I've chosen these four authors because all four are recognized as canonical in modern national literatures of the United States and Russia. Secondly, the juxtaposition of the four authors offers a perspective into the literary appropriation of the witches at the intersection of genre and gender. Thirdly, for each of these authors the witch is an

[9] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell UP, 1981), 124.

instrumental and paradigmatic image representative of cultural attitudes towards femininity. In their works the witch figure creates a space where repression melts into wish fulfillment, fear translates into desire, and projection merges with introjection.

Modern explanations of witchcraft are various: the sociological (antagonistic neighbors settling scores with each other), the psychological (repressed material), the political (the consolidation of power by the Church), the anthropological (scapegoating), and even the pharmacological (eating bread contaminated with ergot). Most scholars agree that it is a complex phenomenon. As Mircea Eliade writes in *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashion* (1976): "Witchcraft cannot be satisfactorily understood without the help of other disciplines, such as folklore, ethnology, sociology, psychology, and history of religion."[10] The list of disciplines can be expanded indefinitely and, at certain point, I have to make a choice.

Among many overarching theories about witchcraft in my dissertation, I've relied principally on psychoanalytical claims that the concept of witches derives from repression. In his essay "A Seventeenth Century Demonological Neurosis" (1923), Sigmund Freud[11] suggests that hysteria is analogous to demonic possession and implies that witches were in fact hysterics. In "The Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937), using a line from Goethe's *Faust*, Freud writes:

> We can only say: "*So muss den doch die Hexe dran*! (We must call the witch to our help after all! – the Witch Metapsychology. Without metapsychological speculation and theorizing – I had almost said

[10] Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft and Cultural Fashion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 71.
[11] See Peter Swales (1982, 1983) on the witches in Freud's writings.

> "phantasizing " – we shall not get any step forward. Unfortunately, here as elsewhere, what our Witch reveals is neither very clear nor very detailed.[12]

It's interesting that Freud resorts to the image of the witch to characterize the psychoanalytical method. Aside from using the witch as a conceptual metaphor, Freud was interested in the phenomenon of witches and suggested that the social disease which creates witches is analogous to hysteria: both are related to the human failure to take responsibility for threatening or frightening feelings and desires.

Since Freud, psychoanalysis and witchcraft have become strange bedfellows: many scholars investigate, explore and revisit the connections between them. An exemplary works in this respect are *Witchcraft and Psychoanalysis* (1993) by Mel Faber and *Witches: The Psychoanalytical Exploration of Killing of Women* (2000) by Evelyn Heinemann, both offering a comprehensive psychoanalytic exploration of witchcraft. Many scholars including Melanie Klein, Julia Kristeva, Lyndal Roper, Tracy Willard, Elspeth Whitney and Naomi Weisstein have also contributed to the psychoanalytic exploration of the witchcraft phenomenon, bringing attention to the themes of female sexuality, motherhood and abjection – issues that lie at the heart of modern day feminism.

The concept of witch has been pregnant with meaning throughout the history of women's and feminist studies, and undergone many stages of development. As Diane Purkiss writes, the myth of the "burning times" became "a key part of many feminist's identities,"[13] to the extent that the witch as a symbol became an adopted daughter of

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[12] Sigmund Freud, "The Analysis Terminable and Interminable" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Starchey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961), XXIII, 225.
[13] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 26.

feminism, one with a problematic past and complicated "baggage".

In *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (1921), Margaret Murray presented her theory about an alleged pre-Christian fertility cult that had once been the ancient religion of Western Europe and, she explored the Christian repression, which resulted in the infamous witch-hunts of 16th and 17th century Britain. Murray's emphasis on eternal femininity, spirituality, a matriarchal "paradise lost," and the deification of the female body and sexual practices reflect the first wave of the modern feminist agenda. She wrote also about fertility and its control, themes that became important later in the radical feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

It's no coincidence that in the attempt to kill the "angel in the house," second wave feminists revived interest in the historical witch craze and drew a parallel with contemporary domestic violence against women. The witch craze is framed as a crime of patriarchal society against women, a gender specific Holocaust – Gynocide by Mary Daly's definition in *Gyn/Ecology* (1978) and Andrea Dworkin's *Women Hating* (1974). In those works, a tortured and burnt witch's body is presented as a universal suffering female body, as a literal and figurative "body of evidence". In *Women Hating*, Dworkin compares the treatment of historical and literary witches to the sadistic and denigrating scenarios imposed on women in pornography and rape.

Barbara Ehrenreich's and Deirdre English' pamphlet *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* (1978) explain the origin of witch-hunts as an attack of male doctors on female healers and midwives. The authors write that those occupations were "associated with the witch, and an aura of contamination has remained."[14] Ehrenreich and English connect the witch

[14] Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses. A History of Women Healers* (CUNY: The Feminist Press, 2010), 34.

to female sexuality and female bodies, an emphasis similar to that found in recent feminist studies - Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994) and Elizabeth Wilson's *Psychosomatic* (2004), both of which drew attention to the body and its reproductive function as an integral part of gender construction. As Elizabeth Wilson wrote: "biology […] needs to become a more significant contributor to feminist theories of the body."[15]

For feminist activists, the witch came to represent both a radical feminist identity and a call for rebellion against patriarchy. In 1968, a newly formed group of New York feminists took the name WITCH, an acronym for Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell. In their manifesto, they wrote: "Witch lives and laughs in every woman. She is the free part of each of us. You are a WITCH by being female, untamed, angry, joyous and immortal."[16] The collective declared a hex on "whatever is repressive, solely male-oriented, greedy, puritanical, authoritarian."[17] The rhetoric and entourage of witchcraft became a psychological weapon, a performative tool of feminist resistance and struggle.

Many academic historians disclaim or dispute 1970s feminist views about witches, finding their research flawed with an exaggerated number of alleged victims. They point also to historical records that show that there were male witches and that women often acted as accusers of other women. This criticism prompted a subsequent move to treat witch trial documents not as hard statistical data but rather as texts that related the construction of women's roles and identities. These studies focused on the different experiences, concerns and options of different women: what they thought, felt

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[15] Elizabeth Wilson, *Psychosomatic: Feminism and the Neurological Body* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 8.

[16] Robin Morgan, "WITCH: Spooking the Patriarchy during the Late Sixties," *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Charlene Spretnak (Garden City: Anchor, 1982), 428.

[17] Ibid., 428.

and did. For example, Lyndal Roper's study *The Witch Craze* (2004) is representative of this turn and is filled with anecdotes: squabbles among neighbors, resentments within families, disagreeable local characters, the machinations of small-time politicians and the perverse psychosexual fixations of magistrates and clerics. The last are best captured in the infamous treatise *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) that describes how and why women became witches and how to identify and prosecute the witch.

Focusing on the negative aspects of the Devil's pact, Roper does not consider the possibility that such a deal might represent an appealing fantasy for women as a promise of love, power, pleasure and riches. At least, within such arrangement a woman is recognized as a partner in a complicated business transaction and is assumed to have something of value to trade – a soul. Still, even in this seemingly liberating fantasy the source of the witch's power remains a man in disguise as the Devil.

As feminist studies took a linguistic turn in the 1970s, the witch became a symbol for *écriture féminine*. In *Le Rire de la Méduse* (*The Laugh of the Medusa,* 1975), Hélène Cixous defines *écriture féminine* as a mode of writing that allows the expression of feminine desire and incorporates the body's language. Writing about *écriture féminine* in a literary review, Xavière Gauthier explains the parallel between the witches and female creativity and then she asks rhetorically "Why witches?" and answers: "Because witches sing [...], they croon lullabies, they howl, they gasp, they babble, they shout, they sigh. They are silent and even their silence can be heard."[18]

In *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), Cixous and Clement examine the mythic female figures of the sorceress and the hysteric and associate these figures with a range of

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[18] Xavière Gauthier, "Why Witches?" *New French Feminism: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtiveron (New York: Schoken Books, 1981), 201-02.

transcendent and subversive beliefs about the evil eye, menstrual pollution, and the castrating mother. They write that "…either woman is passive or she does not exist."[19] Since Cixous approaches writing as a way to deal with the Other, she comes to the conclusion that for *écriture masculine* such non-exclusion is an intolerable threat while for *écriture féminine* it is an opportunity for expansion and exploration.

Unlike the theorists of *écriture féminine*, Silvia Federici is more interested in material reality of witchcraft within the context of emerging capitalism. She sees the witch craze as capitalism's working to restrain, silence, and demonize female sexual power. Her study positions the witch as a key figure to understanding the early modern strategy of capitalism: while women were faced with the threat of torture and death, men were in effect bribed with the promise of obedient wives and greater access to women's bodies. The result of witch craze was that women became what Federici calls "servants of the male work force."[20] In her work, Federici takes Michel Foucault to task for turning a blind eye to the witch-craze as a formative element in the development of what Foucault defines as the techniques of biopower.

In her study *Fearless Wives and Frightened Shrews* (2001), Sigrid Baurer blames the demonization of witches on medieval theological treatises in general and on *Malleus Maleficarum* in particular. Medieval and early modern demonology treatises typically sexualized witchcraft as an occupation of women, and then demonized and criminalized it. The inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, authors of the tract, made female sexuality synonymous with witchcraft and used it to explain, "why it is that

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[19] Hélén Cixous and Catherine Clement, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1975), 349.
[20] Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 115.

women are chiefly addicted to Evil Superstitions."[21] This and other medieval treatises amplified the trend already present in ancient epics, biblical texts and folk stories that identified women as the producers of offensive and harmful magic while male magic was more frequently presented as defensive, benevolent and honorable.

My brief survey of late twentieth-century works on witchcraft demonstrates a continued feminist investment in the witch figure. As Purkiss writes: " [T]he figure of the witch mirrors – albeit sometimes in distorted form – the many images and self-images of feminism itself."[22] After being vilified for centuries, the literary witch undergoes rehabilitation in twentieth-century American and Russian literature as the selected literary works analyzed in this dissertation abundantly demonstrate.

My dissertation "The Inner Witch: Channeling and Containing Femininity" consists of an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. The main body explores the figures of the witch and witchcraft imagery in the selected literary works of Mikhail Bulgakov, John Updike, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Anne Sexton. Each chapter describes and interprets both manifest and latent layers of the witch figures in order to arrive at psychoanalytical and feminist interpretations. Thus, the chapters are arranged according to genre and gender factors rather than to chronology.

Chapter One is titled "The Witch as Impossible Resistance in *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov." This novel has a cult status in Russian literature and its conflation of mysticism and historical reality is definitely responsible for that. By bringing the figures of Devil and God into the novel, Bulgakov creates a metaphysical

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[21] Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum* (New York: Dover, 1971), 41.
[22] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 10.

perspective that brings the value system of human life to the level of eternity. Despite being pronounced unfilmable, the novel has been adapted to films: by Andrzej Waida (1971), Aleksandar Petrović (1972), Maciej Wojtyszko (1989), Yuri Kara (1994), and Vladimir Bortko (2005). Each director altered Bulgakov's witch Margarita and devised and employed new strategies of containment to make her "fit" the screen and audience expectations. Using Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, I discuss how Margarita's nudity, a significant attribute of the witch in the novel, is rendered in these films.

Chapter Two "Better a Witch than a Feminist: Witchcraft in *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Widows of Eastwick* by John Updike" analyzes the witches who are not interested in liberation or resistance, but want to fit in their community, which apparently means that they need a man. For Updike, witchcraft becomes a way to discuss and opine about feminism and femininity. This chapter also includes an analysis of the witches in the film *The Witches of Eastwick* (1993) by George Miller, who significantly changes the plot and shifts attention to Daryl van Horn, the Devil figure.

Chapter Three "Searching for the Voice: the Witch in the Poetry of Anne Sexton" is devoted to those of Sexton's poems that feature witches. In her poetic oeuvre, witch figures change over time. Initially personifications of mental illness, her witches eventually adapt into a rebellious lyrical persona and a performative identity. Sexton's multifaceted witch can be a demanding mother, a representation of guilt, a poetic creatrix, and an alter ego. In one of Sexton's early poems "Her Kind," the witch enjoys a brief moment of freedom before being caught and burnt at the stake. In one of her late poems - "The Witch's Life," an embittered witch retreats and hides inside her house, withdrawing inside her body and her psyche.

Chapter Four "The Witch as a Desiring Subject in the Poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva" investigates poetic representations of witchcraft. A Symbolist poet Tsvetaeva believed in mystic links between words and objects and approached poetry as a magical gift, both a blessing and a curse. Even in the absence of direct references to witchcraft, most of Tsvetaeva's poems stylistically evoke spells, incantations and charms. Her witches stand for poetic creativity and female sexuality that together disable the lyrical persona from having a "normal" life.

The dissertation follows the work of four canonical authors and facilitates a comparative discussion of their individual usage and treatment of the witch figure to arrive at cautious speculations about the cultural trends in the representation of the witch in the twentieth century American and Russian literatures.

Chapter One

The Witch as Impossible Resistance in *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov

PREAMBLE

In this chapter, prior a detailed psychoanalytical and feminist analysis of Bulgakov's literary witch Margarita, I ponder how the novel reflects the author's struggle to survive and to write in the repressive socio-political circumstances of Stalinist Purges. His personal predicaments are determining factors shaping the style of *The Master and Margarita* that melts together Magic and Romance, History and Realism. I also provide a critical overview of the novel in general and a summary of the critical reflections on Margarita in particular to zoom in on the complexity of her character, which, in my opinion, is best approached from psychoanalytical and feminist perspectives. A separate section is devoted to the cinematic adaptations of the novel with emphasis on the ways a textual nakedness of Margarita is translated into a visual one. At the end, I arrive at the conclusion that Margarita represents a dream of impossible resistance and escape from totalitarian system. However, despite the seemingly liberating status of a witch, Bulgakov keeps Margarita within the traditional Russian trope of a sacrificial woman.

Я ведьма, и очень этим довольна.
(I am a witch, and I am very happy about it.)
The Master and Margarita, Mikhail Bulgakov

Bulgakov and His "Sunset" Novel

Bulgakov's Margarita is by far the most famous among the witches in Russian folklore and literature despite the fact that she does not fit the archetype. Traditionally, in Russian fairy tales the witch is an ancient hug living in the depth of the forest in a hut on a chicken leg. Despite her scary appearance and hostility, she is also often a helper, an agent of justice and an advisor. In her studies, Natalia Malakhovskaya hypothesizes that the Russian quintessential witch, Baba Yaga, is a remnant of a Great Goddess, a Sacred Mother-Earth of pre-Slavic matriarchal societies. She argues that Russian folklore preserves the sacred status of the witch while Russian writers such as Pushkin, Zhukovsky, Gogol, Dostoyevsky and Chekov desacralize the image by applying it to menacing and hostile women. The witch as a literary figure regained some of the mystique in the poetry of Silver Age but it did not last long. After 1917 Soviet literature had no place for the supernatural in general and for witches in particular. Witches were relegated to children's genres, for example to Sovietized fairy tales that either satirized or trivialized them as a remnant of archaic times. A typical plot of such a fairytale featured a young pioneer outsmarting the old crone and facilitating a revolution in the fairy tale kingdom. Supernatural in any form was kept in check by dialectic materialism of Marxist ideology.

A rebound of the supernatural became a characteristic of post-Soviet Russian culture. One of the best examples in this respect is the popularity of the *Dozori* novels by

Sergey Lukyanenko featuring vampires, witches and werewolves living among average human population of contemporary Moscow. For his style Lukyanenko is often hailed as a follower of the tradition established by Mikhail Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita.*

The Master and Margarita is a novel that can be read and reread without ever getting bored. Soon after its incomplete publication in 1968, the novel achieved cult status among the Russian intelligentsia and became one of the most beloved and mysterious literary works. Quotes from the novel entered the popular vernacular and even acquired a life of their own: e.g. "Рукописи не горят" (Manuscripts do not burn)[23], "Вторая свежесть – вот что за вздор!" (Second hand freshness – what a nonsense!)[24], and "Нет документа, нет и человека" (No ID, no person).[25] *The Master and Margarita* is considered Bulgakov's masterpiece, generating a huge readerly and scholarly interest. As a result, there are museums and monuments dedicated to Bulgakov and his literary characters in Russia and abroad, as well as world-wide theatre productions, art shows, film adaptations, and operas.

Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940) worked on his "sunset" novel *The Master and Margarita* during the last decades of his life when he fell out of favor with Soviet authorities because of his reluctance to comply with the strict literary and ideological prescriptions imposed by Communist Party on artistic production. Even though he wasn't

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[23] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*. (Moskva: Astrel, 2010), 320. Here and further I quote from this Russian edition. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. There are at least six English translations: by Michael Glenny (1967), Mirra Ginsberg (1967), Diana Burgin and Katherine O'Connor (1995), Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (2001), Hugh Alpin (2007), Michael Karpelson (2011). All of them have their advantages and shortcomings. For example, Glenny and Ginsberg translate a censored 1967 Russian version, while the others use later more complete versions. Glenny's translation is rough and uneven. Ginsberg takes some liberties to preserve tone and feel at the expense of literal accuracy. Pevear's translation is the most technically accurate but it misses some of its humor.

[24] Ibid., 240.

[25] Ibid., 323.

arrested, for the rest of his life he had no opportunity to publish his further works. Bulgakov started *The Master and Margarita* in 1928, burnt it in 1934 and later restored the manuscript by memory and kept writing and revising the novel until his death in 1940.

During his last years Bulgakov was suffering from a terminal sickness and used morphine[26] to alleviate his pain. It was not the first time that he used drugs: in his early thirties he used morphine but was able to overcome his addiction. Some literary critics suggest that Bulgakov's phantasmagorical imagery in *The Master and Margarita* derives from his drug-induced experiences. Hallucinatory events and bizarre characters seemed to be products of an afflicted mind, estranging and transforming an unbearably reality of his physical and political situation. As Bulgakov's health deteriorated so did his professional standing with Soviet authorities that accused Bulgakov's stories, plays and novels of lacking Bolshevik role models and who banned them on ideological grounds. Bulgakov died without seeing his last novel published.

The existence of that manuscript was unknown to the public until its bowdlerized version appeared during the time of Khrushchev's Thaw in 1966 and 1967. Bulgakov's widow Elena Sergeevna Shilovskaya preserved his archive in hope that it would eventually be published. She took upon herself the role of a literary executor, and later the several versions of the novel were produced. Today Bulgakov's scholars continue to debate over which version of the novel is the final version of the text because Bulgakov never finalized his novel; it was completed after his death.

[26] Bulgakov describes his experience in "Morphine" (1927), a fictional diary of a doctor documenting his roller-coaster experience of addiction. Unlike Bulgakov, the hero of the story, doctor Poliakov, is unable to overcome his addiction and commits suicide. At the end, he suffers from hallucinations, paranoia and severe mood swings.

Taking into account that the choice of themes for *The Master and Margarita* was extremely risky during the time of Stalinist terror in the USSR, Ellendea Proffer describes Bulgakov's courage in the following terms:

> In the politically polarized Soviet society of the 1920s choosing the wrong theme could be dangerous for your career; in the 1930s, it was dangerous to your life. The very nature of the concept of *The Master and Margarita* marks Bulgakov as a risk-taker of the first order.[27]

Writing about religion and love instead of communist values and industrial productivity, exposing the Soviet system as a caricature instead of presenting it as a romantic ideal, introducing the characters of the Devil and Jesus instead of promoting atheism was suicidal, and Bulgakov knew it. In the protagonists of Master and Margarita, the novel spells out the inevitable consequences for subjects who do not participate in the collective project of the Soviet State. They remain relatively safe and invisible in a basement apartment – a metaphor for a private space. However, when the Master enters a public space, he immediately becomes a subject of corrective training that originates from the mechanisms of a technology of power akin to those analyzed by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975).

According to Foucault, the goal of discipline is to produce obedience by hierarchical observation, examination, judgment and documentation: "power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and

[27] Ellendea Proffer, "Bulgakov the Magician" Afterword in Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*. Trans. Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor (New York: Vintage International, 1995), 368.

attitudes; their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives."[28] In many respects, Bulgakov's exploration of ideology and discourse bears affinity to the ideas of Foucault: both show particular interest in the repressive power inherent in ideological structures and the discourses through which they are expressed, exploring the ways in which "networks of power [...] pass [...] through the body"[29] and in which this power connects to ideological structures and their language.

In a similar manner, *The Master and Margarita* describes the process of turning a gifted aspiring writer into a psychiatric patient by destroying his novel and breaking his will and dignity, and finally installing fear and passivity in him. On the verge of a mental breakdown, the Master hallucinates about being pursued and embraced by "спрут с очень холодными щупальцами" (an octopus with very cold tentacles). The image of an octopus brilliantly captures the pervasive nature of Stalinism also expressed in the metonymical symbolism of "сильная рука" (strong hand). Master's deterioration under the prosecution reflects the pervasive affect of totalitarian state on a population creating a mood of passivity, depression and resignation.

The Master and Margarita grows out of Bulgakov's resistance to creative and intellectual stagnation through coding, fantasy, intellectualization, and magical thinking. His novel is a product of both political and psychological repression, the writer's attempt to sublimate his frustration and anger. It is his coping mechanism, his dream of revenge. Written in secret during a grim period of Stalinism, the novel constitutes a crack in the

[28] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 39.
[29] Michel Foucault, "Confinement, Psychiatry, Prison: A dialogue with David Cooper, Jean-Pierre Faye, Marie-Odile Faye and Marine Zecca" (1977), in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Routledge, 1988), 196.

socialist Realist facade of Stalinist cultural production through which we can view the consequences of individual, historical and political trauma.

The novel is replete with supernatural characters that seem to be born out of the nightmares of history. Bulgakov introduces Woland, the devil figure, and his servants – demons of different ranks and talents – sexy and scary vampires, a talking vodka-drinking black cat, not to mention flying witches and demons. As opposed to the human characters in the novel, the Devil and his minions are not portrayed negatively. Rather, they are made a gang of tricksters who expose and punish human vices: atheism, adultery, greed, envy, arrogance, gluttony, vanity, and dishonesty. They are grand provocateurs: whimsical, eloquent, and more likable than many of the human victims of their pranks.

The Master and Margarita is particularly significant in Soviet literature because of its conflation of mysticism and historical reality. Margarita, the witch, becomes a symbol of impossible revenge and escape from the oppressive Stalinist regime. In the same way the style of the novel – best defined as magical realism[30] – runs against the dogmas of socialist realism that were privileged and promoted by the regime.

Surprisingly, there is a little scholarly work on Margarita even though she is acknowledged as a driving force of the novel. But, as the title of the novel suggests, Margarita always holds a secondary place remaining in the shadow of the Master.

In Margarita's character Bulgakov paradoxically blends a witch and a sacrificial lover. Her infernal energy is channeled into rescuing her lover from a mental institution – a traditional Russian metaphor for a rigid and regulated society. She pawns her soul to

[30] Initially, magic realism was defined as a literary genre or style associated especially with Gabriel García Márquez and Latin American literature. I use the term in a broader sense as a style incorporating fantastic or mythical elements into otherwise realistic fiction.

the Devil in hopes of reuniting with her missing beloved. At the end, she does not regret her bargain: "Я ведьма и очень этим довольна" (I am a witch and I am very happy about it).[31] Her transformation into the witch marks her transgression of social limitations and gender inhibitions that leads eventually to her happiness.

The Master and Margarita is composed of two parallel, yet intertwined narratives. Twenty-five chapters tell the story of the arrival of the devil and his retinue to Moscow at the height of Stalinism and the effects that their actions exert on the lives of some Muscovites. Among others, the Devil punishes two literati, Mikhail Berlioz and Ivan Bezdomnii, producers of atheistic propaganda and devoted Communists. The first is beheaded while the latter is driven mad. The Devil takes interest in the fate of the lovers Margarita and the Master, who is a writer persecuted for a novel about the trial and crucifixion of Christ. The Master's novel on the Biblical theme is included as a metanarrative: the four hagiographic Jerusalem chapters are interspersed among twentieth century Moscow chapters.

At the end of the novel the separate plots intertwine when the devil-figure, Woland, reunites the Master with Margarita and grants them peaceful existence in a limbo between light and darkness.

Negotiating History, Romance, Magic and Realism

The Master and Margarita is suffused with mysticism, supernatural beings and events, religious themes, and the mockery of Soviet life. Romantic fantasy merges with historic reality, theatrical buffoonery with philosophical seriousness, social satire with religious contemplations: as Muscovites of the 1930s coexist with witches and devils,

[31] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 410.

Soviet bureaucrats with Jesus of Nazareth, Mephistopheles with Pontius Pilate. The novel was heterodox by the standards of socialist realism, inextricably linked to ideological considerations of Communist party that dictated specific pro-Soviet themes, content and styles of writing based on four official principles of *партийность* (party-mindedness), *идейность* (idea-mindedness), *классовость* (class-mindedness), and *народность* (people/folk-mindedness).

Bulgakov employs elements of magic realism to undermine the materialist Marxist framework with its insistence on economical determination of both the human psyche and social organization, its attempts at pervasive rationalization and its blind eye to the supernatural or spiritual causes of History. At times of extreme censorship, it would seem that only metaphorical language could save the artist from persecution; hence the magic realism turns out to be a tool to describe and attack the politics of totalitarian regimes.

The prescriptions of Soviet literature did not approve of magic, the occult and the supernatural. At the First Soviet Writers' Conference in 1934, the state-sponsored Union of Soviet Writers adopted Socialist Realism as the official policy of the Soviet Union. A statement decreed Socialist Realism to be "the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism" and defined it as "a truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development," which "must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism."[32]

Denouncing artistic alternatives, the prominent Soviet official Nikolai Bukharin added a rejection of irrational superstition and mysticism: "Realism generally and

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[32] See Socialist Realism. *Dictionary on Labor Law Talk*. http://encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com/Socialist_realism. Accessed 12 May, 2013.

socialist realism in particular, as a method, is the enemy of everything supernatural, mystic, all other-worldly idealism. This is the principal and definite attribute."[33] The genres that utilize the supernatural almost disappeared from the Soviet literature of the time because witches, vampires and werewolves and the genres to which they belong contradict almost every major tenet of Marxist historical materialism, Soviet doctrine and Socialist Realist dogma.

In *The Master and Margarita,* the blend of stark reality and surreal fantasy is unconventional. Bulgakov leaves the realities of Russian culture and society almost intact, which makes his work particularly fertile for socio-psychoanalysis. Supernatural characters are charismatic while human characters are helpless, weak and pathetic. Bulgakov makes most of his human characters into caricatures devoid of psychological depth. The Master and Margarita are the only likeable characters but even they lose love and hope and are driven into despair. By creating such juxtaposition, Bulgakov assigns the ability to undermine successfully the power of the Soviet State to supernatural characters who disrupt the order and then run away after setting several of Moscow's official buildings on fire. They burn the writers' apartment building, the currency shop and the Griboedov restaurant that represent the material privilege of the Soviet elite.

Ascribing agency to the realm of the supernatural, Bulgakov suggests that it is beyond the reach of individuals to confront the Stalinist regime. By making fun of characters of Soviet officials and average citizens, Bulgakov undermines the Soviet project of molding a new Soviet man liberated from the corrupt influence of religion and private property.

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[33] Nicholai Bukharin, "Poetry, Poetics and the Problems of Poetry in the USSR," *Problems of Soviet Literature*, ed. H.G. Scott (New York: International, 1980).

Bukgakov's supernatural characters expose the superficiality and hypocrisy of the Soviet project and punish those who are invested in it. On the one hand, a Devil-figure Woland is amused by the pervasive atheism of Soviet citizens. On the other, he is relieved to find out that people mostly remain the same: materialistic, greedy, dishonest and stupid. His minions play cruel pranks on the Moscovites by showering them with money that later turns into paper, bribing officials with foreign currency just to report them later to the authorities, making office workers sing a patriotic song endlessly, exposing unfaithful husbands to their wives, driving people mad or transporting them outside Moscow. The Devil's servants even make fun of the secret police who try to arrest the culprits. A mischievous gang easily fools the investigators and turns the chase into a circus.

Bulgakov uses the disruptive actions of Woland's retinue to expose the absurdities of state socialism and the base motives of individuals who are not interested in "the bright future of Communism" but use the system to gain material privileges for themselves at the expense of others. As Riitta Pittman observes: "… it has been the devil's task to act as an agent for the unveiling of everyday Soviet reality."[34] The Devil and his tricksters wreak havoc on Stalinist Moscow, drawing it into an insane carnival, a primary source of Bulgakov's satire. The resulting extravaganzas are masterfully "carnivalesque." According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the main purpose of carnival is to:

> permit the combination of a variety of different elements and
> their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view

[34] Riitta Pittman, *The Writer's Divided Self in Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 65.

> of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers a chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists and to enter a completely new order of things.[35]

While Bakhtin theorizes the medieval carnival in terms of overindulgence of flesh embodied in Rabelais' Gargantua, Bulgakov makes his carnival political to mock and undermine the state order, to expose human imperfections, to establish Woland as an agent of justice and a collaborator of God. Bulgakov's Devil is not only entertaining, but necessary: "что бы делало твоё добро, если бы не существовало зла, и как бы выглядела земля, если бы с нее исчезли тени?" (What would your good be doing if there were no evil, and what would the earth look like if shadows disappeared from it?)[36] – a rhetorical question Woland asks the Apostle Mathew. Problematizing a clear-cut opposition of good and evil, Bulgakov treats them as the two sides of the same coin. The function of the Devil is to punish while the function of God is to redeem and forgive. They are not shown as antagonistic but rather complimentary, like shadow and light.

There is a long philosophical tradition of interpreting the Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent historical changes in terms of the Devil's acts. By employing the sympathetic, almost parental, devil figure of Woland, Bulgakov implies that, compared to the Devil, Stalinism is a bigger evil. Unable to write about Stalinism openly, Bulgakov

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[35] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984), 34.

[36] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 404.

hints at it in a diabolical denounce-and-punish campaign that replicates the Stalinist methods of ideological debate, arrest, torture, psychiatric hospitalization, and physical and mental repression. The novel reads like a record of an epidemic of 1930s-style arrests, provoked and aggravated by Woland and his team.

In *The Master and Margarita* the ideological confrontations are many, and all of them result in the punishment of those who do not comply with the dominant discourse, be it Soviet or diabolical. The novel opens with a debate about the existence of Christ between Woland and two writers, Berlioz and Bezdomnyi. The conversation is highly reflective of the Soviet anti-religious campaign that banned the celebration of religious holidays, destroyed churches[37], led to the persecutions and arrests of clergy and believers. It's enough to mention that one of the criteria for joining the ruling Communist Party was to be an atheist and subscribe to Marxist statement: "Религия есть опиум народа" (Religion is the opium of the people).

During the debate the two litterateurs grow suspicious and hostile towards the stranger who insists that "Христос существовал" (Christ existed).[38] At first they think he is a mad foreigner, later that he is a spy. While Bezdomnii threatens to deport Immanuel Kant to the Gulag for his proof of God's existence, Berlioz runs to report the dissemination of religious ideas. In a freak accident the editor falls under a tram that cuts off his head. A few moments earlier, Woland predicted Berlioz' death by decapitation to undermine his belief that everything can be planned and foreseen. After the incident

[37] In 1931 the Church of Christ the Savior was demolished in Moscow with the plan to build the 415-meter Palace of Soviets with the monument to Lenin on top. The project started but turned out to be too massive. World War II interfered with the plan and the iron beams were used to restore bridges. In 1958 the swimming pool "Moscow" was built on the place of construction. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Church of Christ the Savoir was reconstructed and opened in 2004.
[38] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 17.

Bezdomnii breaks down, chases Woland around Moscow and ends up in an asylum. Bulgakov combines tragic and comic in the opening episode in the spirit of a Russian saying: "It would have been funny if it was not so sad."

Supernatural events such as the unexpected deaths and sudden disappearances of certain Moscow citizens hint at methods of Stalinist terror. As T.N.R. Edwards writes in his book *Three Russian Writers and the Irrational* (1982): "The fantastic reality of life is not far removed from the fantastic unreality of the supernatural."[39]

It's understandable why Bulgakov does not speak about the Stalinist regime and its methods openly. In 1928, Bulgakov's apartment was searched and his manuscript of *The Heart of the Dog* was confiscated. Aware of the arrests and prosecutions of his fellow writers, Bulgakov understood well that he and his family were in a very precarious situation despite the fact that Stalin took a personal interest in Bulgakov's life by getting him appointed as an assistant director at the Moscow Art Theatre.

One can only wonder: was it despair or reverence, fear or hope that drove Bulgakov to write the play *Batum* about Stalin's youth. Upon reading the play, Stalin decided that it was "a very good play but not to be staged".[40] Recently, John Hodge developed a theme of a possible meeting of Bulgakov and Stalin in his witty postmodern play *The Collaborators* (2011), where the writer makes a Devil's pact with Stalin. As a surreal drama unfolds Stalin becomes the author of *Batum* and Bulgakov finds himself signing arrest and execution orders. The play is a case study of "breaking" an intellectual by means of manipulation, humiliation, and cumulative implication and turning a writer into a collaborator of a system.

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[39] T.N.R. Edwards, *Three Russian Writers and the Irrational* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982), 148.
[40] John Hodge, "Introduction," *Collaborators* (London, Faber and Faber, 2011), xiii.

One might blame Bulgakov for not being openly critical of the Soviet system: the workings of power in *The Master and Margarita* are invisible as if acting on Foucault's definition – "a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon action, on possible or actual future or present actions. A relationship of violence acts upon a body or upon things; it forces, it bends, it breaks, it destroys, or it closes off all possibilities." [41] Bulgakov briefly refers to the mass arrests as supernatural occurrence: "люди начали бесследно исчезать" (people began to disappear without a trace).[42] In the novel, witchcraft and diabolical acts replicate the grim reality of the Stalinist Purges. Instead of depicting it realistically, Bulgakov resorts to "magical" rendering of the Great Terror of the thirties.

In *The Origin of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt reflected on the ideological disguise of totalitarianism, which she called "a superior realism" – an artificially created and sustained whitewashed façade. Bulgakov blends realism with the magic elements to penetrate that façade. His subtle, yet vitriolic, anti-Soviet satire reveals both the ideological horrors and practical absurdities of totalitarian Stalinism. In the novel, the literal becomes the figurative while the figurative often is transformed into the literal. For example, a very realistic shortage of living space is symbolic of an absence of freedom and privacy, while a metaphorical invocation of the Devil conjures his immediate intrusion into the lives of the characters.

It's hard to assign *The Master and Margarita* to a specific genre. The novel is a Menippean satire, a Kunstler roman, a fairy tale, an epic, a religious allegory, or a

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[41] Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", ed. J. Faubion. Tr. Robert Hurley. *Power The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*. *Volume Three* (New York: New Press, 2000), 340.
[42] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 82.

political satire but Northrop Frye defined the novel first and foremost as a romance. In Fredric Jameson commented:

> Romance is for Frye a wish fulfillment or Utopian fantasy which aims at transfiguration of the world of everyday life to restore the conditions of some lost Eden, or anticipate a future reality from which mortality and imperfections will be effaced. […] ordinary life, then must already have been conceived […] as the end product of curse and enchantment, black magic, baleful spells, and ritual isolation. Romance is thus a staged struggle between higher and lower realms, between heaven and hell, of the angelic and the demonic or diabolic.[43]

All the elements of Frye's definition are present in *The Master and Margarita*. Bulgakov follows the romantic "rescue me and take me away" formula but reverses the traditional assignment of gender roles – the Master is "a damsel-in-distress", Margarita is "a knight on a horse", or rather a witch on a broom. She drives the romance as she rescues the Master. An angelic and demonic witch, she is caught between the light and darkness and eventually settles for a kind of limbo.

Bulgakov invests Margarita with qualities his male protagonist lacks: the capacity for resistance, aggression, and readiness to go to the dark side to seek help. She is involved, active, proud and resilient while the Master is withdrawn, passive, self-deprecating and reconciled to failure.

[43] Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 110.

Margarita is a striking contrast to the passive and impotent Master driven into neurosis by political persecution, arrest and civil disenfranchisement. All he wants is to be left alone and that's why he finds refuge in the mental asylum. Hypochondriac and depressed, he insists he cannot be healed: "я неизлечим" (I am incurable).[44] His moral masochism is a result of guilt and self-castigation. The Master's deterioration under the prosecution reflects the pervasive affect of Terror on population creating a mood of passivity, depression and resignation.

Margarita acts out the wishes Bulgakov has to repress: she makes a deal to gain agency, to take revenge on Soviet literary institutions, and to retire to some peaceful place outside history. Bulgakov rehabilitates his weak superfluous man and romantic dreamer by pairing him with the traditional counterpart, the strong woman of Russian literature, here, Margarita, who leaves her highly placed Soviet husband to share the life and fate of the Master, the aspiring writer.

Margarita is a contradictory character. She is a faithful lover and an adulterous wife. She is a witch, but in her actions she resembles an angel. She is a queen and a slave. She is powerful, yet always under the control of the Devil.

Margarita in the Mirrors of Criticism

In his study of the novel, Tomislav Longinovic insightfully remarks that Margarita is the only active human character in the novel. Longinovic's close reading[45] of *The Master and Margarita* shows that only Margarita attains her goals and gets rewarded. However, her multidimensional character has been often overlooked or simplified by

[44] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 166.
[45] Tomislav Longinovic, *Borderline Culture: The Politics of Identity in Four Twentieth Century Slavic Novels* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 5.

critics who tend to focus on the male characters in their critical inquiries or who allot their attention to Margarita but categorize her within several limited stereotypes.

For example, Irina Galinskaya idealizes Margarita as the symbol of eternal femininity conveying sensuality, mercy and selfless love while Andrey Kurayev, a Russian Orthodox priest, who turned a literary critic, anathematizes Margarita as an evil witch who condemns herself and the Master by selling her soul to the Devil. He regrets that Margarita achieved a cult status in Russia and reads her as a symptom of a moral degradation. Those two polar opinions are locked in the "Madonna or Witch" rhetoric of axiological debate about the role of Margarita, while her character should be understood as a liminal character that blurs these categories.

Often scholars prefer to ignore Margarita altogether, arranging her and other characters into neat schemes, charts and tables. Interested rather in the formal complexity of the novel, Boris Gasparov works out a catalogue of the parallel characters in biblical and contemporary plots. In his otherwise neat interpretation, Margarita is a reflection of Levi Mathew, the disciple of Christ that I consider a stretch.

In *The Master and Margarita: the Text as a Cipher* (1975), Elena Mahlow falls into a similar trap when she suggests interpreting the novel exclusively as a political allegory of Soviet Russia. She nominates Margarita as the prerevolutionary intelligentsia despite the fact that Margarita is never portrayed as an intellectual. Traditionally, in Russian literature the role of intellectual is reserved for male protagonists while female protagonists perform an emotional function. In my opinion, Bulgakov does not diverge from this rule. In his novel, Margarita stands for both the redemptive and condemning power of love, while the Master represents the power and weakness of intellect.

Since a significant part of the novel unfolds in the mental institution, critics seize on these passages to rationalize and explain the supernatural occurrences. A few psychoanalytical readings of the novel neglect Margarita and tend to explain the supernatural occurrences as hallucinations of the Master or Ivan Bezdomny in the mental asylum. For instance, in his article "The Role and Meaning of Madness in The Master and Margarita: The Novel as a Doppelganger Tale", Matt F. Oja rationalizes the novel as a schizophrenic hallucination of Ivan Bezdomny who invents the love story of Master and Margarita as a soothing delusion. This interpretation transforms central characters into the figments of Ivan's imagination.

The most frequent interpretation applied to the novel is a biographical one and in these cases *The Master and Margarita* is approached as a roman-à-clef. Most biographers agree that Margarita's prototype is Bulgakov's third wife, Elena Sergeevna Shilovskaya (1893-1970). As his literary executor and the co-editor of his novel, she promoted and supported this interpretation by disparaging and undermining the critics who suggested that Bulgakov's two ex-wives might have contributed to Margarita as well.

Some critics cautiously suggest other possible real life figures as Margarita's prototype depending on whom they identify as the Master: Maxim Gor'kii, Sergei Yesenin or Leonid Andreyev. It's worth noting that in most interpretations the identity of the Master determines Margarita's prototype, not the reverse.

The recurring search for Margarita's literary prototype represents yet another popular trend in scholarship regarding *The Master and Margarita*. Unlike the previous case, there is a univocal agreement. The majority of literary critics agree that Margarita is loosely based on several of Goethe's characters including Gretchen and Faust. Like her

namesake Marguerite, she is beautiful and attractive. Like Gretchen, she is capable of pure love and feminine compassion. Like Faust, she strikes a deal with the Devil. There are other characters that Bulgakov partially borrowed from Goethe. For example, the episodic character of Frieda at Satan's ball is also a version of Gretchen. Frieda killed her child with a handkerchief and was hanged for it. Gella, the witch in Woland's retinue, also has a scar on her neck, reminding us again of Gretchen.

Looking for Margarita's literary prototype, some critics point at Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary because of the themes of love and adultery. As is often the case with Bulgakov, the literary allusions are transformed to such an extent that they are rather reversed. The complexity of Margarita's character suggests that it would be a mistake to impose a strict definitive literary or real-life prototype on Margarita's shifting identity. It's more productive to acknowledge her fluid and contradictory nature than to squeeze her in one box or another.

Margarita in the Mirrors of Psychoanalysis and Feminism

Despite extensive critical literature on *The Master and Margarita,* an editor of the critical companion to the novel, Laura Weeks, argues that the most promising approaches of psychoanalysis and feminism have not yet been sufficiently employed. Margarita is perfectly suited to accommodate the application of both psychoanalytic and feminist methodologies. My intention is to employ a psychoanalytic approach to define and interpret this particular witch in terms of the Freudian concept of "a return of the repressed." I'll apply feminist theory to show that even though while making Margarita a

witch Bulgakov does not let her break from patriarchal subordination. Bulgakov's witch remains within a traditional model of femininity: sacrificial, enduring and loving.

In the novel, Margarita is introduced *in medias res* through a story of her lover. In the asylum, the Master tells about their affair to a new patient Ivan Bezdomnii. Following the romantic tradition, Bulgakov portrays their love as star-crossed. While walking the Moscow streets, they run into and immediately recognize each other as true soul mates. The Master is struck by Margarita's beauty and the extraordinary loneliness in her eyes. The yellow flowers on her black dress[46] attract the Master's attention and prompt him to talk to the stranger. They fall in love at first sight. Bulgakov describes their love as fatalistic: "любовь выскочила перед нами как из под земли выскакивает убийца в переулке и поразила нас сразу обоих! Так поражает молния, так поражает финский нож!" (Love leaped out in front of us like a murderer in an alley leaping out of nowhere, and struck us both at once. As a lightning strikes, as a Finnish knife strikes)![47] Metaphors "a murderer", "lightning", "a knife" blend love and death into the romantic concept of *Liebestod* (love-death) foreshadowing the tragic yet uplifting outcome of their affair. At first, the author portrays their love as a private affair beyond the influence of social, sexual, economic and political circumstances, but later their love gets inextricably knotted with sociopolitical and philosophical themes.

Margarita's attitude to the Master combines romantic and maternal aspects. She is a Muse, a caregiver and a lover. Neglecting her marriage to a prominent Soviet specialist, Margarita visits the Master every day, makes him coffee, sets the oval table, dusts his

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[46] Some critics read the combination of black and yellow as diabolic and infernal. In their view, Margarita is an agent of the Devil preying on the Master's innocent soul from the very beginning. Yellow and black are colors traditionally associated with death in Russian culture.
[47] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 155.

books, mends his clothes and admires his writing. Their affair is described as platonic and idyllic, rather than sexual and erotic, unless one reads a sublimated sexual context into their favorite pastime of watching the fire in a stove and baking potatoes. The underlying sexuality of their relationship is never fully expressed, but rather implied. Bulgakov downplayed the novels' erotic and sensual tendencies even though his initial drafts suggest that he tried to go in that direction. Only when Margarita becomes a witch does her sexuality come to the fore.

Margarita is his admiring Muse who worships the Master's novel as a masterpiece and predicts it will bring him fame and recognition. She encourages him to submit his novel for publishing: "она сулила славу, она подгоняла его и вот тут-то стала называть мастером" (She foretold fame, she urged him on, and it was then that she began to call him the Master).[48] Margarita's decision to call her lover the Master rather than by his first name suggests that his talent is more important for her than his masculinity.

Most literary critics are uncomfortable with the sadomasochistic overtones of the name "the Master" and prefer to read artistic implications into it. However, it's obvious that by choosing the name "Master", Margarita sublimates her passion for him as a man into her admiration for him as a writer. Accepting and welcoming her subservient status, she is obsessed with his novel: "в этом романе её жизнь" (her life was in this novel).[49] She memorizes the pages by heart and sings them out. Her obsession can be explained by the fact that the novel is a substitute for the child they do not have. For her, it is a material expression of their love.

[48] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 158.
[49] Ibid., 160.

When the novel is rejected and criticized, the Soviet literary apparatus launches a campaign against the writer that destroys both the book and the Master's sanity. He becomes more and more depressed while Margarita grows angry and aggressive. Margarita craves revenge but it's beyond her human reach: "глаза её источали огонь, руки дрожали и были холодны. Сперва она бросилась меня целовать, затем, хриплым голосом и стуча рукой по столу, сказала, что она отравит Латунского" (Her eyes flashed fire, her trembling hands were cold. First, she rushed to kiss me, then, in a hoarse voice, pounding the table with her fist, she said she would poison Latunsky).[50] Margarita's anger foreshadows her breaking away from conventional femininity.

Despite her attempts, Margarita cannot heal the Master who succumbs more and more to panic attacks and depression, phobias and despair. One night he burns his manuscript only a few minutes before his arrest. The circumstances of his arrest are left unexplained, as if in parenthesis. Bulgakov makes that part of the story unavailable to the reader as the Master whispers about the events following his arrest into Ivan's ear.

When he's released, the Master finds his apartment occupied. As a true master of details, Bulgakov conveys his protagonist's miserable condition in a description of his shabby coat. On a freezing January day he wanders the streets aimlessly until he reaches the Stravinsky clinic where he finds refuge in the mental ward. He shuts down, as he cannot process what happened to him. His mental state corresponds exactly to Freud's description of a melancholic who "…represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and

[50] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 160.

expects to be punished."[51] The loss of the ego that Freud ascribes to the melancholic is the aftermath of the loss of love. He theorized melancholia as a result of internalization of lost object and a consequent pathological split of ego that turns against itself.

By admitting himself to the Stravinsky clinic, the Master withdraws from society and history. Bulgakov represents history as a cause of pain and limitations similar to Fredric Jameson's famous quote: "History is what hurts, […] refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis."[52]

The mental clinic is an uneventful place that provides the Master's with "покой" (the eternal rest), a word related to "покойник" (a deceased person). This etymological excursus suggests that the Master is led by a death drive in his search for complete stasis and calm. His itinerary from the museum to the basement to the prison to the asylum and, finally, to the ethereal limbo keeps pushing him away from, and out of, society in an effort to escape historical reality.

In the second part of the novel, the Master's story is corroborated by "a truthful narrator" who finally introduces Margarita as an independent protagonist and venerates her as an example of "настоящей, верной вечной любви" (true, faithful, eternal love).[53] Self-appointed critics like Kurayev and Barkov insist that Bulgakov's portrayal of a cheating wife as a faithful lover is ironical and sarcastic but their pronouncements are more moralization than interpretation. The endearing manner in which Bulgakov treats his heroine rules out irony. In 1928, Bulgakov wrote in his diary about "моя Маргарита,

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[51] Sigmund Freud, "Morning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Starchey (London, Hogarth Press, 1961), XIV, 246.
[52] Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 102.
[53] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 240.

и кот, и полёты" (my Margarita, and cat, and flights).[54] Taking into account Bulgakov's affair with his third wife, one can speculate that for him to love someone other than his legal spouse wasn't ironic or sarcastic but instead rather painful and complicated.

To set the stage, the narrator points out that Margarita has a very good life: a nice apartment, a maid, money and access to commodities in times of shortage provided by her husband, a high-ranked Soviet specialist. Her situation represents an envied material ideal for the majority of Moskovites. Nevertheless, Margarita is so profoundly unhappy and lonely that she even contemplates suicide. By emphasizing her privileged position, the narrator emphasizes the non-commodified nature of her affair with Master:

> …ей нужен был он. Мастер, а вовсе не готический особняк, и не отдельный сад, и не деньги. Она любила его, она говорила правду (…she needed him, the master, instead of a Gothic house, instead of a private garden, instead of money. She was right – she loved him). [55]

Why was it important for Bulgakov to emphasize that Margarita is not interested in commodities and privileges? It's because only the Master makes Margarita happy, she cannot reconcile herself to the thought that her lover is dead. Since she does not know what happened to him, she is caught between melancholia and mourning, a condition prefigured in Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), where he observes that the loss of a loved one – a highly libidinal invested object – can trigger a pathological

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[54] Mikhail Bulgakov, "Pis'mo k Popovu. 26.06.1934" *Dnyevnik. Pis'ma*. (Moscow: Pisatel, 1997), 343.

[55] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 241.

depression. While for the melancholic Master his “ego is empty”[56], for depressed Margarita – her “world has become poor and empty.”[57] Melancholia and mourning differ in the level of awareness: a melancholic cannot identify the loss, while a mourner is well aware of the loss.

In the novel, Bulgakov depicts a variety of responses to loss: apathy, depression, melancholia, mourning and withdrawal. In Margarita’s descending though all stages of depression Bulgakov offers one of the first literary descriptions of the despair of thousands of women whose husbands were arrested during the Great Terror.

There are still heated debates over the number of people arrested, exiled and executed during the twenty-five years of Stalin’s rule. The estimates vary from six hundred thousands to twenty million. Khrushchev’s report in 1954 gives the number of three hundred seventy thousand of the repressed. Statistically, the overwhelming majority of victims were men: politicians, officers, writers, farmers, political leaders, engineers, and doctors. Some of them were sentenced and executed within a very short period of time; the rest were sent to the gulags for years without the right of correspondence. Often the families were not notified about the location and the fate of their relatives for years. In 1934, the Head of NKVD issued an instruction that included the wives and the children of the arrested. Unless the wife agreed to cooperate and testify against her husband, she had to be arrested and sentenced to five or seven years of labor camp. The wives of the arrested men often were forced to publicly denounce and divorce their husbands. Their crime was love and devotion to their husbands who fell out of favor with the Stalinist system.

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[56] Sigmund Freud, “Morning and Melancholia”, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Starchey (London, Hogarth Press, 1961), XIV, 246.
[57] Ibid., 246.

In the Soviet literature the subject of repressions remained a taboo until Stalin's death in 1953. There are virtually no literary works on the theme of repression before that time except for the Communist Party newspapers portraying the repressed as enemies of the Soviet people, spies, saboteurs and conspirators. Only after Stalin's death in 1953, Alexander Solzhenitsin (1918-2008) and Varlam Shalamov (1907-1982) could write and eventually publish their works. After spending eight years in camps, Solgenitsin wrote *In the First Circle* and published it abroad in 1968. He wrote his Th*e Gulag Archipelago* between 1958 and 1968 and could publish it in the West in 1973 while his novel was officially published in the USSR only in 1989. Shalamov spent seventeen years in camps and described his horrid experience *Kolyma Tales* (published abroad 1966, officially published in the USSR in 1987). While Pasternak and Shalamov focus on the arrested men in their works, in her poem "Requiem" (1935-1940, published in 1987) Anna Akhmatova's describes the grief and despair of women in front of the infamous Lyubanka prison in Moscow, waiting patiently for hours to submit a package with food and clothes for the arrested.

In this respect, Margarita's despair and depression reflects the plight of thousands of women whose husbands, brothers and sons were arrested during the Great Terror. Concerned about her missing lover and trying to fill the void, Margarita develops the habit of talking to her lover in her mind. She revisits the places they frequented together. She holds on to the mementos of their affair: a dry rose, a bank account book, photos, and a half-burnt page of his manuscript. Margarita holds and stares at the material objects representing their love for hours as if conjuring the past. She rereads the novel's only surviving sentence over and over until she puts herself in a trance. Her despair prompts

suicidal thoughts: “нужно было забыть его, или самой умереть” (she must either forget him or die).[58] Here, the melodramatic effect is based on the idea that the loved subject is irreplaceable and unforgettable, so that a readiness to give up one’s own life comes to be an ultimate proof of one’s own love.

Bulgakov implies that there is something uncanny in desperate Margarita even before she meets the devil. She lives in a Gothic mansion. After nine years of marriage, she is childless. She has squint eyes with a mysterious flame in them. She wears black. She is profoundly unhappy and suicidal. She is superfluous. All those characteristics contribute to Margarita’s innate witch-ness that remains dormant until the Devil validates it.

Margarita’s strangeness fits into Freud’s concept of *unheimlich*, the uncanny strangeness within the familiar. According to Freud, the uncanny is frightening precisely because it is partly familiar. Julia Kristeva develops the concept and explains its origin as the result of the process when “[t]he archaic, narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making it an alien double, uncanny and demonical.”[59] The last three words describe Margarita fittingly. Kristeva assigns the destructive powers to the uncanny and points out that “[m]agical practices, animism, intellectual uncertainty and disconcerted logic are all propitious to uncanniness.”[60] Again, the qualities that Kristeva describes correspond closely to the overwhelming presence of the *unheimlich* in Margarita.

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[58] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 242.
[59] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1994), 185.
[60] Ibid., 186.

Lacking feasible options, Margarita wishes to sell her soul to the Devil "узнать, жив он или нет!" (to find if he is alive or dead!) [61] Immediately, the Devil's servant appears with an offer and supplies her with a cream in a golden case. If Margarita enters the pact she is promised to learn news about her lover. At first, she remains suspicious until Azazello recites the lines from the Master's burnt manuscript. Persuaded that she deals with supernatural forces, Margarita agrees. She is instructed to apply a magic cream at midnight and wait for a phone call with further instructions.

Bulgakov revisits and rewrites the myth about selling one's soul to the Devil in gender terms and motivations. While Faust sells his soul for knowledge, Margarita does it for love. She wants to rescue her lover. True to Russian tradition, Bulgakov's hero needs woman's help, whereas the European Faust finds salvation and regeneration on his own. Bulgakov also mitigates all terrifying and painful aspects of the Devil's pact: there is no signing the contract with blood and there is no sex involved even though Azazello pitches the Devil as a desirable lover. Bulgakov presents the pact as a temporary deal since technically Margarita does not sell but only pawns her soul. In many English translations of the novel, the Russian verb "заложить" (to pawn) is translated as "to sell" misconstruing the temporality and reversibility of the agreement. Her alliance with the Devil is only a "part-time" job for Margarita.

When Margarita applies the cream, she accidently drops the container on her wristwatch. It cracks and stops, symbolically marking Margarita's crossing into atemporal dimension of phantasmagoria. Margarita's dramatic transformation is set up in front of the mirror and resembles the Lacanian description of the mirror stage as "a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which

[61] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 242.

manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality."[62] The mirror brings out the inner witch in the form of Margarita's ego ideal: beautiful, uninhibited and free to do whatever she wants.

The magic cream rejuvenates Margarita: her wrinkles disappear, her skin glows, her hair grow longer. In addition, Margarita's constant nagging headache[63] is gone. Beauty, youth and irrepressible joy are the attributes Bulgakov assigns to his witch. He also gives her a new voice: Margarita's soft timid voice is transformed into loud screams interspersed with an uncontrollable laughter. Here too psychology illuminates Bulgakov's choices. Clarissa Estes writes about laughter as an expression of female sexuality: "it's physical, elemental, passionate, vitalizing."[64] According to Estes, laughter is a sensual expression of "woman's wildest sexuality"[65] and thus has a liberating potential.

For Margarita, becoming a witch offers a chance to announce her wishes and to enact her will. When Margarita connects with her dormant witchy nature, she sheds her lethargy and depression and rediscovers the joy of being herself and acting on her impulses. She finally has the courage to write a farewell note to her husband: "Я стала ведьмой от горя и бедствий" (I became a witch out of sorrow and suffering).[66] The critics often take up this quote to point out that Margarita did not suffer from deprivation and poverty, so she is being overdramatic. Nevertheless, Bulgakov often implies that Margarita's emotional turmoil and suffering has nothing to do with the material

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[62] Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" *Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), 4.
[63] The headache that Margarita and many characters in the novel - Pontius Pilate, Margarita, the Master, and Ivan Poniryev - suffer from can be read as a psychosomatic symptom of not psychic but political repression.
[64] Clarissa Estes, *Women Who Run With the Wolves*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 45.
[65] Ibid., 157.
[66] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 256.

conditions of her life. She gladly abandons the comforts and privileges provided by her husband once she is given a chance to rescue her lover.

As a witch, Margarita is naked and exhibitionistic. She gives away her fashionable clothes to her maid Natasha. She teases a neighbor, exposing herself from the window and laughs at his bewilderment. Her transformation alters the novel as the bleak socio-historic reality wanes and devilish phantasmagoria begins. As a witch, Margarita turns into a powerful character with both a voice and agency; something that Bulgakov seems to suggest is brought out by her alliance with the Devil. From that point on, Margarita becomes an impetus of the story. As a witch, Margarita is free and invisible. She flies out on a broom to the river to finish her transformation. Even though Freud[67] insisted on the phallic symbolism of a broom and the orgasmic implications of flight, I would to argue that apart from potential sexual connotations, Bulgakov resorts to flying[68] as a symbol of breaking away from social restrictions and inhibitions. In the novel, flying is an attribute of power and transcendence that is reserved for the devil and his entourage. Margarita flies away, screaming "Невидима и свободна!" (Invisible and free!)[69] Her invisibility is yet another symbol of escape from institutional and personal restrictions and inhibitions.

[67] Freud associated flight with sex in his works on dreams. In his letter to Wilhelm Fliess, he wrote "flying" is explained; the broomstick they ride is probably the great Lord Penis." See Jeffrey Masson, ed., The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 226.

[68] Bulgakov's phantasmagorical imagery in general and imagery of flights in particular bring to mind the paintings by Marc Chagall (1887-1985). In a number of his paintings, including "Over the Town", "Lovers and the Seine River", "Lovers in the Red Sky", the flying figures of the artist and his wife Bella embrace and float through the air in clouds and flowers. Unlike Bulgakov's Master, Chagall's male lover is strong and active: he protects and embraces an angelic and fragile female figure. Bulgakov assigns the role of protector and rescuer to Margarita who has to become a witch to save her lover.

[69]Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 260.

Finally, attaining supernatural powers of flight and invisibility, Margarita exacts revenge on those who destroyed her lover. She does not kill a literary critic: murder and femininity are still problematic even for Bulgakov. The critic is not home and Margarita displaces her rage on his apartment. She wrecks and floods it: smashing the crystal chandelier, destroying the grand piano with a hammer, and staining the bed with ink. On top of that, to amuse herself she smashes all windows in the literati's building that represents the state ideological apparatus. The scene is described with so much gusto that it suggests Bulgakov's revenge fantasy.

Later, the witch Margarita engages in pranks dictated by a distinctly arbitrary desire to do something "очень смешное и интересное" (very amusing and interesting).[70] She breaks a streetlamp to pieces, eavesdrops and peeks into windows. She is whimsical in her actions rather than calculated and deliberate.

Margarita completes her transformation by bathing in a river. Here, Bulgakov blends Russian and European folklore traditions with modern elements in his vision of witchcraft and even freely improvises by returning Margarita to Moscow in a flying car. As she meets Woland, she is reminded that her freedom and powers are contingent upon her submission to his authority. Her liberation from her restrictive gender and social role was only momentary, since it appears that the diabolic hierarchy parallels a patriarchal power structure, whose linchpin is feminine subordination. Margarita remains under the Devil's control and the fulfillment of her wish depends on how well she lives up to his expectations and performs the function of a welcoming and accommodating hostess.

Contrary to the European demonological tradition, the Devil wants her body, not her soul. He chooses her to be a hostess of his Spring Ball, a climatic of immersion into

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[70]Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 258.

the realm of fantasy and horror, with corpses appearing through a fireplace and the sinners getting drunk on champagne fountains. Margarita participates in what can be described as the grand ritual of necromancy, but unlike classical Roman witches such as Lucan's Erictho and Horace's Canidia, she is a passive element.

Margarita's adorned naked body is necessary to arouse the Devil's subjects from the dead and her attention is necessary to sustain them through the night. She has to welcome the cruelest historical villains, mass murderers and criminals. Margarita gives them her love and attention "хоть улыбочку […], хоть малюсенький поворот головы. Все, что угодно, только не невнимание. От невнимания они захиреют. " (At least a smile […] at least a turn of the head. Anything you like but indifference. They get sick from indifference).[71] Her undivided attention sustains the guests through the night.

To become a proxy for the Black Queen, Margarita is bathed in blood and rubbed with a greasy yellow substance. This ritual defiles Margarita and turns her into an abject body that Kristeva defines as "the most sickening of wastes."[72] In the name of her love, she willingly assumes the role of depository of debilitating affect.

As a result of a makeover, Margarita is transformed into a fetish on a pedestal: rose-petal shoes, diamond crown and a necklace – are all that she wears. She is a statuesque object of adoration and worship. As the Black Queen, she receives the dead sinners who are resuscitated for the duration of the feast in their various states of decomposition. Bulgakov describes Margarita's service to the Devil as physically demanding and emotionally taxing, but not spiritually bankrupting. Hosting the Ball is her trial, a test of her strength and courage.

[71] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 291.
[72] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 4.

Out of a fireplace, the corpses materialize into formally dressed men and naked women sporting only high-heeled shoes and feather headsets. Men kiss Margarita's hand while women kiss her knee. The location of the kisses can also be seen as a reflection of gender discrimination because a kiss on a hand is less degrading than one on a knee. Bulgakov resorts to displacement here, since in European demonology, witches worship and kiss the Devil's behind. Again, Bulgakov does not follow strictly any tradition: his demonology mixes and matches Russian and European traditions and freely improvises shaping them to suit his vision.

In the scene of the Ball, Bulgakov's use of female bodies in general and Margarita's body in particular is subordinated to male sadistic desire that becomes even more obvious in the film adaptations of the novel where the verbal is translated into the visual.

In a recent Russian adaptation by Vladimir Bortko Margarita wears a sadistic metal outfit and a crown that cuts into her body and makes it bleed while she stoically performs her duties as a gracious hostess. By presenting Margarita in this manner, Bortko parallels the suffering Margarita with Christ, but Bulgakov does not make that connection in the novel.

Why then does Bulgakov treat male and female bodies differently? His female characters are often naked, stripped, exposed, while male characters are always clothed. However, men are more often targets of physical violence such as beheadings and mutilations. They are driven crazy, taken away in straitjackets, arrested and transported from Moscow to Yalta in a split second. The asymmetry is mostly evident in the episode when the body of the bureaucrat disappears, but his suit continues to function. It curses,

bullies his secretary, signs papers and gives orders. It seems that for Bulgakov the power of femininity is in the body, while masculinity is understood in terms of his function and power, manifested in the man's suit and office position.

Since the power of femininity resides in the body, Bulgakov designates nakedness as an attribute of the witch. His witches, Margarita, Natasha and Hella – are unapologetically naked. They are exposed for the pleasure of the reader and viewer, generating the erotic (or in some cases pornographic) attraction of the text or the films.

Despite the abundant display of naked female flesh, the novel contains few sexual scenes, except for briefly mentioned orgies at the Ball. Even though the title protagonists refer to each other as lovers, their relationship remains romantic rather than carnal. Margarita has more intimate contact with the Devil than with the Master. There are a few suggestive scenes that have sexual connotations: naked Margarita kneels in front of Woland and rubs some ointment into his ailing knee, then sits very close to him on a bed, – but they are not developed by the author. The earlier versions of the novel were more explicit in sexual content, yet Bulgakov edited almost all of it out.

Cinematic Margaritas

Textual nakedness presented a big dilemma to the four Eastern European directors who adapted the novel into the film: Aleksandr Petrovic (1972), Maciej Wojtyszko (1989), Yuri Kara (1994) and Vladimir Bortko (2005). Guarding the morals of Soviet people, the censors would never allow explicit nudity on the screen. Maybe it was the main reason why Eastern European directors Andrzej Wajda and Aleksandr Petrovic did the derivative rather than definitive adaptations of the novel: the Polish film *Pilate and*

Others (1971) focused on the biblical story, and the Yugoslavian film *The Master and Margarita* (1972) focused on the Moscow chapters. There is no Margarita in Wajda's film, and there is a very little of Margarita in Petrović's version which portrays her as both an admirer and a stalker of a famous playwright Nikolai Maksudov. In Petrović's version, Margarita searches for Maksudov after he is committed to the asylum, but she never changes into a witch. Petrović adapted the novel as a melodrama and turned Margarita into a peroxide-blonde eye candy performed by American actress Mimsy Farmer. Unfortunately, Mimsy fails to become Margarita and remains a sweet and obedient beauty. Later under the pressure of criticism, the director explained that he meant his film as a free interpretation of characters and ideas, and not a faithful adaptation of the novel.

Unlike his Eastern European colleagues, Russian director Yuri Kara employed female nudity as a shock element and even added a sexual orgy to Satan's Ball in his adaptation of *The Master and Margarita* (1994, released 2011). On the one hand, the director's choice can be explained by his peculiar style characterized by kitsch, intense colors, exaggeration, surprising digressions, and irony. On the other, Kara's adaptation is symptomatic of the post-Soviet films that relied on sex and female nudity as a way to increase a box office appeal. After decades of prudish Soviet cinematography, nudity and sex became "a group fantasy"[73] exploited by the directors to draw large audience into the theatre.

In Kara's interpretation Margarita is more a vulgar than a refined and romantic ideal of femininity. Kara's ironic view of Margarita mocks earlier interpretations of her.

[73] Igor Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: from the Age of the Czars to Today* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 122.

Again, Kara's portrayal of Margarita could be the result of his overall kitsch aesthetics that makes the film a parody.

The most faithful adaptation of the novel is that of Vladimir Bortko who made it into ten TV installments released in 2005. The Russian director keeps close to the text and casts the actors Alexander Galibin and Anna Kovalchuk as the Master and Margarita because of their resemblance to Bulgakov and his wife. The director builds his interpretation of the Moscow chapters around four genres: Mennipean satire, melodrama, comedy, and historical drama. Twenty-first-century computer technologies give Bortko an opportunity to translate the fantastical elements of the novel to the screen. It also enables him to solve ingeniously the problem of Margarita's nudity. After she is transformed into a witch, Margarita's naked body below the neck is made transparent and almost invisible: one can see only the glowing contours. She is naked but she is also invisible. Initially, the director's solution conveys Bulgakov's idea of Margarita's invisibility but later Bortko has to abandon it for the scene at the Ball where naked Margarita is not digitalized but is dressed in a sadistic outfit made of iron plates and chains. Other female visitors to the Ball come naked wearing huge feather headpieces and tiny apron-like covers. The adaptation conforms with Mulvey's theory of "a male gaze": female bodies are fetishized and displayed for the pleasure of the viewer.

In the Ball scene of the ball, Margarita is constructed through a distinctly "male gaze," a term introduced by Laura Mulvey in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Mulvey exposes the tendency of visual texts to objectify women and to obsess over their alleged threatening sexuality. She defines the male gaze as the overweening perspective of patriarchal culture whereby "woman displayed as sexual

object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle. . . . she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire."[74] In the ball scene of the novel and film versions of *The Master and Margarita*, the heroine is not just displayed, but she is naked as well implying the demeaning and secondary role of women in society. Men are dressed in tuxedoes while women attend the Ball naked. Western cultures in general and European art in particular perpetuate this asymmetry in the depiction of female/male nudity. The *locus classicus* of which can be found in Manet's painting *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863). Feminist scholars argue that the one-sided female nudity is a form of objectification that reduces the women to the instrument of male sexual pleasure.

In the novel, nakedness starts as a symbol of freedom but then changes into a nudity that indicates sexual submission. Margarita has to participate in masculine economy of desire by using her body as a tool to earn favor as if she has nothing else to offer. The heroine's body is presented as her only resource for survival or success.

Secondary Witches

More witch figures appear in the novel as secondary characters. Hella, a sultry red-haired witch, is a part of the Woland's retinue. The ugly scar on her throat accentuates the vulnerability her beauty. Woland describes her as efficient, quick-witted, and invaluable. Despite his flattering characteristic, Hella is less vocal than Woland's male servants. She is less talkative. Mostly she is the Devil's maid serving food, showing visitors in and out and applying medicine to his ailing knee. Again unlike the fully

[74] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen,* 16.3 Autumn 1975, 15.

dressed male servants, she walks around naked startling and confusing the unsuspecting visitors.

She also assists Woland in his black magic performance at the theatre where she is luring women on stage with a promise to exchange their shabby dresses for foreign commodities like fancy perfumes, evening gowns, and cocktail dresses. As women fall prey to the temptation of conspicuous consumerism, soon they are left naked later when magic vanishes and the fashionable clothes disappear to the amusement of men on the Moscow's streets.

Hella is also a vampire ready to suck blood at Woland's command. One of the most frightening and blood-chilling episodes in the novel is her visit to Varenukha. With nothing left of her beauty she is a decomposing bloodthirsty cadaver with long predatory nails and hissing voice. She is such a colorful character but obviously she is not important for Bulgakov since in the concluding scene when Woland and his entourage with the lovers fly away on the black horses she is omitted.

Natasha is another witch in the novel who starts as Margarita's maid. Envious of Margarita's transformation, she decides to use the remains of the magic cream and turns into a witch herself. Like Homeric Circe, she turns a lusty neighbor into a pig and rides him to the Sabbath. Exhilarated by new possibilities, she is overwhelmed with attention given to her at the Ball and chooses to remain a witch and become a lover of one of the prominent guests. It does not matter that her new lover is a dead sinner as long as he is rich. Unlike Margarita, Natasha is materialistic and is seduced by gold offered to her by Jacque. When given a chance to restore her humanity, Natasha chooses to remain a witch because she is disgusted by the prospect of being a maid and living in poverty.

A middle-aged housemaid, a wizened nasty woman Annushka, nicknamed "the Plague", also fits in the category of witchy figures even though there is no magic involved. She is just a nosy, quarrelsome and greedy neighbor. Her mishap with the sunflower oil sets the chain-reaction of the unfortunate events the first one being Berlioz's death. A part of the novel is recounted through her eyes as she spies through the keyhole on her infernal neighbors.

The above descriptions reveal that Bulgakov casts his witches as maids. All of them including Margarita remain subservient to the male characters before and after their transformation. All of them with one exception are unapologetically naked using their bodies to achieve their goals. All of them prefer being a witch to being a woman.

The Witch as Impossible Resistance

At the end of the Ball, Margarita is exhausted but pretends to be fine. She does not complain or demand her reward, patiently waiting for it to be offered to her. Bulgakov presents it as another test of her dignity and pride. The implication is that if she complains, she'll get nothing. Woland even invites Margarita to complain: "Быть может, у вас есть какая-нибудь печаль, отравляющая душу, тоска?" (Maybe, you feel sadness, poisoning your soul, some longing?) with Margarita responding: "Нет, мессир, […] я чувствую себя совсем хорошо" (No, Sir, […] I am perfectly fine). [75] Such exchange repeats a traditional motif from Russian fairytales. Consider for example a fairy-tale *Морозко* (Father Frost) about a test of maiden's integrity[76] and endurance. In

[75] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 313.

[76] In Russian fairy tales, male protagonists often express their dissatisfaction in the face of more powerful personages and get away with it if not get rewarded. For example, Ivan complains to Baba Yaga that her food is not tasty, and the bed is not soft and her hospitality is not good enough and she still helps him.

this particular fairy-tale, a heroine is freezing to death in the forest yet she does not admit her predicament and complain to Father Frost out of decency and humbleness. In Russian fairytales, silent endurance in the face of misfortune appears to be a gender specific prescription for the female characters and it seems that Bulgakov follows this tradition.

The Russian folk and literary traditions insist that suffering is good for one's soul and if withstood without complaint, is rewarded. Bulgakov subscribes to the same philosophy. One of the most famous statements from the novel captures his message and acquires a special significance: "Никогда и ничего не просите! Никогда и ничего, и в особенности у тех, кто сильнее вас. Сами предложат и сами все дадут" (Never ask for anything! Never for anything and especially from those who are stronger than you. They'll make the offer themselves, and give everything).[77] The quote is Devil's advice precluding the humiliation of being refused and rejected by effectively taking away Margarita's sense of entitlement. When Woland, the authority figure, gives his advice to Margarita, the novel effectively celebrates female humility and endurance over entitlement and complaint.

After the final test of her pride Woland offers Margarita anything she wants, but she altruistically misuses her chance to free her lover. She chooses to show mercy to Frieda, a guest at the Ball who committed an infanticide and has to suffer an eternal punishment. Margarita asks for Frieda be released from the haunting image of the handkerchief with which she suffocated her baby. Frieda's punishment represents the Freudian concept of a return of the repressed.

[77] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 314.

Margarita has to maneuver and misrepresent her altruism, saying that she does not care for Frieda, but she was careless enough to promise and now she has to keep her word. To make sure her wish is granted, she has to hide her true motives of compassion and mercy from Woland. Margarita is a still a Queen and she has power. She is allowed her to help Frieda herself. There is no magic ritual; she has to express her wish as an order and it will come true. Then Woland generously insists that Margarita still has the right to ask him a favor. At last, her lover is brought to Margarita together with the official papers for both, and the restored manuscript of his genius novel. The lovers are returned to their nest in the basement apartment.

Margarita saves the Master from an asylum, but the Soviet world of the 1930s outside their apartment is little better. In order to design a happy end for the lovers, Bulgakov has the Devil step in again and take them to otherworldly realms. The reward for the protagonists is again gender specific: the Master is offered eternal peace and freedom of creativity while Margarita is rewarded with a limbo of domesticity in her dream house with Venetian curtains and a garden. At the end, she promises Master silence and restful sleep: “Мой единственный, мой милый, не думай ни о чем. Тебе слишком много пришлось думать, и теперь буду думать я за тебя” (My sweetest love, forget everything and stop worrying. You've had to do too much thinking; now I'm going to think for you)! [78] Here, Margarita sounds more maternal and angelic than romantic and sexual.

Margarita has healing powers to assuage a painful memory, to erase pangs of guilt and to grant peace. The Master passively agrees to go to his “eternal refuge” with

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[78] Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, 411.

Margarita. The key words in the description of the perfect place are “беззвучие” (silence), “тишина” (quietness), “рассвет” (dawn). The Master and Margarita arrive at their “вечный дом” (eternal home), a version of domestic paradise outside history.

Margarita’s goal is to rescue her lover, to make him happy and safe, to provide him with perfect conditions for writing. The Master’s happiness represents her ultimate happiness. Significantly, at the end she gets what she wants: her beloved and a secure refuge in the afterlife. Bulgakov presents their love as a rebellion against totalitarian system, the place where the limits of the social, sexual, personal and political are inextricably connected.

Margarita appears to be a conflation of contradictory and competitive ideals, fantasies, anxieties that set her on a mission to rescue a failed male protagonist against his will. Even as a witch, Margarita is cast into a role of a sacrificial and altruistic woman, the most celebrated female model of patriarchy.

By casting Margarita as a witch, Bulgakov removes responsibility for decision-making from his male protagonist the Master. The witch turns into a conceptual element that saves the Master from the possibility of sinning: the Master does not enter into any deal with Woland that would compromise ethical principles, nor does Woland attempt to convince him to do so.

Thus, Bulgakov assigns the will and agency to the female protagonist and makes his male protagonist weak and depressed. Such a designation resonates with the pivotal work *How the Soviet Man was Unmade* (2008) by Lilya Kaganovsky, in which she analyzes the physical maiming of male characters in Soviet Socialist Realist narratives as symbolic of male subjectivity within Stalinist culture. The male character’s injury, his

bodily “lack,” symbolizes his abnegation of power in relation to Stalin, who is allowed to be the only complete Man against whom all others are measured. Kaganovsky writes that the Soviet novels are often informed by a male masochism as a positive hero takes pleasure in his own incompleteness. The mutilated male body of the heroes, in Kaganovsky’s view, represents the emasculated male condition during the Stalinist era. Focusing on the maimed bodies, Kaganovsky forget about mental or psychological “maiming”, psychiatric debilitation and nervous breakdowns as a result of political repressions. Socialist Realism had no place for a traditional Russian trope of the Holy Fool[79] or madman. Madmen, psychiatric patients, disturbed individuals virtually disappeared from the Soviet cultural discourse and became a central figure only of dissident literature. In my opinion, the Master, as a psychiatric patient, can be interpreted as a waste product of the repressive molding of perfect Soviet masculinity.

The Master is a character broken by a totalitarian system, while Margarita undergoes fantastic transformation and achieves her goals. As a witch, Margarita gains agency and voice, while the Master remains compliant and passive. The gender bending in the novel *The Master and Margarita* reflects the trend of the masculinization of women and the infantilization of men in the Soviet Union. Frequent historical calamities (World War I, revolution, civil war, Stalinist purges, and World War II) wiped out a large proportion of the male population and engendered a passive surviving strategy for men, sustained by a substantial gender imbalance.

In a figure of the witch, Bulgakov offers supernatural assistance for his protagonist to reclaim his dignity and the individuality that has been compromised and

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[79] See Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987).

nearly eradicated by Stalinist repression. Margarita seeks to awaken the Master from the depression into which he has fallen after the destruction of his manuscript and to convince him not to forsake his art in the face of adversity. Margarita saves the Master through a series of self-sacrificing acts. Even as a witch Margarita is still expected to be a self-denying homemaker, benefiting her lover rather than advancing or pleasing herself.

Becoming a witch does not liberate Margarita but enslaves her even further. In her supernatural state she still acts as a handmaid to demonic Woland, the source of her power, just as in her former life she was a Muse and handmaid to the Master whose manuscripts she preserved. The novel exalts Margarita as a self-abnegating sacrificial woman whose only mission is to serve her male lover, her Master. If he needs her to be an angel, she'll be an angel, if he needs her to be a witch, she'll be a witch. Even if he says that he does not need her, she'll impose her vision of his happiness on him because she cannot imagine her life without him.

The Master represents a crushed and weak male intellectual stuck in his moral superiority and abnegation of violence, while Margarita is rewarded for her willingness to compromise and to step out of the moral life. It is significant that Bulgakov designates love as a source of resistance since mainstream works of Socialist Realism disparaged the concept of romantic love unless it was a love for the Revolution, the Communist Party and/or the Soviet system in general. Those who wrote about love and passion risked being labeled decadent and ostracized due to what was then diagnosed as a corruption by anti-Soviet values. By casting Margarita as a witch, Mikhail Bulgakov partakes in a phantasy of resistance and escape from the repressive Stalinist reality. Overall,

Margarita's ultimate devotion to her lover is realistic but her success of saving him from Stalin's repressive machine is as fantastical as her flights on the broom.

Bulgakov blends in Margarita the contradictory attributes of traditional and deviant femininity: compassion and anger, subservience and independence, humility and shamelessness, devotion and rebellion. Such a doubling is intensified by her being a witch. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Bulgakov's witch represents both the dream of escape from the Soviet system and underlines the impossibility of resistance. From a feminist perspective, as a paradoxical combination of angelic and witchy traits, Margarita is the projection of male fantasy about a woman who bestows an unconditional love and is ready to compromise and sacrifice herself in the name of the lover. For Margarita, love justifies her defilement since it redeems the masculinity of her lover. With a focus on love, Bulgakov goes against the grain of the Soviet ideology that shaped cultural production[80] by promoting sublimation of individual interests and sacrifice in the name of Party and a bright Communist future. In *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (1992) Sheila Fitzpatrick writes that Socialist realism redefined romance into "a girl meets a tractor"[81] and promoted this formula in cultural productions. Unlike a Soviet ideal woman, Margarita chooses a lover, not a tractor. From this perspective, Bulgakov's traditionalist view of femininity is a rejection of the "tractor" feminism of Soviet propaganda.

[80] Katerina Clark, Engenii Dobrenko, Andrei Artizov, and Oleg Naumov put together legal documents to expose the ways the Soviet culture was molded by political and judiciary power in *The Soviet Culture and Power: History in the Documents, 1917-1953* (2007).

[81] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Cornell University Press, 1992), 209.

Chapter Two

Better a Witch than a Feminist: Witchcraft in *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Widows of Eastwick* by John Updike

PREAMBLE

The second chapter starts with the overview of a critical reception of *The Witches of Eastwick* and *The Widows of Eastwick* by John Updike and the author's response to unfavorable criticism. It continues with the analysis of the formal structure of the novels, Updike's employment of medieval views on the witchcraft and his implied portrayal of women as potential witches. To conclude the chapter, I consider George Miller's Hollywood adaptation *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987) to claim that the changes the director made to the plot allowed him to tweak misogynist tone of the novel to offer a utopian finale alternative to Updikes' trite dénouement based on marriage.

When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
Macbeth, Shakespeare

Why Witches? Critical Inquiries and Author's Explanations

It was a surprise when John Updike, "a lyrical writer of the middle class man"[82], published *The Witches of Eastwick* in 1984. After years of focusing on male characters, Updike ventured across the gender border and wrote a novel about three middle class women whom he portrayed as witches. The novel drew a lot of attention and became a bestseller suggesting that witchcraft continues to be a fruitful theme in an American culture interested in witches since the Salem witch trials of the seventeenth century. Many American writers including Nathanael Hawthorne, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Esther Forbes and later Arthur Miller wrote about historical witches but perhaps the true "godfather" of the witches in American literature is Lyman Frank Baum (1856 –1919) with his famous American children's story *The Wizard of Oz* (1900). Since Victor Fleming's famous film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Hollywood[83] has successfully exploited the theme of witchcraft. The commercial success of witch stories might have prompted Updike to spice up his novel with some paranormal characters.

A prized and renowned American writer, John Updike (1932-2009) is often denigrated. His literary vision of middle-class America is controversial and unflattering, while his verbose style is challenging and somewhat obscure. The author of more than

[82] Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "John Updike, a Lyrical Writer of the Middle-Class Man, Dies at 76." *The New York Times*. January 28, 2009.
[83] Witches are no longer restricted to the historical or children's genre. They became contemporary heroines in the films like *I Married a Witch* (1942), *Bell, Book and Candle* (1958), *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* (1988), *The Craft* (1996), *Hocus Pocus* (1993), *Practical Magic* (1998), *Bewitched* (2005), *Wonderful Creatures* (2013) and in the TV series *Bewitched* (1964-1972*), Sabrina, the Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), and *Charmed* (1998-2006).

fifty books and dozens of short stories, Updike received multiple awards ranging from the prestigious and highly respected Pulitzer Prize for two of the novels in the Rabbit series and was a finalist for the unflattering 2008 Bad Sex in Fiction Award given by the British magazine the *Literary Review*. His death in 2009 renewed debate about his contribution to American literature.

Updike is often examined for his gender politics and his attitudes to women. Most of his works are written from a male perspective with the exception of *The Witches of Eastwick* (1984) and *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008), in which he explores a female perspective by creating and developing three characters: average suburban divorcees who become witches. In 1984, the three witches of Eastwick were a big departure from Updike's famous character, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom – a quintessential American male, for whom, as David Foster Wallace notes, "sex offers an escape, an alternate life — a reprieve, even, in its finest moments, from mortality."[84]

Like Harry Angstrom, the witches seek a relief from their boredom and depression in sex, but unlike Harry they resort to what Updike describes as a particular woman's occupation – witchcraft. Updike's male characters are not given magic powers, while *The Witches of Eastwick* portrays three central heroines and by extension all women as potential witches. The novel was a commercial success and was adapted to film by director George Miller only a year after its publication. The sequel *The Widows of Eastwick* (2008) was the last novel Updike published before his death on January 27, 2009.

Updike created a trio of unforgettable female protagonists, proving his ability to

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[84] David Foster Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" *The New York Observer*. October 13, 1997.

portray women as more than "wives, sex objects and purely domestic creatures."[85] In numerous interviews, he explained that he intended for the novel to counter the accusations that he neglected and diminished female characters in his previous works.

> I was enough aware of feminist criticisms that my novels always had these same male, sexist, lusty heroes that I did try to write a book involving women as heroes, *The Witches of Eastwick*. But I'm not aware of any feminist celebration of this novel. On the contrary, they didn't like that either.[86]

"Didn't like" was an understatement: feminists disparaged Updike before *The Witches of Eastwick*, and the novel did little to change it. As David Foster Wallace observes none of "…the famous phallocrats of his generation – not Mailer, not Frederick Exley or Charles Bukowski or even the Samuel Delany – excites such violent dislike"[87] and rejection from feminist critics. Even Updikes' explanations of his benevolent intentions in writing *The Witches of Eastwick* did not help:

> The era in which I wrote it was full of feminism and talk about how women should be in charge of the world. There would be no war. There would be nothing unpleasant, in fact, if women were in charge of the world. So I tried to write this book about women who, in achieving

[85] Michiko Kakutani, "Critic's Notebook; Updike's Long Struggle To Portray Women" *New York Times*, May 05, 1988.
[86] Dwight Garner, "Interview with John Updike," *Salon*, February 24, 1999.
[87] David Foster Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" *The New York Observer*, October 13, 1997.

> freedom of a sort, acquired power, the power that witches would have if there were witches. And they use it to kill another witch. So they behave no better with their power than men do. That was my chauvinistic thought.[88]

In the novel Updike contorts the feminist idea that women would exercise power more responsibly than men. His witches casually kill crabs, squirrels and dogs. But forget about animals: they even torment their own kind, displacing their anger and frustration on women. Their loyalty to each other is doubtful and there is little left of their friendship once an eligible bachelor moves into town.

When confronted with accusations of sexism, Updike defends himself: "I can't believe that I'm misogynist. Rather the contrary. Bright, clever, good women have played a major part in my life, and in my way I've tried to be sympathetic and depict the plight of women in our society."[89] The author might have been more persuasive in feminists' eyes if he had not made Alex, Sukie and Jane into promiscuous, malicious and jealous witches and given them some real power. Updike gives them illusory magical powers that could be written off as a coincidence or the result of drug-induced states. Their supernatural status as heroines overshadows their realistic portrayal as pathetic, depressed and struggling women worthy of sympathy.

In almost every interview when questioned on his attitude to women, Updike commented on his choice of turning his heroines into witch figures. He stated that he wrote *The Witches of Eastwick* as an investigation of femininity with the intention "to

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[88] Emily Nassbaum, "Updike and the Women," *New York Books*, October 19, 2008.
[89] Dwight Garner, "Interview with John Updike," *Salon*. 1999.

imagine himself into the lives of his three female protagonists" and "not to put down feminism but to hold it up to the light."[90] Why did the witch turn out to be a necessary and instrumental concept for Updike's investigation of femininity? Where did the idea come from? The author stated that the inspiration for the novel came from his personal experience because he met "witchy women, and [...] felt something of the sinister old myths to resonate with the modern female experience of liberation and raised consciousness."[91]

In an interview[92] with Don Swaim, Updike mentioned that his own grandmother was the source for much of the superstition in his novel. She was a Pennsylvania Dutch woman who liked to tell strange stories about the supernatural. He also mentioned that Jules Michelet's *La Sorcière* (*Satanism and Witchcraft,* 1862) was a great influence on his novel. Updike was attracted to the idea that most women did indeed view themselves as witches and embraced the role. After intending the novel as a peace offering to his feminist detractors, Updike felt puzzled by their unfavorable reaction.

The Witches of Eastwick generated a controversial response. Only a handful of reviews praised the novel for its literary merits and thematic innovations. Positive reviews were outnumbered by outraged responses from a feminist camp that called the novel "a locker-room joke," "sexist," "hysterical" and "mean." The book was judged as misogynistic and gynophobic despite the efforts of some critics to defend it by contending that Updike was reflecting only the point of view of the male characters of a particular age and class, and in that context demonstrating psychological insight.

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[90] Kim Laudermilk, *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 47.
[91] John Updike, "A Special Message," *Odd Jobs: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 855.
[92] Don Swaim, "Audio Interview with John Updike," *Wired For Books*. 5 June, 1984. Ohio University.

Feminist critics have long charged that Updike's male protagonists are deeply sexist and argued that the agenda of *The Witches* is not redemptive. Most feminists felt that the novel trivialized feminism and reduced female powers to mere spells and imprecations.

A brilliant example of feminist criticism of the novel belongs to Margaret Atwood. In her 1984 New York Times' review, she defines Updike's witches as negative characters and writes that the idea of female empowerment in *The Witches of Eastwick* is contradictory and ambiguous. She suggests that Updike takes the slogan "'sisterhood is powerful" and tries to subvert and compromise it.

Atwood explains Updike's employment of witchcraft as a metaphor for "sexuality and power, and especially with the apportioning of powers between the sexes, "[93] and she is not alone in her treatment of witchcraft as a site of struggle and negotiation of power between the sexes. In his introduction to *The Weird Gathering and Other Tales* (1979), an editor Ronald Curran, writes that witches in popular culture "reflect significant social attitudes," "illuminate the interrelationships of popular literature, culture and cognition" and help "recognize the patterns in sex role and personal identity which were vilified and which were then reinforced."[94] Those observations resonate with Updike's statements on witchcraft. In a collection of essays *Hugging the Shore* (1983), the writer remarks that "witchcraft is a venture, one could generally say, of women into the realm of power" and admits to having uneasy feelings while encountering powerful women in his life.

In a similar manner, Atwood suggests that witches in general and Updike's witches in particular are born out of fear: "the witches were burned … because they were

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[93] Margaret Atwood, "Wondering What It's Like To Be a Woman," *New York Times*. May 13, 1984.
[94] Ronald Curran, "Introduction," *The Weird Gathering and Other Tales* (Connecticut: Crest, 1979), 13.

feared."[95]

What fears do the witches of Eastwick represent and what kind of desires, and what strategy of containment does Updike choose in his narrative to deal with femininity unleashed and empowered by magic?

In her analysis of *The Witches of Eastwick* with the telling title "Weak Sisters", Kim Loudermilk explains Updike's failure to make a positive statement about women as working a wrong "choice of a symbol – the witch – to represent the liberated woman."[96] As she explains, the concept of "witch" bears negative cultural and historical baggage and by resorting to it, Updike misuses it and mystifies women and denigrates feminism.

Magic Realism or Realistic Magic

The plot of *The Witches* follows the lives of three women in a fictitious town of Eastwick, Rhode Island during the 1970s. The sequel *The Widows* describes their summer reunion and return to Eastwick some thirty years later. The setting is provincial Eastwick, a "sweetie-pie"[97] town, a typical American suburb with hypocritical social mores and superstitions. In *The Witches of Eastwick*, Alexandra, Jane and Sukie are three women in their prime, recently divorced with children. In *The Widows of Eastwick*, they are the aged widows touring the Rockies, Egypt and China as if trying to run away from death. They finally come back to Eastwick to revisit the memories of their past and to work some magic again.

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[95] Margaret Atwood, "Wondering What It's Like To Be a Woman," *New York Times*. May 13, 1984.
[96] Kim Laudermilk, *Fictional Feminism: How American Bestsellers Affect the Movement for Women's Equality* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 49.
[97] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick* (New York: Knopft, 1984), 172. Here and further all quotes are from this edition.

There is more witchcraft in *The Witches* than in its sequel. Even for the witches, aging is unavoidable and means losing powers. The sequel reconvenes the aging witches to deal with regrets and to make amends, detailing their pain, shame and fear of aging. Writing the sequel was personal for Updike because, as he says: "Taking those women into old age would be a way of writing about old age, my old age"[98] Why would a male writer need three female characters to describe his own aging? Could it be interpreted as a denial of aging and mortality, or as some kind defense mechanism?

In *The Widows,* the women are rich and free, but they are more hags than witches. They are no longer young and desirable to men but free to express themselves without reservations. When they return to Eastwick, they make modest attempts to repair repercussions of their past magic but without much success. Their reunion brings their powers back "as prickings, foreshadowings, a girlish relish in malice"[99] and culminates in a tragicomic ritual to summon a Goddess to cure one of them of cancer. Their aging bodies betray them as their magic powers diminish: the ritual backfires as one of them dies. Aging and natural death bring an end to their powers and there is not enough magic in Updike's fictional world to restore it.

In *The Witches of Eastwick* the women are still young. They face the same social, economic and emotional challenges in the aftermath of divorce. Recently divorced, they enjoy their independence and ignore public opinion. They form a coven, a kind of support group for divorcees, and meet every Thursday for "alcohol, caloric rich goodies and gossip."[100] The women discover their supernatural powers, know some spells and are able

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[98]Emily Nassbaum, "Updike and the Women," *New York Books*, October 19, 2008.
[99] John Updike, *The Widows of Eastwick*. (New York: Knopf, 2008), 47.
[100] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 108.

"to raise a cone of power."[101] Single and seemingly rich Darryl van Horne comes to the town and adds a new element to their triangle. Alex, Jane and Sukie see him as a knight in shining armor and easily fall for him, becoming his lovers one by one and than all together. Parties at van Horn's mansion offer the women an escape from their boring lives. Women eagerly set aside morals and regularly visit the mansion to play tennis, to soak in a hot tub, to drink and smoke pot, to eat delicious food and to have copious sex because Darryl van Horne lives up to his devilish name. The foursome unleashes their latent bisexuality and feeds their malicious powers.

As Van Horne plays the women against each other, they become more competitive and vicious. They curse their nemesis Felicia Gabriel, a wife of Sukie's lover and boss, agreeing that she "should be put out of her misery."[102] One night Felicia is especially bitter accusing her husband in particular and man in general of everything that is wrong in Eastwick and the world. As she showers Clyde in insults and accusations, pieces of trash come out of her mouth. It sets Clyde off and he kills Felicia and then commits suicide. Upon hearing the news, Alex gets scared, but other two witches refuse to accept responsibility and write it off as a coincidence.

Parties at Van Horne's mansion grow bigger and louder and draw the new recruits Jenny and Chris Gabriel. At a party during Easter, Van Horne announces that he's married Jenny. Alex, Sukie and Jane do not take the news lightly. Out of jealousy and spite, they hex Jenny and she withers away from cancer. When Jenny dies, Van Horne leaves the town with Jenny's money and her brother who is rumored to become his lover.

Emotionally devastated the witches fall out as each of them casts a spell to

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[101] Ibid., 75.
[102] Ibid., 128.

conjure a new husband for herself, and soon they all marry and leave Eastwick, giving up both their close friendship and their supernatural powers.

As many critics observed the novel hovers between magic and realism: the witchcraft is often explained as a coincidence, paranoid or wishful thinking. A literary critic Nicholas Spice comments on Updike's use of magic as "a hyperbolical fiction, which floats us into a constant state of interpretative uncertainty."[103]

The number three defines *The Witches* and *The Widows* both structurally and thematically as each of the novels is organized into three parts under self-explanatory titles. In *The Witches* the narrative goes through three parts: Coven, Malefica, and Guilt. *The Widows* is constructed on the similar plan, and the corresponding titles are Coven Reconstituted, Malefica Revisited, and Guilt Assuaged.

Why does Updike need three witches? According to Marion Gibson, Updike's three witches represent "three different facets of American woman: a plump depressed artist from the West, a beautiful intelligent local reporter, and a sharp, embittered musician and music teacher from Massachusetts."[104] In my view, Alex, Jane and Sukie represent three conventional beauty types (blond, redhead and brunette), but they belong to the same class of struggling divorcees.

On the mythological level, the three witches can be seen as a representation of the Great Goddess (a virgin, a mother and a crone). Each of them was once a virgin, now is a mother and in the sequel *Widows of Eastwick* will become a crone.

The tripling of female deities goes back to ancient Greek mythology as the Moirai, the Erinnýes, the Charites, the Graiai, and the Hecate Trivia that continue to exist

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[103] Nicholas Spice, "Arsenals," *London Review of Books* 19, (18 October 1984): 16-17.
[104] Marion Gibson, "Retelling Salem Stories: Gender Politics and Witches in American Culture," *European Journal of American Culture* 25 (August, 2006): 85-107.

as reminders of matriarchal power and significance that later declines with the advent of Christianity. The same tripartite pattern to reemerges in Christianity's concept of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Unlike the unity and oneness of Holy Trinity, Updike's usage of the three witches suggests a fragmentation. His male characters are never split into three.

To perform magic three witches need to come together even though each of them has her supernatural powers. Sukie can fly. Jane can read people's mind. Alex can see people's aura in different colors. She can break a string of pearls on her neighbor's neck to cut an unpleasant conversation short. She also can kill an annoying squirrel with her look and can also alter the weather by will. She has a green thumb: her lavish garden with its abundant harvest of vegetables is symbolic of her high libido. When she harvests vegetables, zucchini, tomatoes, and eggplants, they remind her of male sexual parts. She picks tomatoes as if she "cupping a giant lover's testicles"[105] and processes them into "the blood like sauce."[106] Alex makes vegetables into sauces and puts them into jars as preserves for winter. Each of her lovers increases the fertility of her garden.

The witches perform magic rituals using everyday household items: cookie jars, pins, candles, detergent, and newspapers. Their spells are either learnt in English or improvised in Latin: Alex recites a string of names to whip up a storm. Repetitions of Latin words are an integral part of the spell: a triple "Morte" is enough to kill a squirrel and a triple "Copula" works as an attraction spell. Alex emphasizes that belief is an essential part of casting a spell: "it's important that you believe."[107] Hexing, she adds, draws on the anxieties and fears of targeted victims. With magic powers the witches

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[105] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 6.
[106] Ibid., 6.
[107] Ibid., 246.

accept “a burden of guilt, of murder and irreversibility.”[108] The fulfillment of their own wishes often means trouble and misfortune for others.

Their spells express desire for sex, for art, for freedom, for all the possibilities of the self, detached from the others. What is absent in their lives is articulated in spells and incantations. Very often witches wish for something to happen, and it comes about. As Sukie says, words “make things happen”[109] and even negative thoughts have power: “We kill people in our minds all the time. We erase mistakes. We rearrange priorities.”[110] Updike connects magic with imaginative wishful thinking following Freudian theory.

In *Totem and Taboo* (1918), Freud defined the omnipotence of thoughts as “the principle, which controls magic.”[111] He designated it as a symptom of compulsive neurosis and wrote that in its subtle form it is present in every thought because “As thought does not recognize distances and easily brings together in one act of consciousness things spatially and temporally far removed, the magic world also puts itself above spatial distance by telepathy, and treats a past association as if it were a present one.”[112]

To imply the power of words (be it magical, symbolic, or performative), Updike stresses some words of the witches’ speech by italicizing them. Jane is a witch with a particular speech pattern: she tends to extend her “s” making her speech into snake-like hissing. Similarly, she doesn't get angry in the customary way: because she is a witch,

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[108] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 246.
[109] Ibid., 160.
[110] Ibid., 160.
[111] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (1918), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Volume XIII. London: Hogarth Press, 1955. 278.
[112] Ibid., 284.

"her voice bristled like a black cat's fur."[113] This technique draws attention to certain words and syllables and thus even witches' everyday conversations starts to sound like spells.

The mix of realism and witchcraft lore in *The Witches* and *The Widows* marks the novels' style as magical realism. As a narrative device, magic performs several functions: it's a source for comedy, grotesqueness and violence. Magic materializes what otherwise would remain wishful thinking: milk turns into cream, a storm cleans up the beach, a necklace breaks and cuts short a boring conversation. While suggesting that the witches are powerful, Updike still sets limits to their magic as they are not able to achieve financial security, or avoid aging nor are they able to get the approval of their community. The witches have to work to support themselves and their children. They cannot reverse time. The witches cannot change what people think about them. Money, time and public opinion seem to be beyond the influence of their magic.

A significant and very fitting feature of the novel is its shifting point of view: the narrative perspective often shifts among the protagonists, minor characters and anonymous narrator. It produces an unsettling effect, as the reader is not sure who is narrating the story.

At the end of the novel, the anonymous narrator is mildly judgmental and disapproving of the witches but seems to be attracted to them because they are "gorgeous and doing evil."[114] The narrator feels something "oblong and invisible and exciting" in the legacy of the witches, "a scandal, like smoke rising twisted into legend."[115] Their attractive appearance is deceiving because it hides their evil intentions and manipulative

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[113] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 160.
[114] Ibid., 306.
[115] Ibid., 306.

nature.

Often the narrative is rendered from Alex's perspective. Her vision grounds the novel in many ways as it explores her musings about what a bad mother she is, how old she is getting, what her marriage was like, what her artistic inspirations are and how much she likes Darryl. Her insecurities and anxieties are quite realistic of a middle aged suburban woman.

Updike presents Eastwick as an average provincial American town, still insular even for the early 1970s, which in other places was punctuated by the protests against the Vietnam war, a growing assertiveness of women against patriarchy, the sexual revolution, experiments with psychedelic drugs, and the post-modern blurring of popular culture and high art. The time of the novel is marked by the references to Vietnam War, pop art, and the moon landing. Updike invokes the rhetoric of second wave feminism throughout the novel, but discredits the benevolent aims of women's empowerment. Against the background of the second wave of feminism, Updike's witches seem to be undermining the progressive goals of the women's movement with their selfish, vain, and ultimately destructive magic.

Explanation for Witchcraft: Medieval and Modern

In his novels Updike presents witchcraft as the last resort of a desperate divorcee to claim some agency and power. An analogy is drawn between the witch's magic and the women's independence. *The Witches of Eastwick* opens with the idea that divorce empowers and transforms women into witches, triggering their potential for malice. In *The Widows of Eastwick*, Alexandra explains to her daughter: "we fell off the marriage

bandwagon, there was nothing much left for us but to ride a broomstick and cook up spells."[116] Witchcraft once again is presented as some sort of a coping mechanism.

While being divorced is the main enabling factor to becoming a witch, there are others that Updike invokes and relies on, such as the special "air of Eastwick"[117], heredity and female bonding. Updike explains witchcraft almost as a genetic program of mitochondria passed only to women from "the daughter of a daughter and a woman whose daughters would in turn bear daughters."[118] In addition to genetics, Updike connects witchcraft with a sense of entitlement – "right to exist, that the forces of nature had created her not as an afterthought and companion – a bent rib, as the famous *Malleus Maleficarum* had it – but as a mainstay of the continuous Creation."[119]

As Updike presents magic as a dormant inner feminine essence passed on from generation to generation, he obliquely alludes to *Malleus Maleficarum* (1485). Treatise's statement "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust which is in women insatiable"[120] emerges as Clyde's comment on female sexuality: "Amazing, women, the way loving never fills them up. If you do a good job, they want more the next minute."[121] Witchcraft and female sexuality are together in both statements suggesting male failure to satisfy female desire. A fear of impotence is derived from a female sexuality that is defined as "insatiable." The medieval treatise portrays a devil as an unfailing lover, while Updike introduces van Horne as a diabolical parallel.

Updike's witches live up to of the most characteristics of witches as described in

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[116] John Updike, *The Widows of Eastwick*, 86.
[117] Ibid., 8.
[118] Ibid., 14.
[119] Ibid., 14.
[120] Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum* (New York: Dover, 1971), 141.
[121] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 153.

the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Each woman has a dog as her familiar that matches her appearance and character. Alexandra, "the broadest in body, and the nearest in character to normal, generous-spirited humanity"[122], has a kind Labrador; oversexed Sukie has a sneaky Weimaraner and sinister Jane has an angry Doberman. Among the three, Alexandra is portrayed as being most affectionate to her dog. She calls him "a baby," "doggie," " an angel," while refers to her children as "little shits" and "brats." She does not feel guilty about neglecting children but she feels guilty about neglecting her dog. The relationship between Alex and her dog is depicted as almost intimate as she lets the dog lie next to her and lick her body because it alleviates her depression.

As references to the medieval stereotypes abound, Updike makes the women consort with the devil who comes into Eastwick as Darryl van Horne. His devilish nature is revealed in his name, his function as a tempter and in the pervasive smell of sulfur that follows him. He insinuates himself among the witches, creating resentment and jealousy within the coven. He seduces and flatters them. A devil incarnate, Van Horne, invites the witches into his oversized house, bed and tub designed for sexual pleasure. As an embodiment of self-indulgence and permissiveness, he offers carnal pleasures to the witches that they cannot resist. Van Horne provides the space for these women to indulge themselves.

Another similarity with medieval witches is that the Eastwick witches also subvert Christian beliefs. The women belong to the local Episcopal Church but they are not true believers. They whimsically subvert Christian prayers in their rituals. They recite the Pater Noster in reverse during the Christmas party. They arrange their orgies on the

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[122] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 153.

days of religious holidays: Halloween, Christmas and Easter because Van Horne feels particularly sad and abandoned on those days.

Like medieval witches, the Eastwick witches know spells, form a coven and consort with the devil. Updike's witches do not steal penises, but they do steal husbands. Updike suggests that the witches bring strange and tragic effects to the lives of their lovers: some go bankrupt, some abandon their families, and Clyde kills his wife and commits suicide. Updike makes his witches adulteresses. After divorce, the witches take lovers. The women prefer to imagine their own ex-husbands reduced to "dust", "dried herbs" or "place mats."[123] However, such improbable transformations turn out to be workings of their imagination similar to defense mechanism as it mentioned later that they still receive child support from their former husbands.

Updike utilizes the medieval stereotypes of witches and witchcraft and applies them to his "investigation" of modern femininity. The difference between the medieval and twentieth-century witches is that the first are burnt at stake and the last are "burned […] alive in the tongues of indignant opinion."[124] Despite the blows to their reputation, Alex, Sukie and Jane do not suffer any major consequences for their dabbling in witchcraft. Quite the opposite, they enjoy themselves greatly and get away with numerous forms of mischief.

From the beginning, Updike emphasizes that Alex, Sukie and Jane are attractive women even though Alex is a little overweight and Sukie is compared to a monkey. The women's appearance does not mark them as witches, but they have the traditional traits of being vindictive, temperamental, and spiteful.

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[123] John Updike, *Witches of Eastwick*, 7.
[124] Ibid., 74.

The three divorcees embody a negative stereotype of divorced women as lustful and predatory. They drink a lot, neglect their children, have sex with married men, and torment their enemies (often their lovers' wives). They know incantations, can fly and call up storms at will. They have careers although not lucrative ones: Alexandra makes clay figurines for a local shop, Jane gives cello lessons, and Sukie is a local reporter and real estate agent. They are "poor as church mice"[125] and have to save and scrimp from one child-support check to another. That's why Van Horne's wealth is so enticing that they forgive his physical unattractiveness and foul smell and willingly share his bed. Economically disadvantaged, the women are blinded by the van Horne's wealth and drawn by his flattery and promises. Selfish interest in a rich bachelor fuels the competition for his favors compromising their friendship with each other. Even Alex, who first decides that Van Horne is ugly and appalling, surrenders to him. Nature falls prey to Culture.

Alex, the most powerful witch of the three, represents both the creative and destructive sides of Nature. She justifies the violent and unpredictable side of nature explaining "Nature kills constantly, and we call her beautiful."[126] In *Woman and Nature* (1984), Susan Griffin expands on the implications of a patriarchal philosophical trend that associates women with nature: sexuality and nature "are made into one force, and this force is personified as woman."[127] She concludes that nature is imagined as fatal and evil as a reflection of men's own frailties. According to Griffin, "the metaphors that associate women with nature are actually mystifications of oppressive patriarchal

[125] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 58.
[126] Ibid., 132.
[127] Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature* (Harper & Row, 1978), 26.

stereotypes."[128] Updike takes the same path crediting the witches with the connection to nature and portraying van Horne — to technology and culture.

Alex has the strongest connection to Nature. Updike uses several variations of her name — Alexandra, Alex and Lexa — to reflect her mood and her role. In Latin, Alexandra means a protector, Alex stands for "without law", and Lexa could be read as "lawful." Her name is as ambiguous and as ever changing as her mood.

Alex has a special gift, "a sense of merge": she can become "a rigid trunk", "an oblong cloud" or "a toad."[129] However, her ability to empathize does not extend to people. She blocks that ability on purpose because it drains and exhausts her. Alex experiences what Nancy Chodorow describes in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) as "the basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate."[130] Chodorow also suggests that because of the experience of pregnancy that requires female bodies and minds to accept and sustain the Other within their bodies, women are more empathetic. However, the theorist does not elaborate on the consequences of that ability. For Updike's witch, Alex, the result of her overarching empathy is depression.

The novel suggests that the demands of marriage, childbirth and motherhood caused Alex' despondences. Updike expresses her condition in a metaphor that compares Alex to "a fish, sluggish and misshapen at the bottom of the sea, suffocated."[131] He also makes Alex alienated from her own body. Such a negative attitude to her body is reflective of her emotional condition. She "loved her body as a girl," but after getting

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[128] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 13.
[129] Ibid., 97.
[130] Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: California UP, 1978), 169.
[131] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick,* 67.

married, she started to hate it. Only after divorce she felt relieved and started to work on her garden: "she was planting and singing,"[132] but it was not relieve her depression. She slips back when she is lonely, staying in bed for hours reluctant to get out and do anything.

Similar to the depressed heroines of Charlotte Gilman's "Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and Virginia Woolf's "Mark on the Wall" (1921), Alex sees clowns' faces in the floral pattern of the bedroom curtains and is afraid of them: "they were devils."[133] The picture on the curtains is like a Rorschach test that brings up her hostility to herself.

Through Alexandra, "the profoundest witch of the three" as a main narrator, Updike provides an insight into the inner world of a woman under the pressure of the demands placed on femininity. Her depression is triggered by her marriage and intensified by four childbirths: "child after child leaped from between her legs."[134] As she was taking care of her children and her husband, she started to feel that "she was feeding the world but no longer fed by it."[135] A promising artist she has to postpone her dreams and devote herself to her family. As a result, she is left exhausted and empty: "the world poured through her, wasted, down the drain."[136] In a desperate attempt to define her condition, Alex describes femininity as "not a hole … a sponge, a heavy squishy thing … soaking out of the air all the futility and misery."[137]

The concepts of a hole and a sponge are both metonymical and metaphorical because they refer to the vagina and femininity at the same time. These degrading images

[132] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick* , 145.
[133] Ibid., 71.
[134] Ibid., 69.
[135] Ibid., 69.
[136] Ibid., 70.
[137] Ibid., 70.

imply emptiness and mutability and go back to Hippocratic medical treatises that treated the female body as a deviation, something to be shaped, contained and controlled. Another part of Alex's body – her "fat bare toes, corned and bent by years in shoes shaped by men's desires and cruel notions of beauty"[138] also serve as a symbol of repressed and misshaped femininity squeezed into the expectations and demands of patriarchal culture.

Art is Alexandra's emotional and creative outlet. Her artistic creations are tiny clay figurines, chunky and naked female bodies that resemble prehistoric fetishes. Her creations encapsulate femininity in an antithetical way to Kienholz's pop art that Van Horne admires, but Alexandra sees as "rude, a joke against women."[139] Made out of clay Alex's figurines refer to the naturalness and authenticity of femininity. Nevertheless she makes them in their sleeping or resting position. Alexandra's figurines cannot stand up by themselves, and that is symbolic of the handicapped position of femininity. The figurines also are much smaller in scale and Van Horne sniffs at them while admiring the large scale of Kienholz' artwork:

> a naked woman on her back with her legs spread; she had been concocted out of chicken wire, flattened beer cans, an old porcelain chamber pot for her belly, pieces of chrome car bumper, items of underwear stiffened with lacquer and glue.[140]

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[138] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 78.
[139] Ibid., 87.
[140] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 86.

Kienholz's artwork is composed of junk that suggests the artificiality of femininity. The position of a sculpture is subservient inviting sexual advances. Its doll's plastic face, "with china-blue eyes and cherubic pink cheeks,"[141] is infantile and passive. While Alex's artwork construct femininity as innate and essential, Kienholz's portrays it as a constructed artificial composition.

Temptation of the Witches

The source of temptation for the Eastwick witches is Daryl Han Horn, the Devil incarnate. Unlike his medieval prototype, the twentieth century Devil is not scary or threatening but a mix of slob, entrepreneur and lover. He tempts the women with luxury, undisguised flattery and incessant sex. His oversized eight-foot teak hot tub at the mansion rewrites the Hell into a pleasurable spa in the solvent and sensual scene of the witches relaxing in the tub in the first chapter.

A hot bubbling tub invokes a witches' cauldron with its womb symbolism. After smoking pot, the witches uninhibitedly discuss gender roles and scatological bodily functions describing childbirth, breastfeeding and other physiological aspects of being a woman. Van Horne comments at length on "the plumbing" of female bodies, Updikes' metaphor for breasts and womb. Such and similar statements express male fascination with fear of and disgust at childbirth, lactation, and related female physiology, claiming that men are "so squeamish about everything"[142] and that women have higher tolerance to pain and suffering.

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[141] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 86.
[142] Ibid., 111.

Van Horne expresses both admiration and abhorrence of female bodies, "a marvelous and strange organism."[143] He is envious of women's body ability to "make a baby and then make milk to feed it."[144] Jane responds with sarcasm that the male body "can turn food into shit."[145] The women share their memories of childbirth and admit that it was something special and they felt exhausted but high. In a real or mock pang of womb envy, Van Horne exclaims: "God, I wish to be a woman!"[146] From a psychoanalytic approach Updike's representation of the witch's body stems from an anxiety created by mothering, which is both nurturing and sexual, caring and restricting.

Updike's description of childbirth is romanticized and presented as a pleasurable even ecstatic process. Van Horn's description reflects a patriarchal glorification of motherhood. It's hard to imagine that a man would envy a pregnancy during which a fetus grows inside the maternal body and then at the end has to come out though an opening that is too small. Pregnancy and childbirth are psychologically and physiologically taxing events that patriarchal culture portrays as sacred and inherently womanly.

Placing so much emphasis on the body and scatological themes, Updike expresses a fundamental problem that in the patriarchal society a woman has traditionally been regarded as a symbol and object for men's ends. This view coincides with those of a French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard who defines woman as "a creation of the jealousy he [man] feels for something he is forbidden to be."[147] However, Updike's novel

[143] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 112.
[144] Ibid., 108.
[145] Ibid., 108.
[146] Ibid., 109.
[147] Jean Fransois Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 111.

conveys more than jealousy and envy, by casting women as witches it suggests male paranoia.

With magic powers, Updike unleashes his witches' sexuality. In Van Horne's mansion, after drinking and smoking, there is massage and then group sex: "The three women played with him together, using the parts of his body as a vocabulary with which to speak to one another."[148] The witches use van Horne's body to communicate their same-sex attraction for each other. In positing the erotic drive as an empowering element in the dynamics of gender relations, Updike takes a critical aim at the male fantasy in which a woman is either objectified or idealized and which denies her both agency and voice. The narrative resists identifying the masculine as simply active and creative and the feminine as passive and receptive; in the same way, it subverts Freud's claims, according to which the subject of desire is male and the object of desire is female.

In "The Traffic in Women" (1975), Gayle Rubin suggests that the taboo on same-sex behavior both bars women from phallic power and mandates heterosexual alliance that produces the subjugation of women. Even though Updike hints at the possibility of lesbian attraction among women, still in the end the witches have "to subsume their love for each other into a kind of love for"[149] van Horne, an overblown image of male ego.

Van Horne has a propensity for oversized items and obsessive collecting. Nothing is small about him: his mansion accommodates seven grand pianos, a lab, a library, a pop art collection and a tub-room and he still complains about a tight space. His huge house is a reflection of his libido. His sexual prowess is overwhelming even for three witches:

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[148] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 167.
[149] Ibid., 118.

“he showed a supernatural control”[150], “his cold penis hurt as if it were covered with the little scales.”[151] His name Van Horne and his sexual prowess represent a pre-Viagra male fantasy of “infallible and unfeeling”[152] potency. Updike describes male sexual organs employing military or animal imagery: “torpedo,” “a dog’s tail,”[153] while there are only a few instances when Updike tries to describe female genitals but stops halfway the same way Alexandra’s figurines carry only a hint of vulva unlike “the dolls she used to play with as a child.”[154] Describing female sexual organs, Updike resorts to food or nature imagery: “a pie”, “a twin little pale buns off a pastry tray”[155], “a big plate of ice-cream,” “a garden.” Male sexual organs assume characteristics of weapons or animals, suggesting aggression and wildness, while female sexual organ is presented as gastronomic products fit for consumption.

In descriptions of intimate relationships, Updike focuses on explicit mechanical imagery of sexual intercourse, usually without any romantic or emotional context. A literary critic Edward Champion notes that Updike’s description of sex heavily favors "external sexual imagery" rife with "explicit anatomical detail" rather than "internal emotion."[156] His observation holds for *The Witches of Eastwick*. The relationship between van Horne and the witches fits into a scenario in which a man dominates submissive women sexually and emotionally. He sees the women as his toys and feels “a surge of possessive pride”[157] when all three of them are under his control. He is a collector and

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[150] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 167.
[151] Ibid., 168.
[152] Ibid., 139.
[153] Ibid., 117.
[154] Ibid., 236.
[155] Ibid., 154.
[156] “Interview, with John Updike,” *The Bat Segundo Show* 50. July 14, 2006.
[157] Sigmund Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Volume XIX. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 277.

prefers polygamous sex with no strings attached. It's not the same for the women who eventually develop feelings for him and start competing for his attention.

Instead of identifying Van Horn as a cause of their anger and dissatisfaction, the jealous and bitter witches misplace it on other women. When they talk about their own kind, their pronouncements are misogynistic and spiteful. Jane is the bitterest witch as she unleashes her animosity against a wife of her lover, Felicia Clyde: "she has lost touch with her womanhood. She needed pain to remind her she was a woman."[158] She insists that Felicia needs to be humiliated, sexually abused and beaten in order to restore her touch with femininity. Why does Updike insist that a woman can endure more suffering and pain and "hold whole kingdoms of night within her, burning?"[159] Updike's emphasis on pain, suffering, and humiliation as an essential component of femininity is uncomfortable and wrong, providing Van Horne an excuse to mistreat women. Such position also naturalizes masochism as a female condition in an outdated Freudian manner.

In his essay "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924), Freud defined masochism as a female pathology and explained it as the inevitable result of the castration complex. According to him, feminine masochism, "an expression of the feminine being nature"[160], is one of the three primary forms of masochism along with moral masochism and primary, erotogenic masochism. Based "entirely . . . on the primary, erotogenic masochism, or pleasure in pain,"[161] feminine masochism, according to Freud, is clinically accessible through the fantasies of masochistic men, who obtain

[158] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 161.
[159] Ibid., 160.
[160] Sigmund Freud, "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Volume XIX. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 161.
[161] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 167.

sexual satisfaction primarily through masturbation. Behind such men's need for punishment and humiliation (which form a transition to moral masochism by way of guilt) there is an infantile staging of a "characteristically female situation" that signifies "being castrated, or copulated with, or giving birth to a baby."[162] Freud also acknowledged that the social repression of aggressiveness in women could lead to secondary masochistic impulses, "which succeed [. . .] in binding erotically the destructive trends which have been diverted inwards."[163] In a Freudian vein, Updike naturalizes female masochism and in this way eludes the moral implications of demeaning and mistreating women.

The Freudian theory of masochism is contested by a number of feminist psychologists. For example, Paula Caplan in her study *The Myth of Women's Masochism* (1985) claims: "Masochism is mostly just adaptation to unsatisfying and limiting circumstances"[164] and argues that female masochism is a conditioned response to patriarchal oppression, an adaptive survival strategy that allow women to not only participate in the patriarchal economy but derive some benefits from it.

It has been noted many times that Updike's attitude to adultery is casual and permissive. He almost normalizes adultery: "often a social embarrassment but rarely a cause for individual damnation."[165] The clash between individual impulse and ethical codes of the community is integral to Updike's literary works that often position adultery as "adventure and its life-enhancing and faith-providing properties."[166] In a provocative

[162] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 162.
[163] Ibid., 162.
[164] Paula Caplan, *The Myth of Women's Masochism* (Toronto UP, 1993), 324.
[165] Donald J. Greiner, *Adultery in the American Novel: Updike, James, and Hawthorne* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 57.
[166] James Schiff, *Updike's Version* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 124.

move, Updike assigns redemptive and rebellious potential to sex and infidelity. In the *Time's* cover article, he describes adultery as an "imaginative quest."[167] As one of the characters in *Couples* puts it, adultery "is a way of giving yourself adventures. Of getting out in the world and seeking knowledge."[168] As many critics observed, in his novels and short stories Updike represents a pursuit of sexual gratification as an ontological exercise and a liberating practice.

In *The Witches of Eastwick,* Updike advances the idea of adultery as a healing magic for men: "It was fundamental and instinctive, it was womanly, to want to heal – to apply the poultice of acquiescent flesh to the wound of a man's desire, to give his closeted spirit the exaltation of seeing a witch slip out of her clothes and go skyclad in a room of tawdry motel furniture."[169] For the witches, as for most of Updike's characters, sex offers an escape, an alternate life, "a holiday from the stale-smelling life."[170]

In his review, David Foster Wallace blames Updike for insisting on "the adolescent idea that getting to have sex with whomever one wants whenever one wants is a cure for ontological despair."[171] His observation rings only half true for *The Witches of Eastwick* who are desperate while Van Horne seems to suffer neither from ontological despair nor moral scruples but rather lack of money and admiration.

The witches are compelled into most affairs by pity and sexual appetite rather than by material interest or emotional attachment. Updike spells out a perfect scenario for affairs that exist on

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[167] Quoted in Kattie Roiphe, "The Naked and the Conflicted," *New York Times. Sunday Book Review*. December 31, 2009.
[168] John Updike, *Couples* (New York: Random House, 1996), 47.
[169] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 201.
[170] Ibid., 141.
[171] David Foster Wallace, "John Updike, Champion Literary Phallocrat, Drops One; Is This Finally the End for Magnificent Narcissists?" *New York Observer,* (13 October 1997).

> the strength of his cock alone, [...] the smell and amusement and weight of him—no buying you with mortgage payments, no blackmailing you with shared children, but welcomed simply, into the walls of yourself, an admission dignified by freedom and equality.[172]

The quote suggests that an ideal sexual relationship depends on the size of the penis, the smell and weight of the male body. There should be no expectations or obligations imposed on a man by a woman. Updike throws his witches into adultery but they do not seem to benefit from it materially, emotionally or morally. Alex has an on-going affair with a handyman, Joe, but her house is falling apart. She enjoys Joe's visits but discourages him from leaving h,is family. When Joe is puzzled why he is so attracted to her, Alex says that she bewitched him. When Alex stops enjoying sex with her lover, she thinks that Joe's wife hexed her.

Sukie has several affairs at the same time. She is not very discriminating: even her friends think that she overextends herself. What drives her is mostly pity and loneliness. She feels pity for Clyde because his wife nags him all the time, Sukie invites Clyde to her house when Felicia is out of town. For Clyde, his lover and his wife are the antipodes: "one woman was heaven, and the other hell"[173] because Sukie offers ultimate acceptance and indulges him while the wife makes demands and disparages him. Sukie pities unhappy Clyde whom she sees as "a dog skin of warm bones."[174]

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[172] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 145.
[173] Ibid., 128.
[174] Ibid., 139.

Even in this situation, Sukie's value depends on her lover's perception. Standing naked in front of her sad lover, Sukie feels insecure: "frightful fluctuations a woman must endure on the stock exchange of male minds: up and down."[175] While Sukie feels ashamed of her aging body, Clyde's penis is described as "the most precarious piece of the flesh."[176] Sex with Clyde turns out to be unsatisfying for Sukie but she does not stop because she wants to provide her lover with pleasure. In a Freudian vein, Updike seems to suggest that sexual frustration is the underlying reason for human unhappiness. For his characters, adultery is an attempt to outsmart the repression of the sexual drive and to provide temporarily a release from their misery.

The novel seems to suggest that sexual satisfaction and happiness is impossible within marriage: "marriage is like two people locked up with one lesson to read, over and over, until the words become madness."[177] In the novel, the relationship of the only married couple Clyde and Felicia Gabriel is portrayed in an unfavorable light. After thirty years of marriage their love turns into hate and spite and ends in a gruesome murder-suicide. Clyde blames his depression on his wife Felicia, "that self-righteous boring bitch", for making him numb and his world as "tasteless as paper."[178] That makes him drink himself into a stupor to obliterate out her nagging. The blame for a failed marriage is put on a wife and her active participation in various social activities and movements, while Clyde is presented as a victim seeking solace in extramarital sex and alcohol.

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[175] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 138.
[176] Ibid., 139.
[177] Ibid., 149.
[178] Ibid., 139.

A Feminist Caricature of Felicia Clyde

Despite the general consensus that reads the Eastwick witches as feminists, none of their aspirations fit into that category. They are not rebelling against patriarchy. They accept the dominance of men. Moreover, they do not feel solidarity with other women: if they are single they are competitors, if they are married they are an inconvenience and obstacle. The witches play with the rhetoric of emancipation but are ready to throw it aside as soon as an eligible bachelor appears.

Felicia Gabriel is the only character reminiscent of an active feminist and it's not a coincidence that Updike turns her into a caricature and then makes her husband kill her in a fit of a blind rage. By portraying Felicia in a negative light and contriving such a terrible demise, Updike makes a pronouncement on feminism. Updike's portrayal of Felicia is so unsympathetic and repulsive that the message is obvious: it's better to be a witch than a feminist.

Felicia is involved in all sorts of organizations "obsessed with making the world a better place."[179] She is against the war in Vietnam, pornography, and capitalist exploitation – a vocal source of liberal indignation. She uses her brilliant rhetorical skill to get on her husband's nerves. She scolds him for being a weak and passive editor and being more interested in Sukie than in giving "voice to the community and its legitimate concerns."[180] She pushes Clyde to fire Sukie, but Clyde defends his lover: "divorced women have to work. Married women don't have to do anything and can fart around with liberal causes."[181]

Felicia is hostile to the three witches calling them "whores and neurotics and a

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[179] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick,* 169.
[180] Ibid., 127.
[181] Ibid., 128.

disgrace to the community"[182] and the three witches reciprocate by hexing her. They conjure a special cookie jar and Felicia starts vomiting trash, "… parrot feathers, dead wasps, bits of eggshells" instead of liberal speeches and accusations.

Felicia's feminism is portrayed as a disease. Clyde explains his wife's political agenda as a combination of "sexual frustration"[183] and hypoglycemia. She blames him as a man for all evils, "for sitting in a chair while unjust wars, fascist governments, and profit-greedy exploiters ravaged the world."[184] As she continues to disparage and undermine him, her fury transforms her into a crazy and hysterical Medusa-like figure: "her face had gone white as a skull; her eyes burnt," "her hair seemed to be standing up in a ragged, skimpy halo. Most terribly, thing kept coming out of her mouth"[185] The trash out of her mouth literalizes and diminishes the feminist agenda she stands for. Her outspokenness and her feminist political views get her killed. Craving silence, Clyde beats her with to death with a poker: "he had plugged this hole in cosmic peace forever."[186] He regrets his actions too late. Still debating in his mind with Felicia over his worthiness and manhood, he finishes his scotch and kills himself. In a very twisted way, the novel expresses more sympathy for Clyde than for Felicia who is portrayed as an unsympathetic character. Updike's account of Clyde's suicide is reveals an gripping introspection while Felicia's mind remains inaccessible. This narrative strategy makes readers feel sympathy for Clyde while promoting the idea that Felicia had it coming.

Mockingly or ironically, Updike gives his only feminist character the name Felicia, etymologically rooted in the Latin *felix* for "happy" and portrays her in such an

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[182] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 127.
[183] Ibid., 149.
[184] Ibid., 148.
[185] Ibid., 148.
[186] Ibid., 149.

unfavorable light that her murder seems justified. His narrative never gets inside Felicia's mind unlike its treatment of the witches, Jenny, van Horn and even Clyde. Updike has no sympathy for Felicia: she is worse than a witch.

Through Felicia, Updike presents feminism in particular and political activism in general as an occupation for a sexually frustrated woman with nothing better to do and deserving to die because she is insufferable.

Many critics mistakenly identify Alex, Sukie and Jane as feminists turning a blind eye to poor Felicia. For example, a feminist scholar Kim Loudermilk enlists the witches into the feminist camp because they "break free of the limits placed upon them by patriarchal ideology"[187]: they are working women, they neglect their children, and "they embrace feminist philosophy regarding appearance and standards of beauty"[188] by being slightly overweight, wearing men's clothing, and not shaving pubic hair. This list of "the transgressions" is enough for Loudermilk to conclude: "Updike means for these witches to represent feminism."[189] Such a statement seems precipitous and poorly supported.

If the statement about feminism of the witches holds, then either Updike's understanding of feminism is very limited or critics are afraid to look at the corpse of Felicia. Wouldn't it be wonderful if all feminists were like Alex, Sukie and Jane? Aren't the promiscuous and undemanding witches better than the boring women who have time "to fart with liberal causes"[190]? The witches treat adulterous sex as healing and do not even expect to be given an orgasm in return. They do not expect to get material benefits

[187] Kim Loudermilk, "Weak Sisters," *Fictional Feminisms* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 101.
[188] Ibid., 101.
[189] Ibid., 102.
[190] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick,* 148.

and emotional support from their lovers.

Even though many critics like Kim Laudermilk, Paul Grey, Peter Prescot, and Diane Johnson agree that John Updike uses witchcraft as a metaphor for feminism, I suggest that the writer employs witchcraft as a metaphor for femininity, not feminism.

Hollywood's Happily-Ever-After for the Eastwick Witches

The novel was adapted in the film *The Witches of Eastwick* by director George Miller in 1987. Later in 2009, ABC launched several pilots for the TV series *Eastwick* that, unlike the film, was unsuccessful. As Updike commented on the film: "It had a beautiful cast but intruded on the world of the witches. It became [Jack] Nicholson's movie and dissolved into special effects."[191] Compared to the novel, Miller significantly reworked the plot and shifted the emphasis from witches to van Horne, brilliantly performed by Jack Nicholson. Miller chose Cher, Susan Sarandon and Michelle Pfeiffer to embody three suburban witches. According to Rachael Moseley[192], by casting standard Hollywood beauties Miller celebrates femininity whilst rejecting feminist identity.

At the beginning of the film, three women dream about a perfect lover, negotiating everything from a color of his hair to the size of his penis. Van Horne is a materialization of their collective sexual phantasy, a perfect man.

Unlike the novel, the film plays down the witches' mischief and promotes the idea of female solidarity. There is neither adultery nor promiscuity. There is no victimization of Jenny. Felicia Gabriel is a rather unintended victim and the witches repent shortly after her death. Terrified by Van Horne's growing influence on them, the witches withdraw

[191] Quoted in Alison Flood, "Beyond Rabitt: the Best of John Updike", *Guardian*, (28 January 2009).
[192] See Rachel Moseley, "Glamorous Witchcraft: Gender And Magic In Teen Film And Television", *Screen 43*, (September 2002): 403–422.

their attention and sexual favors. As a result he gets very sick and makes their worst fears come to life. To save Sukie from cancer, the witches pretend to submit to Van Horne's will and return to his mansion as his obedient lovers. Next morning they send him away, mold a wax figure and pierce it with needles. As they're doing it, Van Horne undergoes a monstrous transformation: he starts vomiting, panting and grunting, his face contorts and his extremities grow bigger and hairy. In rage and pain, he runs back to the mansion to punish them.

The witches lock themselves in a kitchen and melt the wax figure in the fire. The ritual turns an ogre-like Van Horne into a fetus-like creature that pops like a bubble. The film ends with an idyllic image of the witches and their babies living in van Horne's mansion. He tries to visit them as an image on a TV screen but the symbol of power – a remote control – is in the witches' hands, and they turn the screen off despite van Horne's pleading.

The film develops the feminist agenda much further than Updike's novel. In the film, the witches turn against the Man, the Devil. Together they have the determination, skill and power to drive him away, managing to liberate themselves and to end the story living in a happy communal family with their (and his) new babies.

The film is more feminist than the novel because the witches strengthen their friendship, destroy their devilish lover who demands their undivided attention and submission, take over his property and to establish a communal matriarchal paradise with their babies. It's a change from Updike's plot that packs the witches back into matrimony and scatters them around the country. Feminist critics Tania Krzywinska and Rachael Moseley praise the film over the novel because in the novel the empowerment of female

witches ends in a murder and mutual recrimination while in the film witchcraft is a source of fulfillment and happiness. In the novel, the witchcraft, a metaphor of female power, is morally compromised and self-limited by the fact that the witches seek marriage to escape from Eastwick and themselves. In the film, the witches transform their sisterhood into a family.

While Hollywood dares to imagine a happily-ever-after for the witches, in his novel Updike perpetuates an old message: that female happiness is in finding the right man. The novel's witches conjure their new husbands to fit their needs. Alexandra sculpts her husband out of clay, putting a lot of work into his legs and hands, because they are very important. Updike sketches her magic as a mundane one: "On her way back to the kitchen from the gardening-tool shed she passed through her workroom and saw her stalled armature at last for what it was: a husband"[193] with a pumpkin for its head. By seeking a husband, she is resolved to abandon her friends, her career and her witchcraft. As she conjures her future husband, she says to Sukie "you must imagine your life and then it happens."[194] However, her imagination is limited and the only available option is to become a wife.

Similarly, Jane conjures a husband for herself putting together pieces of her destroyed cello, some herbs, money, and a tuxedo into "a perfectly suitable little man in a tuxedo and patent-leather pumps."[195] Soon she too marries a wealthy art collector and leaves Eastwick too. In a similar manner, Sukie, staring into a mirror, conjures up "a jaunty sandy-haired man from Connecticut."[196] Her future husband is basically a

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[193] John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick,* 302.
[194] Ibid., 304.
[195] Ibid., 304.
[196] Ibid., 306.

reflection of herself. All husbands are creations conjured up according to women's needs and wishes.

In the novel, early feminist rhetoric about fashion, male chauvinism, and men's power abounds only to be reduced to the belief that women are really mainly interested in men. When at first, women seem to be content and happy by themselves because as Alexandra puts it "…men are not the answer, isn't that what we've decided?"[197], the end of the novel suggests the opposite as the three witches seek marriage. They eagerly abandon their status of desperate divorcees and witches to embrace the status of a housewife.

The Witches and *The Widows* suggest that women's power is whimsical and dangerous. Within his novels Updike discredits women's benevolent intentions and shows that what liberated women really want is a good lay and a good man or husband, and that they will use any power they gain (whether it's political or magic) merely for the same old things they have always used it for: to gain advantage in the competition among women for men. Updike does not really liberate his female protagonists by attributing magic powers to them because those powers have no substantial economic consequences.

In *The Witches of Eastwick* and its sequel *The Widows of Eastwick*, witchcraft is a sugar pill, a placebo of real power in an environment where political, economic and scientific power is mostly a male prerogative. Updike implies that all women are witches competing among themselves for men because men provide access to social and economic power.

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[197]John Updike, *The Witches of Eastwick*, 32.

In the novel, the witch is the central image with which Updike conceptualizes and mystifies femininity. For him, a woman is a witch in the sense that she does not conspicuously use direct efforts to achieve her goal, but relies on the invisible manipulations of words, thoughts and behavior. Updikes' witches compete for male attention. Female solidarity is possible only as long as women are not interested in the same men.

Chapter Three

Searching for the Voice: the Witch in the Poetry of Anne Sexton

PREAMBLE

The chapter explores and interprets Anne Sexton's employment of witchcraft imagery in her poetry. It starts with a brief biographical excursion that leads to the initial introduction of a witch metaphor in a reference for mental illness. Later, as if in an attempt to control her condition, Sexton treats a witch as her alter ego and even takes her position in *The Transformations* to put a witchy twist on the Grimm's fairy-tales. In the poem "The Witch's Life," an alienated and depressed lyrical persona identifies with the witch and locks her up inside her body where she sits "watching a basket of fire." In Sexton's poems the symbolism of the witch is ambiguous and multifaceted: it is presented as an inner entity that tries to come out but is ultimately contained and restricted by a lyrical persona. In this chapter I trace the transformations of the witch-figure in Sexton's poetry and explore psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations. I'll refer to the poetic persona Sexton adopts in her poetry as "Anne" due to a high degree of poet's personal investment.

I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
Anne Sexton

Poetry as Therapeutic Destruction Or Destructive Therapy

The image of the witch haunts the poetry of an American poet Anne Sexton (1928-1974) who began writing poetry as a therapeutic exercise in an attempt to control her volatile psychic condition. There is little agreement on Sexton's diagnosis. Her therapist Dr. Martin Orne diagnosed her with hysteria while Sexton's daughter, Linda Grey Sexton, writes in her memoir that her mother's "illness took different forms," ranging from suicidal ideation to psychotic episodes "such as hearing the voices that directed her to kill herself or her daughters."[198] Linda Grey Sexton suggests that Anne Sexton suffered from a bipolar disorder with some dissociative features. Reading Sexton's poetry for symptoms of her condition, a psychiatrist Colin M. Ross suspects that Sexton might have suffered from multiple personality disorder. The question of Sexton's mental diagnosis remains open. Whatever it was, as Sexton's biographer Diane Middlebrook attests in *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (1991) and as Linda Grey Sexton reminisces in her memoir *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton* (1994), Sexton's compulsions and regressions made a life for her and her family a harrowing experience. In Sexton's struggle to control her psychic volatility, poetry became her "attempt to exorcise personal demons, to understand her impulses and thus be in control."[199] Sexton wrote: "Poetry led me by the hand out of madness"[200] implying that poetry became her therapy. However, judging from the title of her first collection "To the

[198] Linda Grey Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1994), 78.
[199] Steven Colburn, *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 67.
[200] Quoted in Kay Redfield Jamison, *Touched with Fire* (New York: Free Press, 1993), 122.

Bedlam and Part Way Back" (1960), writing poetry aided Sexton only in a partial recovery and brought her only "part way back."

Sexton's poetic style is intimate, personal to the extent that it becomes almost exhibitionist. Her confessional style is close to that of contemporaries such as Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell – the later respectively her friend and teacher. She has been named the "High Priestess" and the "Mother"[201] of confessional poetry. However, Middlebrook asserts that Sexton herself "disliked the reductive implications of the term" and described herself as "the *only* confessional poet,"[202] a phrase that simultaneously identifies her with the school of confessional poetry and acknowledges her uniqueness.

In an interview with Harry Moore, Sexton insists: "my poetry is very personal." In fact, she goes even further: "Any public poem I have ever written, that wasn't personal, was usually a failure."[203] Her poetic exhibitionism was probably motivated and encouraged by a current psychoanalytic belief in "a talking cure" and a healing power of the narrative that reveals and structures the unconscious. However, the excessive digging in the past and revealing of the intimate and private can possibly be more destructive than the repression.

A major belief about expressive therapies at that time was that they serve as a means to self-understanding, emotional stability and resolution of conflict. However, recent studies suggest that writing poetry has a very little value in psychotherapy because it is missing the essential element – a narrative. What if Sexton's poetry and mental disorder are symbiotic twins that feed on each other? As Dr. Albert Rothenberg suggests:

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[201] Jo Gill, "Anne Sexton and Confessional Poetics," *Review of English Studies* 55 (June 2004): 425.
[202] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 382.
[203] Anne Sexton, "Interview with Anne Sexton" *No Evil Star*. Ed. by Steven Colburn (Ann Harbor: Michigan UP, 2007), 50.

> There is thus a thin but definite borderline between the most advanced and healthy type of thinking – creative thinking – and the most impoverished and pathological types of thinking - psychotic processes.[204]

It's hard to define the extent to which writing poetry was therapeutic or destructive for Sexton, because on the one hand there are nine volumes of poetry, a play, and four children's books, on the other hand there are depression and phobias intensified by alcoholism, recurrent nervous breakdowns and suicidal attempts, the last of which on October 4, 1974 was fatal.

It seems that at the end of Sexton's life, poetry exhausted whatever healing power it might previously had. As Linda Grey Sexton writes that during the last period of her mother's life "the poetry lost its center of gravity and began to spin out of control. Soon even the old black art brought no comfort to its creative witch."[205]

Her daughter's reference to her mother as a witch seems to be connected first and foremost to Sexton's creative powers. Such a parallel was common. For example, *The Radcliffe Quarterly* called Sexton "a contemporary witch"[206] for her unbound imagination and breaking taboos.

Sexton often used the metaphor of witchcraft and magic in talking or writing about the power of language and poetry. She compared herself to " [a] good witch or bad

[204] Albert Rothenberg, *Creativity and Madness* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 12.
[205] Linda Grey Sexton, *Searching for Mercy Street* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1994), 295.
[206] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 382.

witch, right from Grimm's fairy tales. Wish I could find I was related … to a witch."[207] As Steven Colburn observes in *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale*, the witch became an integral part of Sexton's "famous glamorous mask."[208] Sexton was well aware of her alter ego and promoted it. When asked who is hiding under her appearance of "a puritanical, beautiful chick", she answered: "the bad witch writes her poems."[209] The contradiction between outside and inside, appearance and essence, public and personal is reconciled in the concept of the witch.

Those statements testify to the importance of the witch-figure in Sexton's poetry. In Sexton's first collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) two poems directly refer to witches: "Double Image" and "Her Kind." In the first poem, "green witches" is important but hardly a central image while in "Her Kind" the witch is both a key image and a persona.

Diane Middlebrook offers a biographical interpretation of the poem matching it with facts from Sexton's life: her post partum depression, suicide attempts, a difficult relationship with her mother and daughter. What feels like painful guilt materializes in the form of "green witches" torturing and reprimanding "Anne."

"Anne" describes her conflicting love-hate relations with her mother and her little daughter, who was removed from her care. Unable to be a proper mother, "Anne" feels guilty and meaningless, depressed and infantile. As if escaping from the demands of motherhood, she regresses into her childhood and goes to live with her mother. She

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[207] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 247.
[208] Steven Colburn, *Anne Sexton: Telling the Tale* (Ann Harbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 67.
[209] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 248.

describes her condition of "a partly mended thing, an outgrown child."[210] The metaphor of a broken object suggests her inability to function while an infantile metaphor suggests that she is incapable of taking care of herself.

The phenomenon of an attempted return to childhood is well documented in psychoanalysis. Anna Freud described an infantile regression as one of the defence mechanisms in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1936) defining it as a return to behaviour, objects or stages fixated during childhood. The definition of regression appears later in Dr. Colin Ross' diagnosis of Sexton made on basis of her poems. While stressing that his findings are not conclusive and speculative, Ross asserts that Sexton's writings are "suggestive of the existence of a child alter personality stuck in the past at the time of the trauma, and constantly reliving the trauma internally."[211] His article is a blend of a literary criticism and a medical diagnosis.

As the poem continues, "Anne" hears destructive voices in her head: "Ugly angels spoke to me" (35). In the following lines, the oxymoron "ugly angels" transforms into green witches, a personification of repressed guilt. "Anne" seems to be unable to respond or argue with those destructive voices. The witches speak to her three times. They shame "Anne" for all her shortcomings: "The blame, they said, was mine" (36). They remind her that she is an inconvenience to her mother: "Too late, too late to live with your mother" (36). And finally, they instill the feeling of doom and despair: "Too late, too late to be forgiven" (36).

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[210] Anne Sexton "Double Image." *The Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*. (London: Virago, 1993), 35. For the sake of convenience further in the dissertation, Sexton's poetry is referenced according this edition with only page number given in parenthesis.
[211] Colin A. Ross, "Anne Sexton: Iatrogenesis of an Alter Personality in an Undiagnosed Case of MPD" *Dissociation* 3 (September 1992): 102.

"Anne" does not engage in a conversation with them and passively accepts their accusations. Significantly, the mother sides with the witches and puts more pressure on her daughter: "I can not forgive your suicide" (37). To stay connected to her mother, "Anne" splits her into good mother and evil green witch representing the maternal disapproval and anger.

Sexton's doubling of the mother parallels Melanie Klein's theory of splitting. In *Love, Hate and Reparation* (1964), Klein identifies such splitting as an infantile coping mechanism. She explains that children regularly split the image of the mother into two distinct images: the Good Mother and the Bad Mother. The Good Mother is available, nurturing, loving and all forgiving. In contrast, the Bad Mother is the unavailable and punishing mother. Klein applies her theory to classic fairy tales and claims that the witch in fairy tales is a product of the mother splitting and her death brings psychic relief to children.

In "The Double Image" the green witches continue to live even after the mother's death. In the poem, the "green witches" convey maternal resentment and disappointment at the failure of the daughter to grow up and meet her mother's expectations.

Sexton writes her second collection "All My Pretty Ones" (1962) in the aftermath of both parents' deaths. The collection is divided into five sections, each with a distinctive theme: the loss of her parents, the surgical procedures, and the mother-daughter relationship, aging, and a love affair. The witch does not appear as a separate image in this collection but references to witchcraft surface in "A Curse against Elegies", "Ghosts," and "Black Art".

The opening poem "A Curse against Elegies" presents one side of a conversation.

We hear only “Anne’s” inner voice caught in a fight with somebody, maybe even herself. She wants to move on, she “is tired of all the dead”, she “refuse to remember the dead” (60). Her counterpart is obsessed with a question of blame and is talking to the dead. “Anne” gives up and sends her counterpart to the graveyard to “talk back to your old bad dreams” (61). Overwhelmed and exhausted with mourning, Sexton defines as a curse the urge to remember the dead and talk to them.

The theme of death is developed further in the poem “Ghosts” where Sexton provides a catalogue of the ghosts of dead women, men and children. In feverish negation she emphasizes that the ghosts of women are “not witches”, the ghosts of men are “not devils,” and the ghosts of children are “not angels” (65). It seems that Sexton applies Freud’s formula of changing negation to affirmation when the unconscious is at work. For her, the dead mother is “a witch,” the dead father is “a devil” and the dead child is “an angel.” According to a French philosopher Jacque Derrida, “Psychoanalysis has taught us that the dead – a dead parent, for example – can be more alive for us, more powerful, more scary, than the living. It’s the question of ghosts”[212]

The poem can be interpreted from a biographical perspective: a dead woman in the poem is Sexton’s mother, a figure of great authority and power; a dead man is her abusive father who probably molested her as a child; a dead child may refer to an unborn child Sexton aborted from the fear it was not her husband’s child.

In “The Hex” from “The Book of Folly”(1972), “Anne” explores the cause of her depression and inability to enjoy the pleasant moments in life. She defines her depression as a Nana-hex: “Every time I get happy / the Nana-hex comes through” (313). The hex

[212] *Jacques Derrida, New York Times Magazine, Jan. 23, 1994.*

sours and turns everything rotten or dead. "Anne" recalls being thirteen a teenager with a positive attitude towards life encapsulated in lines: "I feel great! Life is marvelous! I wrote a poem!" (313). Her optimism is destroyed by "the old woman's shriek of fear / "You did it. You are the evil" (313). "Anne" does not describe the preceding event as it's repressed in her unconscious.

Trying to locate an event that caused Sexton's unstable mental condition in her childhood, Diane Middlebrook devotes one of the chapters to "Nana-Hex," uncovering the story of "bodily humiliations and spirit-killing rejections"[213] Sexton endured as a child from both her parents and Nana and later referred to it explaining her phobias and self-loathing. The poem "The Hex" identifies the trauma that prevents the maturation of "Anne": "thirteen for your whole life, just masks keep changing" (313). Middlebrook suggests the poetic voice here belongs to one of "damaged children trying to conjure happiness by magical thinking."[214] Many Sexton's poems rely on the voice of an infantilized lyrical heroine and focus on the theme of passive suffering.

The Witch as a Poetic Alter Ego

The witch is a central image of Sexton's signature poem "Her Kind," with which she frequently opened her public readings. It gave the same name to her poetry-rock group. In Sexton's opinion, the poem "show[ed] what kind of woman she was, and what kind of poet."[215] Paradoxically, by claiming that an audience could know her and her

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[213] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 248.
[214] Ibid., 220.
[215] Ibid., 115.

work through this particular poem, she suggested the opposite. Sexton loved paradoxes and one of her favorite was: "In poetry, truth is a lie is a truth."[216]

Middlebrook writes that Sexton hoped "Her Kind" would become a keynote of the film and for this purpose she often emphasized the metaphor of "good witch - bad witch." She stressed the concept of witchcraft in her commentary about to her own poetry in an interview with the director Richard Moore. In the footage from the documentary series "USA: A Poetry" produced by National Educational Television in the early 1970s, Sexton performs "Her Kind" in her deep dramatic voice. The tempo is slow and every line is accentuated. Sexton's face is captured in a close-up that creates a sense of intimacy. When she recites the poem, her eyes either fix on a book she's reading from or they look up to the right. Only while speaking the last two lines of each stanza, does she look directly into the camera and nod her head as if admitting: "I have been her kind" (15). Her voice is sad and melancholic.

Prior to becoming finally "Her Kind," the poem went through several revisions: it started as "Night Voice on a Broomstick" (1957), and turned into "Witch"(1959). Sexton changes a first person persona to polyphony, lengthens the short lines and adds a refrain that becomes the new title. While "Her Kind" is "accessible, challenging, richly textured, and culturally resonant,"[217] it showcases what Middlebrook calls "an undifferentiated but double 'I'"[218], an integral feature of Sexton's poetic voice.

In "Her Kind" Sexton shifts from one persona to another, and, as Middlebrook writes, "insists on a separation between a kind of woman (mad) and a kind of poet (a

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[216] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 258.
[217] Diana Hume George, *Sexton: Selected Criticism* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 35.
[218] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 114.

woman with magic craft): a doubleness that expressed the paradox of Sexton's creativity."[219] As she continues, the biographer fails to explain how the duplicity of Sexton's poetic persona "finds a way to represent a condition symbolized not in words but in symptoms that yet need to be comprehended." Sexton's double voice is indeed a reflection of what Elaine Showalter identifies as "double-voiced discourse," a characteristic of *écriture féminine* that embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant. Showalter argues that women's self-expression cannot exist independently of male-centered ideology: " . . . all language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it."[220]

Sexton's duplicity/multiplicity of poetic voices amounts to the special kind of polyphony defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1963). Polyphony means multiple voices coexisting and interacting within one framework. Bakhtin credits Dostoevsky with "constructing a polyphonic world and destroying the established forms of the fundamentally monologic (homophonic) European novel."[221] He writes that only a modern novel can accommodate polyphony unlike poetry that tends to be monological.

According to Bakhtin, in a polyphonic novel the voices of characters are absolutely free from authorial control. The same rule applies to Sexton's poetry that accommodates often several competing voices and disorienting shifts in perspective. Could such poetic fragmentation be a reflection of Anne Sexton's mental condition? Does her mental

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[219] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 114.
[220] Elaine Showalter, "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" *The New Feminist Criticism*. Edited by Elaine Showalter. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 264.

[221] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 8.

condition explain her poetic technique? On the one hand, Middlebrook refers to Sexton's poetry as symptomatic of her mental condition on the other hand she cautions against straightforward identification of life with poetry.

The poem "Her Kind" is an example of Sexton's splitting technique. Middlebrook interprets the poem as representing three versions of women: the witch, the housewife and the adulteress. In my view, the three verses in "Her Kind" do not describe three different types of women; instead, they elaborate on the persona of the witch with whom the poet strongly identifies. Particular emphasis is given to the idea that these three women are in fact one by the refrain in each stanza: "I have been her kind" (15). Thus Sexton's poem brings attention to performativity in a socially constructed idea of femininity where some roles, that of the witch included, are not encouraged because they are not conducive to survival.

Sexton's witch is "going out" and flying and thinking of evil. She breaks the norm of passive and benevolent femininity. Her witch boasts nocturnal powers and wild sexuality and the fact she has six fingers further emphasizes her monstrosity. Additional fingers can be interpreted as Sexton's attempt to restore castrated femininity and empower her witch. In many ways, "Anne's" witch represents her own alienation and inability to fit into the normative standard of femininity that she defined in one of her letters as "an apron with arms."[222] The first stanza presents the witch flying over rooftops and dreaming of evil. What more unpleasantly ironic image for the patriarchy could there be than a witch flying away from domestic bliss atop the broom, a tool symbolical of her enslavement to male fantasy of the cleaning woman by day and the sexed up

[222] Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters* (New York: Mariner, 2004), 93.

monogamous harlot by night?

Middlebrook asserts that the poem "is spoken through a mask by a dramatic persona and offers a psychological portrait of a social type,"[223] but in my view, the witch is not "a social type," but a deviation from it. The witch breaks away from the social limits: "I have gone out, a possessed witch" (15), but in the end, she is caught and brought back in a cart to be burnt at the stakes. Not only is she literally and metaphorically contained in a cage and destroyed on the fire, her demise sends a warning to anyone who would follow in her steps.

In the second stanza, the witch returns to her cave filled with 'skillets, carvings, shelves, closets, silks, innumerable goods" (15) to serve "worms and elves" (15). And finally, in the third stanza the witch is carted though the village and burned. Each stanza is furnished with some sort of a verdict: the witch "is not a women quite," "is misunderstood" and "is not ashamed to die" (15). According to Middlebrook, in the poem "Her Kind" Sexton expresses the terms in which she wishes to be understood: "not as a victim, but as a witness and as a witch."[224] The poetic persona shifts between association and disassociation with the witch, as if "Anne" is both drawn to, and terrified by, her.

The lines "I have ridden in your cart, driver, / waved my nude arms at villages going by" (15) allude to the Platonic vision of the soul as a driver trying to tame the wild horses of her instincts. It also references the Freudian structural model of the mind comprising the ego, the super ego, and the id. The witch personifies the id, the repository of instincts and biological drives. She is an erotic and sexual being who exposes her body. The instinctual id has to be repressed and sacrificed by the rational ego and

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[223] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 114.
[224] Diane Middlebrook, "On 'Her Kind'," *Poets of Weird Abundance*. Parnassus (1985). *Modern American Poetry*, 156.

idealistic superego. In the end of the poem, the witch suffers a terrible death: "flames still bite my thigh and my ribs crack where your wheels wind" (15). Here, physical torture refers to moral self-castigation.

The last line "A woman like that is not ashamed to die" (15) is perplexing because of the unexpected usage of "ashamed" instead of the expected "afraid." Sexton's poetic choice might be considered as a Freudian slip, revealing the affinity between shame and fear. It was noticed by Ellen Merriman Capo who asks: "Why does one intuitively expect the last line to read: "is not afraid to die?" and "Does brutal treatment which should call forth anger or aggression produce submission in Sexton?"[225] Nonetheless, Capo believes Sexton's fear of death prevents her from saying "afraid." In my view, it's unlikely that Sexton would avoid certain expressions because she was fascinated by death. To uncover the meaning of the line one needs to change a negation into an affirmation and look for a synonym of "not ashamed" – "proud." The choice of words suggests that Sexton did not see any shame in death.

The poem "The Witch's Life" from Sexton's posthumously published collection "The Awful Rowing Toward God" (1975) has strong references to the poem "Her Kind." By comparing and contrasting the two, one can follow the trajectory of the witch.

"The Witch's Life" starts with a childhood memory describing "an old woman in our neighborhood whom we called The Witch" (423). The woman is a recluse, peering from behind the wrinkled curtains and yelling: "Get out of my life!" (423). She has wild unruly hair "like kelp" and a loud scary voice "like a boulder" (423). She is portrayed as a hostile loner.

[225] Ellen Merriman Capo, "I Have Been Her Kind': Anne Sexton's Communal Voice" *Original Essays on the Poetry of Anne Sexton*. Ed. Francis Bixler (Conway: U of Central Arkansas Press, 1988), 36.

After describing the witch, "Anne" switches into a self-reflective mode and wonders if she's became the witch herself. She tries to assess her own appearance and actions. She observes that she has "clumps of […] hair" (423) and jester's shoes. She is hostile to everybody, even to her children and "a few special animals" (423). Her mind is too closed for the outside world: "no opening through which / to feed it soup?" (423). The following line "plugged up […] sockets" (423) suggests her extreme introversion and emotional withdrawal. The mode of hesitation and self-doubt is expressed though the repetition of "maybe" that starts the series of self-addressed questions. At the end, "Anne" affirmatively answers her own question:

Yes. It's the witch's life,
climbing the primordial climb,
dream within a dream,
then sitting here
holding a basket of fire (423).

The stanza suggests both identification and disassociation with the witch, the same double bind as in "Her Kind". On the one hand, Anne claims affinity with the witch, on the other hand she is afraid to fully embrace her. The difference between "Her Kind" and "Witch's Life" is that in the first the witch is externalized and set free while in the "Witch's Life" the witch is internalized and imprisoned. "Her Kind" is moving outward with witch is flying and running to the woods. The witch in "The Witch's Life" withdraws from the world, moving inward. She retreats in the "primordial" and unconscious – "dream within dream" – where she sits and watches over "the basket of

fire" (423). The image of the witch sitting over the fire is symbolic of life force, passion and agency contained within the lyrical persona instead of being released into the world. When in "Her Kind" the witch is captured and burnt by the villagers, who represent social conventions, in "The Witch's Life" her containment is a self-imposed punishment as she withdraws from society.

Inasmuch as Sexton identified with the witch, it's only logical that she defined her poetry as "black art." In "Black Art", Sexton's manifesto, she renders her poetry as "the black art," "illicit love" and "the weird abundance" (88). She differentiates two kinds of writing: feminine and masculine, only to fuse them in the last stanza. Sexton creates a definition for "a woman who writes" (88) to compare and contrast it with that of "a man who writes" (88). In her poetic vision, feminine writing comes from feelings and emotions while male poetry stems from intellect and rationality. Sexton shows that the economy of male and female desire is organized by different requirements and constrains. A female poet is "a spy" (88) while a male poet is "a crook" (88). For Sexton, poetry is "the black art" (88), an attempt to transcend the mundane in order to reach for the stars and to make a tree. Her poetry is meant to break though the limits of the "enough" that stands for gendered expectations and restrictions. "Enough" for women consists of the domestic sphere: "cycles and children and islands", "mourners and gossips and vegetables" (88). For men "enough" comprises the public sphere: "erections, congresses and products", "machines and galleons and wars" (88).

Sexton assigns women to the sphere of the private and passive, while men are relegated to the public and active. Aligning women with nature and men with culture, suggesting that they have different temporal motivations, she subscribes to the traditional

dichotomy—natural woman and cultural man. Sexton does not question the genders but accepts them like Julia Kristeva's elaboration in her essay "Women's Time", where she presents female subjectivity as linked to cyclical time (repetition). She sees it related to natural cycles, gestation, biological rhythm, and monumental time (eternity) — "all encompassing and infinite like imaginary space."[226] The linear and masculine time of history, or as Kristeva calls it "the obsessional time" is envisioned as — "project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding: [. . .] as departure, progression and arrival."[227] For Sexton, feminine and masculine poetry are complimentary and derive from gender differences.

The Suicidal Witch

Sexton received the Pulitzer Prize for her third collection "Live or Die" (1966*)* which she called "a fever chart for a bad case of melancholy."[228] The poems represent a suicidal lyrical persona suspended between life and death. "Anne" hesitates in her choice up until the last poem "Live" that becomes a hymn to life: "I say *Live, Live* because of the sun, the dream, the excitable gift" (168). The collection deals with Sexton's death obsession and her attempts to overcome it.

The poem "Live" opens with the dark imagery of "hell"(167), "mutilation" (167), "mud" (167) and "the baby on the platter" (167) and concludes with "the promise to love more" (169). Several images in the poem convey Anne's alienation from her body: "I wore a sawed-off body" (167), "somebody's doll" (167). Searching for a reason to live,

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[226] Toril Moi, *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 191.
[227] Ibid., 192.
[228] Anne Sexton, "Author's Note," *Live or Die* (Mariner Book Edition, 1999).

she has a revelation: “I found an answer” (169) and she appoints the Sun as a feminine deity, “a purifier” and “an answer” (169).

Step by step, “Anne” rediscovers and reaffirms her own value and finds confidence:

> Even crazy, I’m as nice
>
> as a chocolate bar.
>
> Even with the witches’ gymnastics
>
> they trust my incalculable city,
>
> my corruptible bed (169).

The combination of gastronomic, urban and sexual imagery is a little bit confusing here. She refers to herself as mentally unstable, capable of “witches’ gymnastics” (169). Those are her faults, which she tries to counterbalance with being desirable as “a chocolate bar” (169), “city” (169) and “bed” (169). Why is she all those things for her family? It remains a puzzle.

In the poem, “Anne” addresses her family of her “dearest three” and refers to herself as “the witch”: “The witch comes on and you paint her pink” (169). The witch is a negative part of her personality, but it seems as if her family has learned to deal with it.

The resolution of the poem comes with the images of eight Dalmatians. “Anne” feeds them and rejoices at the decision not to drown the puppies. Looking at the dogs, “Anne” chooses life – “the sun, the dream, the excitable gift” (169) instead of the “hospital shift, repeating The Black Mass” (169). The liveliness and simple happiness of eight puppies represent and reinforce Eros, a life force that pulls the lyrical persona away

from a nervous breakdown and suicidal thoughts.

Body Parts: Falling Apart and Pulling Together

Sexton's collection "Love Poems" (1969) is organized around the subject of her body: her hand in "The Touch," her mouth in "The Kiss," her breast in "The Breast," uterus in the "In Celebration of My Uterus," her hip bone in "The Break," "long brown legs" in "Barefoot," and her knee in "Knee Song." Middlebrook believes that the addressee in these poems, which often refer to Sexton's numerous affairs, is male but then contradicts herself by saying that the poems represent female desire for love and acceptance that "… has been lost forever, the unsymbolic experience of infant intimacy with a maternal body."[229] What Sexton strives for in those poems is an escape from fragmentation, pain and loneliness that is possible only in the presence of a lover or a mother.

Most poems present the image of a fragmented body, a one that is infused with pain: the hand is cut off and hidden in "a tin box", a mouth looks like "a cut" and the bone is broken. The poems of fragmentation are balanced by the poems where "Anne's" body finds its unity and wholeness, as in "The Nude Swim," "It is a Spring Afternoon" and "Us." To feel whole and complete, "Anne" needs a partner who both validates and desires her. In Holly Norton's view, Sexton's poems about body mostly "show passivity and if they show power, it is only sexual power over men." [230] Liz Hankins comments to the same effect:

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[229] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 299.
[230] Holly Norton, "Sharpening the Axe: The Development of Voice in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton" (Diss. Bowling Green State University, 1996), 172.

> In the process of defining herself, Mrs. Sexton comes to regard the female body as an object which, she feels, is somehow owed to men. She, however, uneasily, comes to define herself by her sexual relationships with men and by the extent to which her body is offered and used as a sacrifice.[231]

Hankins' observation applies to the poem "The Interrogation of the Man of Many Hearts." It presents two speakers: "Anne", an interrogator, questions her hesitant lover, "the man of many hearts" (176). Unable to choose between his wife and "Anne," he is torn. He brings up the subject of his wife in the conversation. "Anne" asks him: "Who's she, that one on your arms?" (176). The lover complains about an unhappy marriage and calls his wife "a witch":

She is my real witch, my fork, my mare,
my mother of tears, my skirtfull of hell,
the stamp of my sorrows, the stamp of my bruises
and also children she might bear
and also private place, a body of bones that
I would honestly buy, if I could buy,
That I would marry, if I could marry (176).

Sexton's lines subvert Biblical "Song of Songs." The witch here is the wife who stands for the male lover's predicament of moral obligation of marriage. Having a wife prevents him from unalloyed joy with "Anne" because he feels guilty and he wants to

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[231] Liz Hankins, "Summoning the Body" *Midwest Quarterly* 28 (August 1987): 515.

share this guilt with “Anne” who refuses to accept it: “Why have you brought her here?” (176). His moral guilt is expressed through physical pain. His wife becomes symbolic of that. His description of his wife consists of “tears,” “sorrows” and “bruises” (176). She is “a real witch”, “[night]mare,” and “hell” (176). She also stands for home and children and “a man of many hearts” wants to keep them. He calls his wife a witch because she has a power to take something from him when she leaves. The male voice here reminds us of Updike’s Clyde: both are caught between a lover and a wife and both vilify and demonize their wives as witches.

Witch’s Fairytales

In *Transformations* (1971), Sexton gives “a sadistic spin”[232] to seventeen Grimms’ fairy tales. The idea to rewrite famous fairy tales came to Sexton when she saw her daughter Linda reading Grimms’ tales. She asked Linda to name her favorite fairy tale and dedicated the collection to her daughter.

In *Transformations* dark laughter arises not from the comical but the grotesque and obscene. She mocks the fairy tales after realizing what they contain are lies: a kiss does not transform a frog into a prince and “A Sleeping Beauty” complex will get a girl sexually abused rather than rewarded. Sexton ridicules feminine naiveté and passivity as virtues rewarded only in fairy tales. Even though Sexton’s fairy tale conventionally ends with marriage, it’s not portrayed as a pinnacle of happiness and fulfillment but “a kind of coffin” (232), “a museum case” (258). Sexton’s fairy tales do not carry a promise of happy endings. Critics praised *Transformations* for formal experiments and feminist

[232] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 333.

perspective.

Sexton's choice of the witch as a narrator for her fairy tales seems to be very fitting because she has no intention of sugarcoating the tales but preferred to strip them bare, and to open the repositories of collective unconscious. In her poems, Sexton anticipated cultural analysts such as Bruno Bettelheim who in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) discerned sexualized meaning in many fairy tales.

Sexton's witch will tell it all, infusing the fairy tales with sex and violence, cannibalism, incest, rape and abuse. Introducing *Transformations*, Kurt Vonnegut wrote that Sexton's grim version of fairytales "domesticates my terror, … teaches it some tricks which will amuse me, and then lets it gallop wild in my forest once more." [233] In a way, *Transformations* anticipates the later trend of revisiting and revamping fairy tales in popular entertainment notable TV shows and films including *Enchanted; Grimm*; *Once Upon a Time*; *Mirror, Mirror*; *Snow White and the Huntsman*; *Tangled; Brave*; *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters; Maleficent; Oz: The Great and Powerful* and many others that recycle, update and capitalize on and exploit the classic fairy tales.

The title of *Transformations* is a double-entendre: every tale involves a magic transformation, and every tale is itself transformed. Each fairy tale has its own introduction and coda – commentary on the meaning and significance of the story. Sexton infuses the language of fairy tales with references to modern culture as she exposes the dark psychic core in each tale.

Transformations was a commercially successful collection that gained Sexton even wider popularity and recognition. First published in the magazines "Playboy" and

[233] Kurt Vonnegut, "Foreword." Anne Sexton, *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), vii.

"Cosmopolitan," the poems both paid well and introduced Sexton to a wider audience. Inspired by success, she collaborated with the composer Conrad Cusa who turned the collection into the opera and reflected on the transformation in the following lines:

> the poems are arranged with the author's approval to emphasize the sub-plot which concerns a middle-aged witch who gradually transforms into a vulnerable beauty slipping into a nightmare.

The opera unfolds in a mental institution, where patients, with "Anne" as one of the characters, act out altered fairy tales as individual psychodramas. The cast for the opera consists of only eight singers each of whom performs multiple roles, as if suffering from multiple personality disorder. For example, the actress who performs "Anne" is also cast as The Witch, Step-Mother Queen, Aunt, Mother Gothel, Andrew's Sister, and finally Briar Rose.

It's interesting to consider why the opera relies on the transformation of the Witch into a Sleeping Beauty, not vice verse. On the one hand, the Witch promises agency and liberation, but also entails alienation, pain and anger. On the other hand, a "Sleeping Beauty" gives up the agency and responsibility, substituting it for a masochistic license to be abused. Sleeping also acts as an anesthetic, a near death existence that transforms Sleeping Beauty into a fetish. The fact that Sexton approved the transformation of the Witch into the Sleeping Beauty can mean different things: a return to conventional femininity, death or even the overmedication of a psychiatric patient. More importantly it reveals Anne Sexton's fascination with The Witch and Sleeping Beauty duality.

The narrator of *Transformations* is not the usual infantilized and vulnerable

“Anne” of Sexton’s earlier poems, but a strong-willed, menacing “middle-aged witch.” She describes herself as

tangled on my two great arms,
my face in the book
and my mouth wide,
ready to tell you a story or two (223).

Assuming the persona of a witch, Sexton enters into the poetic narrative and becomes part of the stories; she is on the inside and the outside, both detached and intimate, an ideal perspective from which to relate her transformations.

The witch draws seven listeners into her circle by promising to tell them fairy tales. She sounds aggressive and determined to awaken a child inside her audience only to show them the cozy and sweet fairy tales from a cruel, sexual and dark perspective.

Aside from being a narrator, the witch is a protagonist in the four fairy tales: “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, “Rapunzel”, ‘Hansel and Gretel” and "Briar Rose." Traditionally in fairy tales the witch is a personification of evil. An encounter with the witch promises nothing good. She openly can be frightening or she can hide her evil nature under a beautiful face. She can plan to cook you up or just poison you. She can enslave you and request impossible services. She can withhold important information.

Unlike Grimms’ message to be a good girl, Sexton’s fairy tales undermine traditional gender prescription for women[234] embodied in the Sleeping Beauty,

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[234] For comprehensive interpretations of gender prescriptions in fairy tales, see Ruth B. Bottigheimer, *Grimms’ Bad Girls and Bold Boys: The Moral and Social Vision of the Tales* (Yale University Press, 1986); Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Marina Wagner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994); Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton University Press, 2003).

Cinderella, Briar Rose and Rapunzel, who silently and humbly waiting for their lives to begin in marriage.

Each of those stories is based on an antagonism between the women of different generations: the witch (an older women) and a young princess (an immature girl). The antagonism is blamed on the witch, while her younger competitor is the embodiment of innocence. The conflict dramatizes the Electra complex that produces the daughter's rejection of the mother in favor of the father in her final move towards heterosexuality. The witch represents a vilified and degraded mother who impedes a heroine's heterosexual relationship with a male protagonist.

In "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," a wicked stepmother clings to her status of the fairest one in the kingdom. When she notices the signs of aging - "brown spots on her hand and four whiskers over her lip" (225), the queen orders a servant to kill Snow White. It's not just her death that she requests, she also wants to eat her heart and incorporate a part of her beauty and youth: "Bring me her heart […] and I will salt it and eat it" (225). Presented with a substitute animal organ, the queen "chewed it up like a cube steak" (226). Why would a powerful queen want to destroy her rival in beauty? Perhaps, because, even though she is a witch, her status of as a beauty is a source of her power in the kingdom run by her husband. Freed by a kind servant, Snow White finds refuge with seven dwarfs. Sexton sexualizes those fairy tale creatures in a *double entrendre* "those little hot dogs"(226), metonymically reducing them to the walking and talking penises. The dwarfs promise protection but make Snow White a housemaid. She has "to stay and keep the house" (226).

The queen soon learns the whereabouts of Snow White and makes three attempts

on her life. Her gifts are deadly: a suffocating "lacing", "a poison comb" and "a poison apple" (227). Snow White, "a dumb bunny" (227), accepts the witch's gifts willingly again and again. Each gift causes a death that can be undone by removing the poisonous object. Two of the witch's gifts appeal to Snow White's vanity. Lacing and comb represent constricted and constructed femininity. "Lacing" reshapes the female body into a more desirable form, "comb" fashions her hair, another symbol of female sexuality. The third gift of "a poison apple" is a more complicated symbol as it alludes to the Book of Genesis' apple of "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" which can stand for temptation and sexuality. Snow White is unable to swallow and digest the apple: "she bit into a poison apple and fell down for the final time" (228). The apple – the knowledge of good and evil – puts Snow White into a coma and the dwarfs' attempts to revive her are futile: "they undid her bodice, they looked for a comb […], they washed her with wine and rubbed her with butter" (228). They put her into a glass coffin that can be read as a symbol of her virginity, and she becomes a fetish and a tourist attraction: "all who passed by could peek in upon her beauty" (228). Sexton's dead Snow White on display resonates with Edgar Allan Poe's famous quote: "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."[235]

Snow White is kept in a glass coffin until a prince gets her as a present. The coffin is dropped and Snow White awakens and becomes "the prince's bride" (228). Invited to the wedding, the wicked queen is made to dance in "red-hot iron shoes" (228) until she dies in a graphically torturous dance. Why does the narrator put the audience into the witch's shoes: "your toes will smoke/and then your heels/ and you will fry upward like a

[235] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," *Essays and Reviews*. Ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), 15.

frog" (228), inviting the readers to feel the witch's pain, and not a triumph of Snow White?

The queen's mirror, a symbol of perfect femininity, now belongs to Snow White and she grows obsessed with it the same way the evil queen did. The ending suggests that in the long run Snow White will become the mirror image of her wicked stepmother.

The fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty carries a special significance for Anne Sexton. In the biography Middlebrook detects parallels between Sexton's story of becoming a poet and the plot of "Snow White." While answering the question "How did you become a poet?" Sexton would start her story with her mother being jealous of her daughter's gift for poetry. The poison apple would be the restrictive gender conventions of wife and mother. Trying to comply made her sick. The psychiatrist was "like the prince in fairy tale, [who] stumbled onto the remedy that woke her into a new life as a poet."[236] In her story, Sexton identified with Snow White, reserving the role of the witch for her competitive mother.

In a provocative move, Sexton opens "Rapunzel" with an ode to a lesbian love: "A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young" (244) and includes the suggestive description of sex between an older and younger females: "and touch and touch. / Old breast against young breast" (245). The older lover asks the younger for oral sex: "give me your nether lips/ all puffy with their art/ and I will give you angel fire in return" (245). The lines explicitly suggest a sexual relationship between a witch and a girl.

Like "Sleeping Beauty," the fairy tale "Rapunzel" also has resonance in Sexton's life. She had a great aunt Nana with whom, according to Middlebrook, she was very

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[236] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 3.

close: “While they lay together under Nana‘s blue bordered quilt, Nana would stroke Anne‘s back and tell stories or reminisce about old days.”[237] In a recorded conversation[238] with Maxine Kumin, Elaine Showalter, and Carol Smith, Sexton talks candidly about her close relationship with her great aunt. During her therapy Sexton came to an understanding that her intimacy with her great-aunt went way beyond conventional limits. Both Dr. Orne, Sexton’s therapist, and Linda Sexton, her daughter, believed that Sexton’s sexualized attachment to Nana contributed to the complexity of her psychic condition in her adult life. Even though Dr. Orne doubted Sexton’s recovered memories of being sexually abused by her great aunt and her father, Lois Ames, a psychiatric social worker and a very close friend of Sexton, strongly believed “that Anne was a victim of child sexual abuse by both Nana and her father.”[239] Her conviction was based on Sexton’s symptoms that are common to the victims of sexual abuse.

The fairy tale itself starts with a description of a lavish “witch’s garden/ more beautiful than Eve’s” (246). It belongs to the witch, Mother Gothel, who claims a baby from a man who’s stolen a fruit from the witch’s garden for his pregnant wife. In the other fairy tale poems, the witch remains anonymous, but here she is personalized as both a mother and a lover. She loves her adopted daughter Rapunzel, and wants her only for herself, preventing her heterosexual development by locking her in a tower: “…Rapunzel was a beautiful girl /Mother Gothel treasured her beyond all things” (246). Mother Gothel has a strong sexual interest in the girl. She incarcerates Rapunzel in a tower, so “None but I will ever see her or touch her” (246). The witch tries to save Rapunzel from

[237] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992, 45.
[238] Maxine Kumin, “Conversation with Anne Sexton, and Elaine Showalter and Carol Smith.” *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 4, (June 1976): 115-36.
[239] Diane Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 58.

heterosexuality, but it breaks into the tower in a form of a prince. The prince finds his way up and dazzles Rapunzel "with his dancing stick" (246), a Freudian symbol for penis.

The witch separates and punishes the lovers. She cuts Rapunzel's hair off and sends her to wonder in the forest. If Rapunzel's long hair is symbolic of her libido and femininity, than the cutting represents an attempt to repress the awakening of her heterosexuality. The witch blinds the prince, so that "as blind as Oedipus he wandered for years" (247). Poetic scenario refers to Oedipus story where blindness is a symbol of castration and impotence. The witch is a threat to the masculinity of the prince.

After a while the lovers find each other and Rapunzel's tears cure the prince sight. Why are female tears so often assigned healing and magic properties? Too often crying is presented as female activity that can make a change for the better happened.

It is interesting, that Sexton spares Mother Gothel the horrible death imposed on the witches from other tales. For example, the stepmother of "Snow White" dies after dancing in red-hot iron shoes, which burn her feet horribly. The witch of "Hansel and Gretel" is baked in an oven. In contrast, in "Rapunzel" the witch's heart "shrank to the size of a pin, / never again to say: Hold me, my young dear, / hold me" (249), but she is alive and still dreams about "the yellow hair" (249). Is it the utmost punishment for the witch to be deprived of Rapunzel's body, as a literary critic Alicia Ostriker[240] contends, or is it a reflection of Rapunzel's sadness upon being deprived of the witch's body? If indeed Sexton projected her relationship with her great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley (Nana),

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[240] See Alicia Ostriker, "That Story: Anne Sexton and Her Transformation," *Sexton: Selected Criticism* (Urbana: Illinois UP, 1988), 251-73.

as the introduction to the poem suggests, then it's understandable why Sexton would prefer the witch not to die.

In the fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel" Sexton does not change the Grimms' plot but presents maternal love as cannibalistic. The preamble of the tale consists of a mother's address to her son. Lovingly, she uses food metaphors: her son is "fudge", "hard-boiled egg", "pears", and "chicken" (286). She reveals the desire "to bite", "to chew" (286) him. The poem refers to the maternal desire to incorporate her baby back into her body by consuming him: "it is but one turn in the road and I would be a cannibal" (286).

Except for the cannibalistic overtones, the tale proceeds in a familiar manner: two children Hansel and Gretel are sent into the woods because their parents do not have enough food to feed them. In the woods, the children "[c]ame upon a rococo house / Made all of food from its windows / To its chocolate chimney" (288). The witch invites them in and acts in a motherly fashion: she treats children to supper and puts them to sleep. Later she locks Hansel up and feeds him well, because "she was planning to cook him / And then to gobble him up" (289). Meanwhile, Gretel is made into her servant.

In anticipation of her meal the witch describes to Gretel how delicious Hansel would taste: "better than mutton" (289). Finally, the witch decides to cook Gretel as "an hors d'oeuvre" (289) and orders her to get into the oven. Gretel feigns ignorance and tricks the witch into the oven: "The witch turned as red / As the Jap flag / her blood began to boil up /Like Coca-Cola. / Her eyes begin to melt" (289). As in "Snow White" the witch meets her death in fire.

The children are safe and find their way home. Conveniently, their mother is dead and the father takes them back. The kids are still haunted by memories of their

forest adventure and every supper reminds them of “the woe of the oven, / the smell of the cooking witch, / a little like mutton, / to be served only with burgundy and fine white linen / like something religious” (289). The detailed description of the witch’s taste raises suspicion that the children might have actually tasted the baked witch. In the poem, cannibalism is recurrent and a perverse attribute of mother and children; only the father is immune to it.

In “Hansel and Gretel” and “Snow White”, the witch is a double of the mother: both are cannibalistic and they both die at the end. The cannibalism of the witch is an infantile projection. It’s the children who have enormous appetites that threaten the survival of the family and have to be sent into the forest. It’s the children who are up eating the house, symbolic of maternal body. Fetuses, babies and small children are cannibalistic in the special sense that they rely for their nourishment and survival on maternal body. From conception to weaning an infant consumes the maternal body first in the form of blood and later in the form of breast milk. Maternal body is literally their home and food and the separation from it is painful and traumatic. In my reading, the fairy tale “Hansel and Gretel” re-enacts the drama of weaning. The refusal of the maternal body to nourish is enacted as the sending of the children away into the forest, where they discover alternatives to breast milk – a house built of candies, chocolate and cookies. They liberate themselves from dependence on the maternal body by getting rid of the witch, who is the alter ego of the mother. Freed from dependence on the breast milk, they reenter civilization as their father’s children because their mother as a food provider is dead both literally and symbolically. As the father becomes a breadwinner and provider, the children no longer need the mother. However, every meal reminds the

children of the taste of the witch, possible a reference to a repressed memory of the taste of mother's breast milk, "something religious" (289) while the oven can be read as a fetal memory of a womb experience. The fairy tale presents the maternal body as a candy house while the oven is her womb.

Another fairy tale "Briar Rose" is preceded and followed by lengthy autobiographical stanzas in which Sexton explicitly alludes to her own psychiatric history involving controversial recovered memories of sexual abuse by her father. The father figure is not a protector but a sexual predator.

In "Briar Rose", the witch appears at the christening: "the thirteenth fairy / Her fingers as long and thin as straws/ Her eyes burnt by cigarettes/ her uterus is an empty teacup" (291). She is described as bulimic, unhealthy and barren. She comes uninvited with "an evil gift" (291) of death and then disappears unpunished. The further fate of the witch remains unknown. But, the twelfth fairy substituting death for sleep mitigates the curse.

The tale recounts the extreme precautions the king takes to keep his daughter safe. Still the prophecy comes true and the entire kingdom is plunged into sleep: "They all lay in trance / each a catatonic / stuck in the time machine" (291). In one hundred years, a prince comes and kisses the princess and she wakes up screaming "Daddy! Daddy!" (293). The fairy tale ends with the traditional wedding, but the happily-ever-after is spoilt by the princess' turning out to be a neurotic and insomniac, addicted to medications.

The exploration of the witch figures in Sexton's poetry shows that they acquire unstable and mutable symbolism ranging from mental illness, maternal demands, sexuality and creativity. It appears that the trajectory of the witch-figure in Sexton's

poems is parabolic. In “Her Kind” Sexton releases her inner witch but, nevertheless, captures her and burns at the stakes. In “Double Image” the “green witches” express the disappointment of a mother at her daughter’s failure to comply with the Ego Ideal. The poem “The Interrogation of Man of Many Hearts” vilifies the wife of the lover as a witch but in the poem “Live” the lyrical persona identifies as a witch and is thankful to her family for “painting her pink” (169). In the poem “The Doctor of the Heart” Sexton refers to herself as “witch-writer” with “only a gimmick called magic fingers” (301). In *Transformations,* the Witch is a narrator who takes charge and retells the fairy tales her way. As if making full circle, Sexton employs the voice of the witch in “The Witch’s Life” where the witch is literally contained and imprisoned within the body. Internalized and repressed, the hides inside “Anne”.

Sexton’s witch is not a personification of evil, but rather a representation of alienation and victimization imposed upon her part by herself and partly by her surroundings. As Middlebrook notes, Sexton’s witch often expresses “an irrepressible wish for an authentic social presence that is not wife, lover or mother.”[241] Mostly Sexton’s witch is a pathetic creature without agency and anger. As Janice Markey comments: “Sexton‘s anger is never clarifying; no sooner expressed, it is repressed, and the same emotional and intellectual impasse remains.”[242] From a feminist perspective, Sexton’s employment of the witch figure is far from liberating.

[241] Diane Middlebrook*, Anne Sexton: A Biography* (New York, Vintage: 1992), 15.
[242] Janice Markey, *A New Tradition? The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich: A Study of Feminism and Poetry* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1985), 116.

Chapter Four

The Witch as a Desiring Subject in the Poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva

PREAMBLE

In her poetry Marina Tsvetaeva abundantly resorted to witchcraft imagery and borrowed stylistic patterns from the Russian folklore genres of incantation and lamentations. In Tsvetaeva's early poetry the witchcraft imagery initially conveys infantile anxieties and fears and later becomes conceptual vehicle for sexuality, poetic creativity and love. When Tsvetaeva speaks from a position of a witch and a sorceress, she transforms her passive lyrical persona into a desiring subject.

To understand where such preoccupation comes from, one needs to consider the circumstances of her life. The chapter starts with a biographical excursion into Tsvetaeva's life foreshadowed by history. Tsvetaeva's suicide is given a special attention: I consider the personal and historical circumstances of her suicide and the ways her contemporaries and biographers interpreted it.

Tsvetaeva's poetry went a long way to be accepted and embraced in the Soviet Union, Russia and abroad. Post-Soviet Russian scholarship embraced her as "a symbol of the time" while American and French scholarship considers her as a representative of *ecriture féminine* in Russian literature.

Я ненасытная на души (I am hungry for the souls).
Marina Tsvetaeva

Marina Tsvetaeva – Between History and Myth

Marina Tsvetaeva's poetry does not fit neatly into – what is referred as – the Silver Age in Russian literature. Roughly between 1890 and 1915, prompted by Western European literary movements and inspired by modernist esthetics, Russian literature reacted against traditions of critical realism and romanticism and underwent revolutionary changes as a mixture of Marxism, mysticism, aestheticism, Nietzscheanism, and eroticism ushered in modernist innovations and shaped a variety of movements including Symbolism, Acmeism and Futurism. These radical changes also prompted Russian poetry to recognize and embrace the talent of female poets such as Marina Tsvetaeva, Anna Akhmatova, Zinnaida Gippius and Sofia Parnok. These poets could not differ more from each other, but all shared the same sentiment: they resented being called "поэтесса" (poetess), preferring the masculine form "поэт" (poet). In an attempt to underscore their outstanding talent, Russian critics often referred to them in using the masculine form implying thereby that they were more than average "poetesses" scribbling about love and domesticity. In his review of Akhmatova's collection *Четки* (Rosary, 1914), Boris Sadovsky insisted that Akhamatova was "несомненно, лирический поэт, именно поэт, а не поэтесса…"[243] (without a doubt, a lyrical poet, a poet indeed, not a poetess). In a similar manner, Mikhail Osorgin wrote that Marina Tsvetaeva was "не поэтесса, а поэт"[244] (not a poetess, but a poet).

[243] Boris Sadovsky, "Foreword," *Stikhotvoreniya. Poemi*. Anna Akhmatova. (Moscow: ACT, 2002), 454.
[244] Mikhail Osorgin, "Poet Marina Tsvetaeva," *Marina Tsvetaeva: Lyrica. Analiz Texta*. Ed. Maximova Tatiana. (Moscow: Drofa, 2002), 9.

Recognized and praised, creative women were still seen as an anomaly and their male contemporaries often described them as witches, sorceresses or prophetesses. Even their respective husbands shared the same sentiment: a Russian poet Nikolai Gumilev described his wife Anna Akhmatova as “не жену, а колдунью”[245] (not a wife, but a sorceress) while Sergey Efron presented his wife Marina Tsvetaeva as Mara, a woman with magic powers, in his short story “A Sorceress.” In Zinaida Gippius’ case, such a perception was shared even by her political enemies: Russian Orthodox priests referred to her as “белая дьяволица” (a white she-devil) while the revolutionary Leon Trotsky in his antireligious pamphlet disclaiming the existence of witches half-seriously wrote: “… одна ведьма есть – Зинаида Гиппиус”[246] (… there is one witch – Zinaida Gippius). Instead of arguing against such perception, women writers exploited it by capitalizing on the *fin de siècle* rise of mysticism, occultism and spiritualism[247] in Russia manifest in such wide range of phenomena as Rasputin’s short lived success, Solovyov’s Gnosticism[248], Blavatsky's Theosophy, and a proliferation of psychics, fortunetellers and practitioners of magic, especially in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

There is no need in fortune telling to hypothesize that if not for the October Revolution of 1917 and subsequent historical changes, Marina Tsvetaeva’s life (1892-1941) could have been the fairy tale of a prodigy child of upper-class Moscow parents. Instead, her life became a tragedy ending in the suicide of a desperate evacuee during World War II.

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[245] Nikolay Gumilev, “Iz Logova Zmiyeva,” *Stikhotvorenia i Poemi*.(Moscow:Zvonitsa, 2008), 184.
[246] Quoted in Georiy Adamovich, *Dalniye Berega: Portraiti Pisateley Emigratsii*. (Moscow: Respublika, 1994), 47.
[247] See Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, ed., *Occult in Russian and Soviet Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997).
[248] Philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) is often credited as the spiritual father of Russian modernism. His works regarding the Divine Sophia explore the concept of the Divine Feminine and her controversial association with God and the Holy Trinity.

At the beginning of her literary career, Tsvetaeva optimistically proclaimed: “В этот мир я родилась быть счастливой” (In this world I was born to be happy)[249], but in 1925, at thirty-three, she already perceived her life as incarceration: “Как каторгу избываю жизнь” (As a sentence I serve my life).[250] Later in 1936, Tsvetaeva’s perception of life grew even more grim and antagonistic: “Век мой – яд мой, век мой– вред мой, век мой – враг мой, век мой – ад мой” (My age – my poison, my age – my pain, my age – my enemy, my age – my hell).[251] The poem reveals a painful relationship between a lyrical heroine and history. The absence of verbs conveys her lack of agency while the string of monosyllables beats relentlessly as a harsh verdict without right of appeal.

Tsvetaeva’s life took unexpected twists and turns as she sought her place in Russian literature of the first half of the twentieth century. She experienced early literary success as well as ostracisms, admiration and shunning. She had a romantic marriage to Sergey Efron, a White Army officer who later became a Soviet agent; she bore three children, one of whom did not survive a post revolutionary famine. She had passionate affairs with men and women. She struggled to survive revolutions and wars, deprivation and poverty, emigration and a return to the Soviet Union in 1939. Her return was immediately followed by the arrests of her husband, daughter and sister. At forty-eight Tsvetaeva found herself without any income, barred from publishing, dependent on the kindness of friends and strangers and, probably, under surveillance of NKVD. In

[249] Marina Tsvetaeva. “Radost’ Vseh Nevinikh Glaz…”*Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh.* Tom 1. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1994), 231.

[250] Marina Tsvetaeva. “Suchestvovaniya Kotlovinoyu…” *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh.* Tom 2. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1994), 147.

[251] Marina Tsvetaeva. “O Poete ne Podumal…” *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh.* Tom 2. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1994), 156.

Moscow, Tsvetaeva lived in a rented room with her teenage son, sent packages for her sister, husband and daughter in prison, scraping by on a tiny income from translating. It seemed it could not get any worse when the Second World War began and she had to evacuate to the provincial town of Elabuga. In August 1941, a wife and a mother of "the enemies of the people" and a recent repatriate, whose poetry was considered "hysterical and shrill" (Maxim Gor'kii), Tsvetaeva hanged herself leaving three lucid suicide notes, asking friends to take care of her son and not to bury her alive. She also asked to be forgiven[252] for her inability to go on living.

Her suicide is shrouded in mystery: many questions about it remain unanswered. Was it an impulsive act of despair or a deliberate action? What was Tsvetaeva's psychological condition at the time of writing the notes? What was the last straw that broke her back?

We may only speculate that Tsvetaeva's mental health was compromised by the historical and personal traumas she lived through. Unlike Sexton, Tsvetaeva was never diagnosed as depressive,[253] but that does not mean that she did not suffer from that condition not recognized by Soviet psychiatry. Her diaries paint a portrait of a struggling individual faced with impossible challenges and difficult choices.

In *The Death of a Poet: The Last Days of Marina Tsvetaeva* (2004), Irma Kudrova tries to reconstruct Tsvetaeva's final days and connect the dots that ended in her suicide. Her hypothesis is that Tsvetaeva's despair and eventual suicide were precipitated

[252] Tsvetaeva's sister Anastasia, a devoted Christian, requested permission from the Patriarch of Russian Orthodox Church to have a special memorial service for Tsvetaeva. The permission was granted as Tsvetaeva's death was officially reclassified as a murder by a totalitarian regime.

[253] In the Soviet Union, the mental health system dealt mainly with people with acute schizophrenia and psychoses and often was used by the authorities as a punitive tool against dissidents. Psychoanalysis was banned as a bourgeois pseudoscience in 1925 and depression was seen as a disease of "a rottingcapitalism."

by the arrests of her husband and daughter. Following a similar logic in her documentary book *Пятый воздух, Версия убийства Марины Цветаевой (Fifth Air. Version of Marina Tsvetaeva's Murder, 2008*), Tatiana Kostandolgo argues that Tsvetaeva's death was in fact a murder ordered by NKVD that was disguised as suicide. Most literary scholars doubt a staged suicide version but they acknowledge the role of Soviet authorities in driving Tsvetaeva to ultimate despair and suicide.

Understanding what pushed Tsvetaeva to commit suicide requires greater clarity about the circumstances of her death but most of the official documents are lost and even the site of her burial remains unknown. Little wonder that so much speculation surrounds her death. Even people who knew her well have different versions, sometimes offering contradictory explanations. For example, her contemporary Anna Akhmatova refused to believe in Tsvetaeva's suicide, insisting instead that it was the Soviet system that killed her. She wrote:

> Её убило то время, нас оно убило, как оно убивало многих, как оно убивало и меня. Здоровы мы были - безумием было окружающее: аресты, расстрелы, подозрительность, недоверие всех ко всем и ко вся… (That time killed her; that time killed us, as it killed many, as it was killing me. We were sane, the situation was crazy: arrests, executions, suspicions, paranoia to all and everything…) [254]

[254] Quoted in Ariadna Efron, *O Marine Tsvetaevoy. Vospominamiya Docheri* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pilatel, 1989), 47.

Unlike Akhmatova who blames historical time and Stalinist repressions, Boris Pasternak explains Tsvetaeva's suicide by her particular escapism and even infantilism:

> Марина Цветаева всю жизнь заслонялась от повседневности работой, и когда ей показалось, что это непозволительная роскошь и ради сына она должна временно пожертвовать увлекательною страстью и взглянуть кругом трезво, она увидела хаос, не пропущенный сквозь творчество, неподвижный, непривычный, косный, и в испуге отшатнулась, и, не зная, куда деться от ужаса, впопыхах спряталась в смерть, сунула голову в петлю, как под подушку. (All her life Marina Tsvetaeva used her work as a shield against reality, and when she believed that it was an impossible luxury and in the name of her son she had to sacrifice her passion and look around soberly, she saw chaos, not creatively transformed, but still, uncanny, hard, and it terrified her, and, not knowing where to run from terror, she hastily hid in death, put her head into a noose as if under the pillow).[255]

Pasternak suggests that when Tsvetaeva finally took off her rose-colored glasses; she was shocked by reality to such an extent that even suicide seemed a better choice. He compares Tsvetaeva's suicide to hiding under the pillow implying that she was not only

[255] Boris Pasternak, *Lyudi i Polozheniya* (Moscow: Detskaya Literatura, 1986), 23.

scared and terrified but also infantile. His explanation sounds like an attempt to assuage his own guilt. It's a widely publicized fact[256] that Tsvetaeva hung herself on a rope that Pasternak tied around her suitcase while helping her to pack for evacuation. While doing so, he praised the quality of the rope by saying that it was strong enough for hanging.

Analyzing Tsvetaeva's diaries and the accounts of Tsvetaeva left by her contemporaries, Maria Belkina finds many descriptive elements that coincide with symptoms of depression and concludes that Tsvetaeva had a nervous breakdown long before her suicide. Acknowledging her sister's nervous breakdown, Anastasia Tsvetaeva, blamed Tsvetaeva's suicide on a conflict with her teenage son who was disrespectful and rude to his mother. Following the same path, Irma Kudrova links Tsvetaeva's suicide to the mother-son relationship, but suggests that Tsvetaeva took her life in an act of maternal sacrifice and attempt to free her son from a burden.

Many biographers point at the NKVD's pressing Tsvetaeva to become an informant and the miserably harsh conditions of Tsvetaeva's life in evacuation as contributing factors. Being many, however, none of their speculations satisfactorily fill the gaps. Perhaps that's how Tsvetaeva would have liked to remain: proud, passionate and inaccessible.

While most scholars read Tsvetaeva's suicide as an act of despair, I am inclined to see it as an act of resistance and courage. Writing about genres and genders of death in *Death in Quotation Marks* (1991), Svetlana Boym interprets Tsvetaeva's suicide not as a search for a way-out but as a way up. She treats it not as a defeat but as victory: "in Tsvetaeva's writings, death is regarded as a transcendence and a transgression, as a feat

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[256] Yevgeny Yevtushenko. "Stikhi ne Mogut Bit Bezdomnimy." Marina Tsvetaeva. Stihotvoreniya. Poemi. Dramaticheskiye Proizvedeniya. (Moscow: Hudozhestvenaya Literatura, 1990), 25.

and a feast, as an escape into the poet's incorporeal paradise and as a reenactment of feminine tragedy."[257] Rightfully, Boym insists on reading Tsvetaeva's suicide as an act of political and poetic defiance, suggesting that even in their most intimate moments, Tsvetaeva's personal dramas are intertwined with historical perturbations and poetic creativity.

According to Simon Karlinsky, such a close intertwining of personal and historical elements in Tsvetaeva's life makes her an example of "the fate of Russian poets after the Revolution."[258] Even though Tsvetaeva is not an exception – she is one of many Russian artists persecuted, broken, driven into despair and silenced by the Soviet system – her tragic life is especially gruesome and dramatic because her emigration had given her such a rare chance to escape Stalinist repression of which many others could only dream of.

Many poets and artists perished in post-revolutionary Russia: some like Sergey Yesenin (1895-1925) and Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893 -1930) took their lives, some like Alexander Blok (1880-1921) died of physical exhaustion in Bolsheviks Petrograd (former St. Petersburg), other became victims of Stalinist purges. During the 1920s and 1930s, about two thousand writers, intellectuals, and artists were arrested and either executed or imprisoned. Many writers, like Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938), Isaac Babel (1894 - 1940), Boris Pilnyak (1894 -1938), the theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874 - 1940), Aleksei Tveriak (1900 -1937), perished in prisons and labor camps. Many poets and artists were silenced or made to sing odes and eulogies to the Communist Party and

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[257] Svetlana Boym, "Death in Quotation Marks," *Another Freedom* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP, 2010), 221.
[258] Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, Her World and Her Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 7.

the Soviet system. The stories of the repressed began to come to light only in the 1990s after Gorbachov's democratization and perestroika when the Soviet past in general and Stalinist epoch in particular underwent historic and moral revision and reevaluation after the collapse of Soviet Union in 1991.

The scholarship on Stalinism is abundant both in Russia and the United States of America, but, American and Russian approaches differ: American historians Robert Conquest, Donald Rayfield, Timothy Snyder, and Orlando Figes unequivocally condemn Stalin and Communist ideology because of their mass repressions while Russian scholarship is split into two camps. The first consists of Roy Medvedev, Kirill Aleksandrov, Dmitri Volkogonov, and Yuri Yemelyanov who see Stalin as a dictator and a murderer of thousands of people, while their opponents Yuri Leskov, Peter Krasnov, and Arsen Martirosyan portray Stalin as a strong and wise leader and insist that the Great Terror is a myth. They succumb to a nostalgic glorification of a myth that Russia needs "a strong hand" and whitewash Stalin.

Most Russian and international studies of Stalinism focus on men as producers and victims of the Stalinist repressive program, either omitting women altogether or assigning them the role of silent and invisible sufferers. Such a lack of attention is partially compensated by the memoirs authored by women who were victims of Stalinist oppression and who wrote and published their testimonial memoirs years later. Based on memoirs of Lidiia Chukovskaia and Nadezhda Mandelstam, Beth Holmgren *Women's Work in Stalin's Time* (1993) explores the roles of women writers in Stalinist society and discusses their unique position as witnesses and preservers of their repressed male relatives' literary legacy. Holmgren notes often the women "became writers because

they were survivors charged to bear witness […] they […] bravely assumed responsibility for their husbands' forbidden archives and biographies."[259] Holmgren implies that the gender specific strategy of self-effacement helped women to survive. Despite her own terrible misfortunes and suffering, including arrest, exile and execution of her husband Osip, Nadezhda Mandelstam wrote: "I do not know a more frightening destiny than Marina Tsvetaeva's."[260]

Leaving Russia in 1922, Tsvetaeva seemed to have won a rare chance to escape Stalin's purges that started around 1930s and intensified in 1936 -1939. Abroad, she was safe yet hardly happy. Reunited with her husband, she lived as a penniless émigré, moving around Czechoslovakia, Germany and finally settling in France, where her nonconformist character and a favorable reception of Mayakovsky and his poetry during his visit to Paris in 1922, ruined Tsvetaeva's already dim prospects of publishing and thus any hope of a steady income. Her husband and her daughter became Soviet secret agents and had to flee France after being implicated in an assassination plot against Ignatiy Reiss, a Soviet spy who deflected to the West.

When Tsvetaeva followed her husband and daughter back to the USSR in 1939, she experienced the full might of Stalin's repressive machine when three of her family members – her sister, her husband and her daughter – were soon arrested. Consequently, Tsvetaeva was labeled the wife and mother of "the enemy of people," and many friends and acquaintances distanced themselves from her out of fear of guilt by association.

Tsvetaeva's tragic life has prompted Maria Razumovsky to call her "a symbol of the fate of her generation and of a tragedy that in many cases was systematically and

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[259] Beth Holmgren, *Women's Works in Stalin's Time* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 3.
[260] Ibid., 45.

intentionally overlooked and deliberately suppressed."[261] If Tsvetaeva had chosen to cast herself in her poetry as an eternal victim, it would not have been a melodramatic exaggeration. But her lyrical persona is more complex. It's that of a fatalist, aware of the influence of historical events on her life, and an escapist, looking for a refuge in poetry and myths. Living through the wreckage of historical and personal catastrophes, Tsvetaeva admitted: "из Истории не выскочишь" (No jumping out of History).[262] But even understanding historical circumstances, she blamed herself for being a magnet for misfortunes: "в моих руках и золото – жесть, и мука – опилки" (in my hands gold – rust, and flour — dust).[263] Such a theme of self-incrimination brings Tsvetaeva's and Sexton's poetry close representing their response to traumatic events, for one, personal and internal; for the other, external and worldly.

Pendulum of Critical Reception of Tsvetaeva's Poetry

Unlike Sexton, Tsvetaeva began publishing early and her poetry was well received by contemporaries like Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, and Maximilian Voloshin who all praised her lyrical power and technical skill. She became a unique voice of Silver Age poetry, at first associated with Symbolism but later not affiliated with any particular movement. After the Bolshevik revolution, it became progressively difficult for Tsvetaeva to publish in the USSR: neither her themes nor style fit Communist ideology. She was there during the revolution and civil war – and this requires a little bit of an explanation. She was not among the group of writers who

[261] Maria Razumovskaya, *Marina Tsvetaeva. Mif i Deistvitelnost'* (Moscow: Raduga, 1994), 25.
[262] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Poet and Time" *Art in the Light of Consciousness. Eight Essays on Poetry*. Translated by Angela Livingstone. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 37.
[263] Marina Tsvetaeva. "Pismo k Yerenburgu. 21 October, 1921" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh.* Tom 6. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1994)

welcomed the revolution. An influential Soviet writer and critic Maxim Gor'kii responded to Pasternak's praise of Tsvetaeva in 1927 in the following way:

> С высокой оценкой дарования Марины Цветаевой мне трудно согласиться. Талант ее мне кажется крикливым, даже – истерическим, словом она владеет плохо… (It is difficult for me to agree with you in your high evaluation of Marina Tsvetaeva's talent. Her talent seems to me shrill, even hysterical. She is not a master of language…)[264]

It was impossible for her to versify poems that would comply with any ideological or practical requests, be it the cultural expectations of Russian émigrés in Paris or Soviet ideological prescriptions. In her memoir Tsvetaeva's daughter Ariadna Efron wrote that for her mother "poetry was neither luxury nor even necessity, but inevitability,"[265] while Tsvetaeva referred to her poetic talent as "душевно-художественный рефлекс" (an artistic reflex of the soul),[266] underscoring its instinctual nature.

In emigration, Tsvetaeva craved an audience for her poems and suffered deeply from not being able to publish. She struggled to find avenues for publishing her poems, both in Soviet Russia or abroad. The inability to realize her potential to the fullest, the experience of being restricted by historical circumstances, is reflected as claustrophobia,

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[264] Maxim Gor'kii, *Neizdanaya Perepiska* (Moscow: Academy Nauk Press, 1963), 301-302.
[265] Ariadna Efron, *No Love Without Poetry: The Memoirs of Marina Tsvetaeva's Daughter*. Translated by Diane Nemec Ignashev (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 88.
[266] Marina Tsvetaeva, *Art in the Light of Consciousness. Eight Essays on Poetry*. Translated by Angela Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 91.

a recurrent motif in Tsvetaeva's poems utilizing the spatial metaphors that present the body as a container. Images of "могила" (grave), "стойло" (stable), "трюм" (trunk), "дом" (house), "котельная" (burner), "пещера" (cave), "тюрьма" (prison). In many of Tsvetaeva's poems, her lyrical persona is desperate to escape and strives for what in psychology is referred to as a dissociation state, a split between body and soul. Psychologists define dissociation as a defense mechanism that offers an escape from traumatic and unbearable reality.

A similar motif runs through Tsvetaeva's diaries, where she asserts that her poetry translates the body into the soul and that her lyrical voice belongs to Psyche, a soul imprisoned in her flesh. Almost symptomatically in her diaries Tsvetaeva writes about her soul in the third person: "Моя душа – чудовищно ревнива: она бы не вынесла меня красавицей" (My soul – is terribly jealous: she would not stand me being a beauty) [267] and "ни волосы не я, ни рука, ни нос: я – я: незримое" (I am not my hair, hands, nose: I – I: invisible). [268] Her poetry often identifies an inner entity – Demon, spirit, soul, Psyche, desire, voice – imprisoned in the body and trying to break out though the flesh: "Жив, а не умер Демон во мне / В теле, как в трюме./ В себе как в тюрьме" (Alive, not dead is a Demon in me/ in the body as in a trunk, in myself as in a prison).[269] Tsvetaeva and Sexton are very similar in the way they develop the theme of body alienation. What Sexton expresses in terms of body fragmentation and withdrawal, Tsvetaeva renders through claustrophobia and dissociation.

[267] Marina Tsvetaeva, *Autobiographicheskaya Prosa* (Yekaterinburg: U-Faktoria, 2005), 307.
[268] Marina Tsvetaeva, *O lyubvi* (Sankt Peterburg: Azbuka, 2009), 338.
[269] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Zhiv a ne umer Demon vo mne…" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 2. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 285.

Like Sexton's poetry, Tsvetaeva's is intense and shocking, combining fervent frankness and emotional vulnerability. It prompted Joseph Brodsky to describe Tsvetaeva as "the most unique and sincere among Russian poets."[270] Tsvetaeva's poetry, like Sexton's, is deeply confessional, personal and intimate but unlike Sexton's, Tsvetaeva's exhibitionism is deliberately coded. Even though she often transcends her personal experience by mythologizing it, her lyrical persona remains very personal and intimate. I'll refer to the poetic persona Tsvetaeva adopts in her poetry as "Marina" due to a high degree of the poet's personal investment. At the same time I am aware that "Marina" cannot be equated with Marina Tsvetaeva, just as "Anne" cannot be equated with Sexton.

Tsvetaeva defined the source of her own lyricism in the following statement: "душа и я — вечная трагедия" (the soul and I — the eternal tragedy)[271] and described her method as "художественной-болевой, ибо душа наша способность к боли" (poetics of pain, because our soul is our capacity for pain).[272] Her statements suggest that the three foundations of her poetry are soul, tragedy and pain as expressed in her exemplary "Поэма конца" (Poem of the End) as "вопль вспоротого нутра" (a scream of a torn belly)[273] with a central image of a belly wound transformed into a bleeding and screaming mouth.

Tsvetaeva's poetry does not assuage but amplifies the pain, as the lyrical heroine looses herself in a vicious circle of loss, abandonment and despair. With broken grammar

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[270] Solomon Volkov, *Conversations with Joseph Brodsky*. Trans. Marian Schwartz (New York: Free Press, 1998), 54.
[271] Marina Tsvetaeva, *Autobiographicheskaya Prosa* (Yekaterinburg: U-Faktoria, 2005), 215.
[272] Marina Tsvetaeva, *Art in the Light of Consciousness. Eight Essays on Poetry*. Translated by Angela Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 76.
[273]Marina Tsvetaeva, "Poema Kontsa", *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 2. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 378.

and syntax of Tsvetaeva's poetry mimics emotional intensity and incoherence, rendering the themes of pain and suffering, as she resorts to visceral metaphors. She skillfully employs alliterations and assonances, abrupt acoustics, torn syncopated rhythms, and verbal omissions. According to her, the punctuation of her poetry is suggestive of tears and cries, screams and shrieks: "Спойте вслед! Что могла—указала ударениями, двоеточиями, тирэ" (Sing! What I could – I put into stresses, colons and dashes).[274] Tsvetaeva reveled in alliteration and assonance admitting: "Есть нечто в стихах, что важнее их смысла – их звучание" (There is something in the poems that is more important than the meaning – their sound).[275] Julia Kristeva refers to Tsvetaeva as "the most rhythmic of Russian poets." [276] While underscoring the importance of the auditory and rhythmic aspects for Tsvetaeva, Kristeva associates poetic rhythm and sound with the maternal.

Kristeva's observation is supported by Tsvetaeva's attributing tremendous influence to her mother both on her life and poetry. In the essay "Mother and Music"(1935), Tsvetaeva describes how her peculiar synesthetic perception transforms verbal imagery into a sensory experience. She recollects how her mother's singing overwhelmed her with its rich and vivid imagery: "я эти слова не слушаю, а глотаю, горящие угли" (I do not listen to those words, but swallow the burning coals) and "я физически чувствовала входящее мне в грудь Валериино зеленое венецианское

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[274] Marina Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannoie. Svodnye Tetradi*. Edited by Elena Korkina and Irina Shevelenko. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1997),152.

[275] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Poet and Time" *Art in the Light of Consciousness. Eight Essays on Poetry*. Translated by Angela Livingstone. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 71.
[276] Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women* (London: Marion Boyars Publisher, 2003), 23.

зеркало” (I physically felt Valeria’s green Venetian mirror cutting into my chest).[277] As the song burns and cuts the flesh, the imagery breaches the limits of the symbolic and moves into the semiotic creating visceral physical experience.

In the autobiographical essay “Мать и музыка” (Mother and Music, 1935), Tsvetaeva speculates that her life is a compensation for her mother’s repression and sacrifice: “Её измученная душа живёт в нас – мы только открываем то, что она скрывала. Её мятеж, её безумие, её тоска дошли в нас до крика” (Her tormented soul lives in us – we only open what she shut down. Her revolt, her madness, her sadness became our scream). [278] In a subtle way, Tsvetaeva suggests that her destiny is shaped by transgenerational trauma. The same could be said about her daughter Ariadna Efron who dedicated her life to her mother’s legacy after spending fourteen years in labor camps and in exile.

If not for her daughter’s unceasing efforts, Tsvetaeva’s poetry would have been forgotten if not lost. Ariadna acted as a censor, an editor and a critic to make Tsvetaeva’s poetry more acceptable and digestible for Soviet ideological discourses and to publish at least some of poems. To achieve this, she decided to seal her mother’s archive until 2000 because of some controversial material such as Tsvetaeva’s personal diaries and poems that at the time would have been classified as anti-Soviet.

During Krushchev’s Thaw, Tsvetaeva’s contemporaries began to praise her work more openly and her admirers started to advocate for her recognition and inclusion into the literary cannon. As Boris Pasternak predicted: “…самый большой пересмотр и самое большое признание ожидают Цветаеву” (the greatest recognition and

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[277] Marina Tsvetaeva. “Mother and Music.” *Art in the Light of Consciousness. Eight Essays on Poetry*. Translated by Angela Livingstone. (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1992), 156.
[278] Ibid., 157.

reevaluation of all awaits for Tsvetaeva).[279] Indeed, subsequent changes in the political climate of the Soviet Union made publishing more of Tsvetaeva's works possible. During the period of perestroika and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Tsvetaeva's poetry and life became subjects of intensive study in Russia and abroad.

Contemporary Russian scholarship portrays Tsvetaeva as a martyr of the Soviet system, an approach that often whitewashes or omits controversial and unflattering episodes of her life. Biographical exposé as a genre of literary criticism is a recent development in Russia; running into dismay and protest from Russian scholars who contend that airing dirty laundry has no literary value. Russian literary scholars like Lyubov Zubova, Yurii Kagan, Elena Kozlova, Elena Korkina, Irma Kudrova, Olga Revzina, and Anna Saakyants focus either on Tsvetaeva's biography or write about the formal and thematic complexity of Tsvetaeva's poetry. In recent years, however, studies with a more textual approach have come into vogue, ranging from an examination of a single theme, motif, and image to the elucidation of an entire poetic oeuvre and its principles.

Compared to Russian scholarship, international scholars are more interested in the topics of gender and sexuality, mythological patterns, and ideology. American scholarship on Tsvetaeva includes Simon Karlinsky's *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Woman, Her World and Her Poetry* (1986), Jane Taubman's *A Life Through Poetry: Marina Tsvetaeva's Lyric Poetry* (1989), Olga Hasty's *Tsvetaeva's Orphic Journeys in the Worlds of the Word* (1996) and Alyssa Dinega's *A Russian Psyche* (2001) and Svetlana Boym's "The Death of the Poet." When Tsvetaeva's archive opened in 2000, Tsvetan

[279] Boris Pasternak, *Lyudi i Polozheniya* (Moscow: Detskaya Literatura, 1986), 371.

Todorov edited and arranged extracts from nine volumes of Tsvetaeva's letters, notes and diaries to publish *Vivre Dans le Feu: Confession*s (2005), in effect the autobiography that Tsvetaeva never wrote herself.

Most studies focus exclusively on Tsvetaeva, leaving the comparative aspect unaddressed. While I employ a comparative method, my research focuses on that issue only partially and selectively. A full-fledged comparative study of Tsvetaeva's and Sexton's poetry remains to be done.

Tsvetaeva's poetry appeals to French and American feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Susan Sontag, and Hélène Cixous who place it in a tradition of *écriture féminine*. Even though the three feminists agree that Tsvetaeva's poetry emblematizes feminine difference, their approaches and interests differ significantly. For example, Julia Kristeva is interested in Tsvetaeva's poetry as reflecting the ways "to break the code, to shatter language, to find specific discourse closer to the body and emotions, to the unnamable repressed by the social contract."[280] Kristeva describes Tsvetaeva's poetry in terms of pre-Oedipal and maternal signifying practices. In her view, Tsvetaeva's poetry is more semiotic than symbolic, more maternal than paternal. Indeed, Tsvetaeva often breaks the grammar rules that for Kristeva represent the Law of the Father. By inventing her own grammar, the poet unsettles the Law. Often Tsvetaeva's poetic lines are broken and twisted in an attempt to reveal their tangible semiotic meaning, as in her poem "Рас-стояние: версты, мили…" (Dis-stance: versts, miles…, 1925) where the hyphenated words make the separation between a lyrical persona and Russia almost visible.

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[280] Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 200.

Many Tsvetaeva's poems sound broken and raw as she defamiliarizes the Russian language, bringing out its archaic roots, etymology, sound, and a rhythm of individual words. She intertwines archaic words with neologisms, vivid metaphors with allegories. Along with folklore genres, she employs modernist techniques such as estrangement and montage, key concepts of Russian Formalism.

Tsvetaeva's poetic tone is often overdramatic and hyperbolic, indicating a desperate attempt to make herself heard. Despite the hysterical tone, she is capable of calculated coldness and detached observations. Paradoxically, in her poetry Tsvetaeva often counterbalances the Dionysian drive with Apollonian clarity and logic, in a demonstration of what Hélène Cixous calls "frightful intelligence."[281] Such poetic techniques enable Tsvetaeva, in Susan Sontag's opinion, to "reach the precipice of the sublime and topple over into hysteria, anguish, dread." [282]

Witch in the Early Poems

Tsvetaeva's first collections "Вечерний Альбом" (Evening Album, 1910), "Волшебный фонарь" (Magic Lantern, 1912), combined later into "Из двух книг" (From Two Books, 1913) represent an enchanted world of childhood where the witch initially articulates a range of infantile fears and anxieties but later moves to represent female sexuality and creativity. The former motif develops in the poem "В субботу" (On Saturday, 1910), that presents sisters reading a fairy tale in their parents' absence. They imagine that their house is filled with hostile creatures, the most frightening of

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[281] Hélène Cixous, *Readings: The Poetics of Blanchot, Joyce, Kafka, Kleist, Lispector and Tsvetaeva*. Ed. Trans. & Intr. by Verena Conley (Minneapolis-London: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 48.
[282] Susan Sontag, *1926. Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Rilke*. Ed. Paolo Dilonardo, Anne Jump. (New York: Farrar, 2007), 18.

which is “старой колдунье беззубой” (an old toothless witch).[283] Here, the fear of parental abandonment is ameliorated by sisterly love.

In the poem “Курлык” (Kurlik, 1910), a little girl invents her own spell to keep a witch away. As these early poems suggest, Tsvetaeva’s use of the witch figures reflects Bruno Bettelheim’s observation in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) that the witches in fairy tales represent infantile anxiety about parental abandonment.

As Tsvetaeva’s lyrical persona matures, the witch comes to represent female sexual awakening, as in the poems “Наши царства” (Our Kingdoms, 1910) and “Декабрьская сказка” (December Fairytale, 1910). A common characteristic of these poems is the “enchantment” of the quotidian and the domestic. The sisters reimagine their home as “замок розовый, как зимняя заря” (a castle, rosy as a winter dawn) [284] and they themselves become princesses. Their father is “волшебник седой и злой” (sorcerer … grey and evil)[285], a personification of patriarchal authority. The daughters rebel and chain their father in order to practice magic and drink deer’s blood. Practicing magic is their claim to power. The sisters gain prophetic powers and learn about human nature by examining human hearts with a magnifying glass. Up to this point, the poem dramatizes a twist on the Freudian Electra complex and incest taboo: the mother is absent and the father is chained. The sisters are oblivious to heterosexual love until a prince enters their castle and unsettles their sisterly bond. In the poem, the prince represents a heterosexual object of love that the sisters are hesitant to embrace, as they are afraid to loose their

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[283] Marina Tsvetaeva, “Kurlik,” *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 1. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 247.
[284] Marina Tsvetaeva, “Nashi Tsarstva,” *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 1. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 138.
[285] Marina Tsvetaeva, “Da drug nevidanii, neslikhanii…” *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 1. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 156.

freedom and magic.

The poem describes the prince as a male "Sleeping Beauty," consistent with Tsvetaeva's practice of featuring a strong lyrical heroine and a passive infantile lover. In "Да, друг невиданный, неслыханный" (Yes, friend unseen, unheard, 1920), "Marina" rescues her lover from a prison and they flee on horseback into the starry night. Gender roles are subverted, as the lyrical heroine encourages her lover: "Мужайся: я твой щит и мужество" (Man up: I am your shield and courage).[286] Tsvetaeva's lyrical persona is very much like Bulgakov's Margarita except for one small detail: Tsvetaeva's emphasis on the sexual. Even in her early poem "Недоумение" (Perplexity, 1910), a little witch expresses her disappointment at a reluctant suitor and explains it by his fear of her magic:

Испугался глаз её янтарных,

Этих детских, слишком алых губок,

Убоявшись чар её коварных,

Не посмел испить шипящий кубок?

Are you afraid of her amber eyes

her childish too red lips

afraid of her deceitful magic

did you refuse to drink a sizzling cup?[287]

In the poem, the metonymies draw attention to eyes and lips as tools of seduction while the metaphor of a sizzling cup represents female sexual desire. The lyrical heroine

[286] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Da drug nevidanii, neslikhanii…" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 1. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 75.
[287] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Nedoumenie," *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 1. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 154.

challenges a male addressee who does not want to respond to her advances and is intimidated by her persistence.

The theme of female sexuality is dramatically developed in the poem "Колдунья" (A Sorceress, 1909). The lyrical heroine identifies herself as a primeval woman, describing her magic powers as feminine, sexual and orgasmic: "Я –Эва, и страсти мои велики./ Вся жизнь моя страстная дрожь (I – Eve, and my passions are great. /All my life is passionate tremor)."[288] Instead of seducing a knight, the witch warns him to keep away. In the fourth stanza, priests intervene as a voice of authority and forbid the knight to listen to and look at the witch:

Закрой свою дверь

Безумной колдунье, чьи речи позор.

Колдунья лукава, как зверь!

(Close your door to

a crazy witch whose words are shameful.

The witch is cunning as a beast.)[289]

The priests embody a misogynistic patriarchal system that vilifies and denigrates a sexual woman as a witch, by associating her with madness, dishonor and bestiality. In her poem, Tsvetaeva gives a lyrical heroine a chance to defend herself. She admits to her only sin of preferring laughter and freedom to tears and sadness. In her poem, Tsvetaeva poetically works with the intersection of femininity, sexuality and shame, but is unable to solve a dilemma. On the one hand, she admits that female sexuality breaks the law of

[288] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Kolduniia," *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 1. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 439.
[289] Ibid., 254.

traditional Christian morality and accepts an impending punishment in the afterlife: "быть в аду нам, сестры пылкие, пить нам адскую смолу" (we'll be in Hell, passionate sisters, we'll drink hellish pitch).[290] On the other hand, she also insists that women deserve lenience and exemption from the divine trial: "Бог, не суди – Ты не был / Женщиной на земле!" (God, do not judge –You haven't been a Woman on the earth!)[291] Her lyrical heroine is given courage to defend herself and claim her innocence:

Приговорена к позорному столбу
славянской совести старинной,
с змеёю в сердце и с клеймом на лбу
я утверждаю что невинна.

Sentenced to the shame pillar
of Slavic ancient conscience,
with a snake in my heart and a mark on my forehead
I insist I am innocent.[292]

Here, pillars and chains represent patriarchal Christian Slavic morality while the traditional Biblical symbols of a snake and a mark on the forehead refer to the lyrical heroine's sin. Nevertheless Tsvetaeva's heroine refuses to submit and obey and laughs in defiance. Such usage of laugher as an expression of female sexuality and rebellion

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[290] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Bit' v Adu Nam Sestri Pilkiie…" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Tom 1. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 86.
[291] Ibid., 87.
[292] Ibid., 98.

resonates with Hélène Cixous' views in "The Laughter of the Medusa" (1971). In her essay, the feminist philosopher, very much like Tsvetaeva, employs the metaphor of priests to embody the phallocentric sublimation.

According to Cixous, patriarchy deforms female sexuality of categorizing of women as sexual objects for men and preventing them from exploring and expressing their sexuality in itself, and for itself. Cixous writes that female laughter, sexuality and creativity have a liberating potential: "Let the priests tremble, we're going to show them our sexts!" [293] To free sexuality means to free language in an act of *écriture féminine* and *jouissance*, which Cixous defines as a metaphysical fulfillment of desire. Similarly, for Tsvetaeva identity, sexuality and language are intertwined. Writing poetry was less a choice for her and more an inevitability, something beyond and above her. Obsession, magic, witchcraft.

Poetry as Witchcraft and a Devil's Pact

In her poetry and diaries, Tsvetaeva often describes herself as "a witch," "a woman with the six sense," "Sybil," "Lilith's daughter," and "a sorceress." She is scared of the prophetic quality of her poetry: "Я знаю это помимовольное наколдовыванье — почти всегда бед! Но, слава Богу, — себе! Я не себя боюсь, я своих стихов боюсь" (I know this unwilling conjuring – almost always misfortunes! Thank God, - to myself! I am not scared of myself, I am scared of my poems).[294]

Like her lyrical persona connected with a variety of omens, visions, and traditions,

[293] Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), *The Medusa Reader*. Ed. by Marjorie B. Garber, Nancy J. Vickers (London: Routledge, 2003), 62.
[294] Marina Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannoie*. *Svodnye Tetradi*. Edited by Elena Korkina and Irina Shevelenko (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1997), 33.

Tsvetaeva was often described by her contemporaries as a witch because of her green "snake" eyes, her gypsy rings and bracelets, and her captivating verbal skills. Tsvetaeva herself propagated such a perception: "Да, женщина – поскольку колдунья. И поскольку – поэт" (Yes, a woman – and thus a witch. and thus – a poet). [295]

In Tsvetaeva's later writings, as in Sexton's, the witch becomes almost an axis of self-identity: "А теперь мне необходимо писать большую книгу – о старухе – о грозной, чудесной, ещѐ не жившей в мире старухе – философе и ведьме – себе!!!" (Now I need to write a big book – about a hag – terrifying, marvelous and extraordinary – a philosopher and a witch – myself) [296] Tsvetaeva's diary entries, poetry, letters, and essays abound in witchcraft imagery while describing poetry: "Темная сила! Мра – ремесло!" (Dark power! Death – art!) [297]; "Магический круг. Сновидческий круг. Зачарованный круг." (A magic circle. A dream circle. An enchanted circle)[298]; "сомнительное пойло, что в котле колдуньи" (a dubious potion in a witch's cauldron).[299] In one of the letters she describes the perfect poetry as "колдовство и молитва" (incantation and prayer), [300] blending the genres of prayer and incantation in her formula. What makes those two genres different is the position of the lyrical persona. While praying, she is humble and self-deprecating in her appeal to God for help and a reprieve, or at least the consolation. While engaged in witchcraft, she is fierce and brave,

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[295] Marina Tsvetaeva, *Neizdannoie. Svodnye Tetradi*. Edited by Elena Korkina and Irina Shevelenko (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1997), 64.
[296] Ibid., 441.
[297] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Temnaia sila! Mra – remeslo!" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 98.

[298] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Poets with History and Poets without History," *Art in the Light of Consciousness. Eight Essays on Poetry*. Translated by Angela Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1992), 178.
[299] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Pisma," *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), T. 5, 363.
[300] Marina Tsvetaeva. Pismo k Achmatovoy, *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), T 5, 363.

claiming magic power in her effort to change the world and people. However, the magic of Tsvetaeva's poetic scenarios fails: poetic incantations and prayers only manage to express an unfulfilled desire for love, protection and control over her destiny.

Tsvetaeva's perception of poetry as a witchcraft is evident and poignant in her poems about Anna Akhmatova. To express her adoration and respect, Tsvetaeva creates several mythopoetic identities for Akhmatova in a cycle of thirteen[301] poems such as "шальное исчадие ночи белой" (a passionate child of white night), "царица" (a queen), "Богородица" (Madonna), "краса грустная и бесовская" (a sad and hellish beauty), "уснувший демон" (sleeping demon), "Муза плача" (Muse of Lament), "раненая Муза" (wounded Muse), "небесный крест" (a heavenly cross). The varied imagery juxtaposes the sacred and the infernal, the aristocratic and the folkloric, the Christian and the heretical. Along with naming her addressee repeatedly, Tsvetaeva resorts to homophonic paronomasia, alliterations and metonymy. Akhmatova is referred to as "голос" (a voice), that is deep and strong; "руки" (hands) that are impossible to reach, and "очи" (eyes) that are religious icons; as emotions of "гордость и горечь" (pride and bitterness) that hint at her character and her maiden name, Gorenko.

Two key images command our attention: "Муза" (Muse) and "чернокнижница" (a practitioner of black art, a witch). The former image flattered Akhmatova, while the later shocked her. Depicting Akhmatova as a witch, Tsvetaeva implies that she is responsible for historical catastrophes that ravish and destroy Russia. Such association is strongest in the seventh poem of the cycle where the addressee is depicted as a figure of monumental destruction:

[301] Number "thirteen" is considered to be an unlucky number, a "devil's dozen" in Russian folklore.

Ты, срывающая покров

С катафалков и колыбелей,

Разъярительница ветров,

Насылательница метелей,

Лихорадок, стихов и войн,

-Чернокнижница!

You, tearing the covers

Off the coffins and cradles,

A spinner of the winds,

A sender of the blizzards,

Plagues, poems and wars,

- Witch![302]

[302] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Ti, srivayushchaya pokrov…" *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), T 5, 363.

By portraying Akhmatova as a witch, Tsvetaeva invokes terror and despair similar to Walter Benjamin's description of the angel of history who is "… turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet."[303] Most likely, Tsvetaeva designates Akhmatova as a witch of history to monumentalize her poetic talent rather then her historical agency. By describing Akhmatova as "чернокнижница" (a witch, a practitioner of black arts), Tsvetaeva also burdens her with the historical responsibility implied by the Russian adage: "Поэт в России больше чем поэт" (A poet is more than a poet in Russia).

After 1916 Tsvetaeva addresses no poetry to Akhmatova until 1921 when she writes the poem "Кем полосынька твоя…" (Who'll harvest your line, 1921). In a poetic form, she extends her condolences on the death of Akhmatova's ex-husband Nikolai Gumilev and expresses concerns about Akhmatova's future. To convey the pathos of mourning, Tsvetaeva stylizes the poem as a lamentation, a folkloric song traditionally performed at funerals. Her allusions to political repressions are coded in the lines: "Не загладить тех могил / Слезой, славою" (No atonement for the graves / with tears and fame).[304] The arrests of the intelligentsia are hinted at in a line: "Все работнички твои / Разом забраны" (All your workers are taken away).[305] Tsvetaeva alludes to Alexander Blok's death and Nikolai Gumilev's execution in the following lines:

Один заживо ходил

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[303] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1955), 257.
[304] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Kem polosinka tvoia…" *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), T 5, 363
[305] Ibid., 289.

—Как удавленный.

Другой к стеночке пошёл

Искать прибыли.

(И гордец же был-сокóл!)

Разом выбыли.

One walked around

As if strangled

The other went to the wall

To seek his luck

(What a proud man he was!)

Both are gone.[306]

Archaic diminutive epithets "чернокосынька" (black-haired), "белорученька" (white-handed), "ясноконька" (bright-eyed), "чернокрылонька" (black-winged) portray Akhmatova as a suffering heroine of Russian folk ballads. The nouns in diminutive case "полосынька" (line), "работнички" (workers), "сподвижнички" (helpers), "пёрышка" (feathers), "крылышки" (wings) contribute to the pathos of helpless pity and sincere concern.

In this poem Akhmatova is again described as a witch, but this time she is not a powerful destructor but a helpless witness and a victim of history. At the end of the poem, she turns into a bird and tries to fly but stones thrown at her interrupt the flight. The imagery conveys

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[306] Ibid., 285.

Tsvetaeva's prediction that Akhmatova's poetic creativity will be stifled and constrained by the Soviet system since poetic powers do not stand against the socio-political power of repressive machine that treats poems as incriminating evidence.

The theme of witchcraft is present not only in Tsvetaeva poetry but also runs deep in her prose. She develops the motif of poetry as witchcraft in the essay "Искусство в свете совести" (Art in Light of the Consciousness, 1932), describing the Devil's pact between a poet and a demon:

> Демон (стихия) жертве платит. Ты мне — кровь, жизнь, совесть, честь, я тебе — такое сознание силы (ибо сила — моя!), такую власть над всеми (кроме себя, ибо ты — мой!), такую в моих тисках — свободу, что всякая иная сила будет тебе смешна, всякая иная власть — мала, всякая иная свобода — тесна и всякая иная тюрьма — просторна. (The demon (passion) pays the victim. You give me blood, life, consciousness, honor, I give you such a power (power is mine), such a control over everybody (but yourself because you are mine!), such a freedom in my embrace, that any other power will be ridiculous to you, any other control – meager, any other freedom – stifling, and any other prison – spacious).[307]

The paragraph describes the transaction between a poet and the Devil – an exchange of the human values for ultimate power, control and freedom. Unlike Bulgakov, Tsvetaeva describes

[307] Marina Tsvetaeva, *Art in the Light of Consciousness. Eight Essays on Poetry*. Translated by Angela Livingstone (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1992), 378.

the Devil's pact as a poetic act of achieving superiority and breaking away from human limitations.

Another autobiographical essay "Черт" (Devil, 1935) suggests that Tsvetaeva's fascination with the Devil began in early childhood. When a little heroine of the essay "Musia" disobeys her mother and sneaks into a library, she meets a naked half-dog, a half-human creature: "голый, в серой коже, как дог […] главное были – глаза: бесцветные, безразличные и беспощадные. Я его до всего узнавала по глазам, и эти глаза узнала бы – без всего" (naked, his skin grey, as a dog's […] the most important were his eyes: uncolored, indifferent and inexorable. I recognized him first by his eyes and I would have recognized his eyes without seeing anything else).[308]

Tsvetaeva refers to her imaginary friend as "дог" (a Great Dane) [309] – a majestic grey dog with sad eyes. To conjure him up, she invents a chant blending two words "Чорт –Бог" (Devil-God). At first, the creature functions as a silent enigmatic friend, but later he assumes a role of a lover. He makes the heroine feel special, chosen and loved – the emotional response Tsvetaeva was probably seeking in all her adult relationships. In return for his love, he demands ultimate devotion and secrecy. The little girl clings to her Devil and does not reveal his presence to anyone: "Бог был – чужой, Черт – родной. Бог был – холод. Черт – жар" (God was a stranger, Devil was a relative. God was cold, Devil – heat). [310]

The puzzling figure of the Devil invites a range of interpretations. Irma Kudrova

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[308] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Chert," *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 672.
[309] Fluent in several languages, Tsvetaeva was well aware about the palindromic nature of "dog" and, similar to Sexton, used it repeatedly to problematize the figure of the Devil as a reversal of God.
[310] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Chert," *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 637.

suggests that he represents Pushkin in particular, and poetic genius in general while Tsvetaeva's biographer Simon Karlinsky suggests that Tsvetaeva's "own private Lucifer" stands for "many attractive and prohibitive things: love, uniqueness, danger and, for good measure, Russian literature."[311] Lily Feiler points towards the creature's androgynous characteristics and connects it to Tsvetaeva's latent bisexuality. She also explains Tsvetaeva's Devil as an anti-mother figure: "he is a force from down-under, while Mother rules from above."[312] It's likely that the imaginary friend is conjured in defiance of the mother, however; it's hard to agree that the Devil is "a force from down-under" because in the dream he saves a girl from drowning and lifts her up in flight.

Who or what is the Devil? The answer might be found in a dream in which the Devil rescues a little girl from drowning and they fly above the earth holding hands. He promises to marry her: "А когда-нибудь мы с тобой поженимся, черт возьми!" (Some day we'll get married, damn it!) [313] The flight produces triumphal and ecstatic feeling and makes it impossible to ignore that Tsvetaeva's image of Devil is sexualized and romanticized. He assumes characteristics of a perfect lover. At the end of the essay, Tsvetaeva eulogizes the Devil and acknowledges him as shaping her character and life, making a poet out of her, teaching her the truth, encouraging her to cherish her pride and honor. At the same time, she blames him for making her an outcast and putting a circle of loneliness around her.

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[311] Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva. The Woman, Her World and Her Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 15.
[312] Lily Feiler, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat of Heaven and Hell* (Ann Harbor: Duke University Press, 1994), 27-28.
[313] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Chert" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 85.

The Magic of Love and a Desiring Subject

Tsvetaeva’s love poetry often employs images of witchcraft and magic. By many contemporary accounts Tsvetaeva was passionate, easily fascinated by people with whom she often initiated relationships herself. Those who knew her well wrote that she had a pathological propensity to mythologize people, events and reality. Her husband Sergey Efron wrote about his wife: “всё строится на самообмане” (everything is built on self-delusion) [314] while one of Tsvetaeva’s lovers Roman Goul described her as “clinically speaking, certainly a mythomaniac.”[315] What Tsvetaeva’s nearest and dearest described as limitation and inconvenience, a feminist theorist Susan Sontag considers a cornerstone of poetic creativity. In her introduction to Tsvetaeva's poetry collection, Sontag asserts that

> ...to be a poet, requires a mythology of the self. The self-described is the poet self, to which the daily self (and others) are often ruthlessly sacrificed. The poet self is the real self, the other one is the carrier; and when the poet self dies, the person dies.[316]

Olga Hasty agrees with Susan Sontag in her book *Tsvetaeva’s Orphic Journeys in the World of the Word* (1996) stating that mythological patterns informed both Tsvetaeva’s poetry

[314] Quoted in Sergey Romanovsky, *Ot kazhdogo – po talanty. Kazhdomy – po sud’be* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo SPBGU, 2003), 31.
[315] Quoted in Simon Karlinsky, *Marina Tsvetaeva. The Woman, Her World and Her Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), 176.
[316] Susan Sontag, *Where the Stress Falls* (New York: Farrar, 2001), 138.

and her life. One widely publicized anecdote reveals the synergy in an astonishing fashion. Tsvetaeva married her husband because he brought her a carnelian bead-shaped stone from the Crimean Koktebel beach. She was smitten because he had intuited her favorite stone. In addition, she decoded[317] a reversed name Orpheus contained in his name Sergey Efron. Tuned to meaningful coincidences and omens, Tsvetaeva considered their union to be predestined and remained in the marriage long after she and her husband grew apart.

Being married did not prevent Tsvetaeva from many love affairs, which she documented in letters, diaries and poetry. In a fictionalized account of Tsvetaeva's love life *Костер неистовой любви* (A Fire of Passionate Love*,* 2006), a writer Elana Arsenyeva describes Tsvetaeva's relationships with twenty-eight lovers: men and women, aristocrats and proletarians, poets and publishers. Most of those affairs ended in painful breakups with Tsvetaeva channeling her hurt feelings into poetry and prose. It appears that Tsvetaeva needed to be in love to feel alive and to write poems. In her diaries and letters, she admits that she has a fixation both on "love" and "non-love" as turbulent emotions that make her feel alive. In one letter to a lover, she begs him for love: "Ведь меня нет, только через любовь ко мне я пойму, что существую (I do not exist, only through love for me do I understand that I exist.)" Such a plea suggests that for her, existence is *Amo ergo sum*.

Tsvetaeva's husband compared his wife's passionate nature to an oven and her lovers to fire wood: "Громадная печь для разогревания которой необходимы дрова, дрова и дрова" (A

[317] Anagrams were popular at the time, and Tsvetaeva used then a lot.

huge oven that needs logs, logs and logs). [318] It is hard not to find Freudian symbolism in his remarks. Interestingly, Tsvetaeva resorted to similar imagery in her diary, admitting to her obsession: "У меня всё – пожар!" (In me, everything is fire!)[319] and "…каждое моё отношение – лавина" (each of my relationship is an avalanche).[320] Tsvetaeva metaphorically refers to "love" as "fire" and "avalanche," underscoring its uncontrollable and destructive nature. In a letter to Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva regrets that the word "love" fails to convey its true meaning and wishes for "настоящего костра, на котором бы меня сожгли" (a real fire, on which I would be burnt).[321]

Falling in love, being in love and even falling out of love were Tsvetaeva's "drugs", feeding an emotional need for attention and gratification. The ideal and perfect addressee of her poetry is often a beloved, but none of her lovers seems to be able to bear for long the high intensity of her passion. As Ariadna Efron wrote, her mother's lovers soon got "tired of the unconventional intensity Marina imposed on them, of the effort she demanded of their minds and spiritual musculature."[322]

In her daughter's memoirs, Tsvetaeva is portrayed as a misunderstood Pygmalion trying to change and perfect her lovers as she

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[318] Quoted in Sergey Romanovsky, *Ot kazhdogo – po talanty. Kazhdomy – po sud'be* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo SPBGU, 2003), 31.
[319] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Pismo k Barachu" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 85.
[320] Ibid., 182.
[321] Ibid., 121.
[322] Ariadna Efron, *No Life Without Poetry. The Memoirs of Marina Tsvetaeva's Daughter*. Translated by Diane Nemec Ignashev. (Northwest University Press, 2009), 103.

> …chiseled away at their very core, reshaping and remaking them to fit her own special powerful and unconventional mold, which she accomplished by way of her special, powerful, and unconventional language, talent, character and her very essence.[323]

Most of her lovers complained later in their memoirs that Tsvetaeva demanded the impossible and none of them lived up to her expectations either intellectually or emotionally. Tsvetaeva described the pattern in the following terms: "Боялись моего острого языка, «мужского ума», моей правды, моего имени, моей силы и, кажется, больше всего — моего бесстрашия; наконец, самое простое: я им просто не нравилась. Как женщина" (They were afraid of my sharp tongue, my "male mind", my truth, my name, my strength, and most of all – my fierceness; and finally, very simply: they did not like me. As a woman).[324]

Tsvetaeva's love poetry often reveals the disappointment with illicit affairs as her lyrical heroine's expectations and the desires of her lover clash. While she aspires to spiritual connection and demands an ultimate devotion, her lovers seek sexual gratification and want to maintain emotional distance. The tendency to idolize love and lovers turns Tsvetaeva's lyrical persona into an emotional wreck, often begging for love, forgiveness and acceptance.

Tsvetaeva's lyrical persona is fearful that her lover will grow indifferent and leave her. To prevent it, she resorts to magic and puts a spell on her beloved, gives him a love potion or

[323] Ariadna Efron, *No Life Without Poetry*. Trans. by Diane Nemec Ignashev (Chicago: Northwest UP, 2009), 104.
[324] Marina Tsvetaeva. *Neizdanoye*. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1997), 525.

presents him with a magic gift. Patterns of attraction spells, jealousy spells and revenge spells are at work in many Tsvetaeva's cycles and individual poems such as "Полюбил богатый бедную" (Rich loved poor, 1918), "Чтобы помнил не часочек, не годок" (Remember me more than an hour, a year, 1918), "Развела тебе в стакане" (I mixed in your drink, 1918), "Слезы, слезы – живая вода" (Tears, tears – live water, 1918), "П. Анатольскому" (To P. Anatolsky, 1920). Tsvetaeva stylizes her love poems as incantations that aim to provide emotional or physical healing or hexing, make somebody to fall in or out of love. Her poems express a desire for protection, good fortune, and love.

In "Чтобы помнил не часочек, не годок" (Remember me more than an hour, a year, 1918), "Marina" casts a "forget-me-not" spell on her lover to make him restless and insomniac in her absence. He would see visions of "Marina" and be drawn back to her. She also gives him a magic golden comb that doubles as a musical instrument: "Чуть притронешься – пойдет трескотня, Про меня одну, да все про меня" (Touch it slightly – it will sing/ about me, only about me).[325] Her comb is a magic object that has to remind the lover about "Marina's" two distinctive features: her beautiful hair and her poetic talent.

In the poem "П. Анатольскому" (To P. Anatolsky, 1920), a lyrical heroine gives her lover an iron ring to ensure that he remains faithful and impervious to the charms of other women. Here, the ring is both literal and metaphorical. Tsvetaeva loved massive silver rings and bracelets and often presented rings to her lovers as a promise and demand of complete fidelity and ultimate devotion. As the poem develops, the ring turns into an iron armor encasing the lover

[325] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Chtobi pomnil…" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 532.

and making him invincible.

Tsvetaeva actively borrows imagery from the rich Russian folk tradition: birds (swans, eagles, ravens, doves), rings (golden, silver, iron, pearl), mirrors (dim, broken, clear), forests (dense, dark, grey) and roads (long, foggy, unknown) – images from folk fairy tales and lyrical songs. Poetic symbolism is explicit: a swan and an eagle stand for a beloved, a raven is usually an omen of death or bad news, a dove is a bringer of good news. Rings symbolize love and commitment. Finding a ring means finding love while losing or throwing a ring away means losing or forgetting love. In Tsvetaeva's poems of the emigration period, the lyrical persona often walks out of her house to talk to the wind, moon and sky about her lost beloved. Tsvetaeva often employs melodramatic elements and the theatricality of folk lyrical songs about an unfortunate or tragic love. Many of her poems indeed became popular romance songs.[326]

In emigration, Tsvetaeva turns with new intensity to Russian folklore for themes, style and imagery. As her daughter Ariadna Efron writes:

> By fatal coincidence Marina left Russia just as Russia – together with the revolution – had burst into her work, taken root in her with all its multi- and poly-vocalism, with all the national character of its dialects, sayings and vernacular, with all its songs of glory all

[326] Tsvetaeva's poems "У зеркала" (By the Mirror) and "Мне нравится" (I like) were put to music by Mikael Tariverdiyev and performed by Alla Pugachova in "Ирония Судьбы" (The Irony of Fate), a popular Soviet comedy-drama directed by Eldar Ryazanov in 1975. Eldar Ryazanov featured Tsvetaeva's poems in dramas "О бедном гусаре замолвите слово" (Say a Word for the Poor Hussar) in 1981, and "Жестокий романс" (Cruel Romance) in 1985.

its funeral laments, potions for the evil eye, and other sorcery.[327]

Tsvetaeva's turn to folkloric and archaic sources can be explained by her growing geographic and cultural nostalgia. Away from Russia she suffered and resented that her Russia was baing transformed into "...CCCP, […] в глухое, без гласных, в свистящую гущу. Не шучу, от одной мысли душно" (…USSR –into the consonants, without the vowels, into a hissing mass. No kidding, just one thought and I am getting sick).[328] Tsvetaeva hated the new name of Communist Russia, abbreviated as triple "s" and "r" that even on a phonetic level was stifling and claustrophobic for her.

To deal with painful nostalgia and loss, Tsvetaeva resorts to Russian folklore and history, trying to recreate and to conjure the Russia she has left behind, the Russia that exists no more. Her epic poems of the émigré period center on stylistic and thematic emblems of Russia: folklore themes, vocabulary and syntax, traditional epithets and symbols.

Tsvetaeva's incantation patterns allow her lyrical persona a high degree of expression if not agency. She strives for the impossible – to conjure the lover and shape him according her needs, to connect with a lover who is years and miles away, to step out of her body's constrains, to heal her emotional wounds, to reenter into a lost garden, to fly away into ethereal realm, to claim and defend her right to love and feel. The 'I wish/I want' clauses from the first-person point of view represent the lyrical persona as taking ownership of her wants and desires.

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[327] Ariadna Efron, *No Life Without Poetry*. Translated by Diane Nemec Ignashev (Chicago: Northwest UP, 2009), 89.
[328] Marina Tsvetaeva. Pismo k A. Teskovoi. *Neizdanoye*. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1997), 525.

It's striking how much Tsvetaeva's heroine resembles Bulgakov's Margarita. The difference is that Margarita remains in love while Tsvetaeva's lyrical heroine grows progressively disillusioned with her lover and finally either abandons him or is abandoned.

The poem "Переулочки" (Side Streets, 1922) exemplifies Tsvetaeva's interest in witchcraft. It reads as a vast attraction spell, encapsulating, in Tsvetaeva's own words, "a story of ultimate seduction with words."[329] The poem is the monologue of a witch who lures a lover into the labyrinth of Moscow streets that represent a trap of her love. The poem gradually sublimates sexuality as the lyrical persona leads her lover on with words and seduces him three times: with apples, fish and finally the sky. The apples are the metaphorical breasts that she shows to the lover but forbids him to touch:

Яблок — лесть,

Яблок — ласть.

Рук за пазуху

Не класть.

Apples – flattery

Apples –sweetness

Do not put hands

On my chest.[330]

The second time she seduces him with a river and fish that metaphorically refer to

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[329]Quoted in Lily Feiler, *Marina Tsvetaeva: The Double Beat of Heaven and Hell* (Ann Harbor: Duke University Press, 1994), 122.

[330] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Pereulochki" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 439.

female sexual organs:

Речка — зыбь,

Речка — рябь.

Рукой — рыбоньки

Не лапь...

River – shimmer

River – waves

Hands away from my fish,

- don't touch… [331]

The sorceress lures the lover but forbids him to touch her body as she aspires to an ethereal spiritual love of which he is incapable. At last, she invites him to rise into the otherworldly heavenly dimension of an azure sky – "лазорь", but he refuses to sever his connections with life. She insists:

Милый, растрать!

С кладью не примут!

Дабы принять —

Надо отринуть!

....

Милый, не льни:

[331] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Pereulochki" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 439.

Ибо не нужно:

Ибо не лжи:

Ибо ни мужа.

Beloved, spend!

With baggage there is no entry

To partake –

You need to throw away.

Beloved, no hugging:

There is no need for it:

No lies,

No husband.[332]

Transcendental ethereal love is impossible for the lover and the sorceress turns him into a golden bull to guard her home:

На при — вязи

Реви, заклят:

Взор туп,

Лоб крут,

[332] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Pereulochki " *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 439.

Рог злат.

On the chain

Roar under a spell

Dull eyes,

Steep forehead

Golden horn.[333]

The transformation of the male lover into a bull is indicative of aggressive male sexuality. His golden horn implies erection while his moans imply his sexual desire. The witch turns him into an animal and chains her lover to reveal and control his sexuality. While the lyrical persona is portrayed as a spiritual being, the male lover is driven by the desires of the body. Overall, the poem conveys the impossibility of ethereal transcendental love unburdened by bodily demands and temptations and explores the contradictions inherent in female and male expectations that doom the relationship.

When abandoned and disillusioned, the lyrical heroine often responds with protective or revengeful spells. In the poem "Отмыкала ларец железный" (Unlocking an iron box, 1916), "Marina" employs a magic ritual in order to forget an unfaithful lover. She opens an iron case and removes a pearl ring. The chest represents her body and soul, while the ring represents her love. Ritualistically, she takes her lover out of her soul. She predicts that their separation is a misfortune for both lovers, and the road, a traditional metaphor for life, will be more difficult for

[333] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Pereulochki" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 439.

her lover:

Будет твой путь

лесами дремучими,

песками горючими

Душу – выкличешь,

Очи выплачешь.

Your road will be

in dark forests, hot sands

Soul – take out

eyes – cry out.[334]

Obviously, the lyrical heroine wants her ex-lover to suffer. She predicts that his life will be hard and painful without her. At the same time, the end of love means death for a lyrical heroine:

А надо мною – кричать сове,

А надо мною шуметь траве.

Over me – an owl will cry

Over me – the grass will whisper.[335]

The motif of an unrequited love continues in the poem "К озеру вышла. Крут берег"

[334] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Otmikala larets zheleznii…" *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 374.
[335] Marina Tsvetaeva, "K ozeru vishla…" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 265.

(To the lake I went. The bank is steep, 1916), where the heroine throws a ring into a river in an attempt to forget her lover:

Кинула перстень. Бог с перстнем!

Не по руке мне, знать, кован!

Threw away a ring. I do not need a ring.

Not for my hand it was cast.[336]

The ring transforms into a swan and flies away transparently symbolizing the folkloric imagery of Russian fairy tales. The poem turns into a ritual meant to deal with the loss of love: the iron chest is soul, the ring is love, a swan is a beloved, and a river refers to life.

Once again "Marina" reveals and revels in her magic powers in "Коли милым назову – не соскучишся! " (If I call you a beloved – you will never get bored, 1916). To win the lover, "Marina" presents herself in several roles: "Богородица" (Madonna), "поцелуйщица" (a kisser), "чернокнижница" (a witch), "свирельница" (a fluteplayer), "беззаконница" (an outlaw). Blending a pagan witch with the Madonna of the Three Hands, her lyrical heroine promises fascinating and endless wonders to her lover if he stays with her. The Madonna's first hand brings punishment and destruction; her second hand is far-reaching and all embracing, while the third hand is reserved for writing poetry.

While Anne Sexton gives her witch twelve fingers, Tsvetaeva assigns her witch with an extra hand. In both cases, adding extra parts to the body can be read as a poetic attempt to "un-

[336] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Pereulochki" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 391.

castrate" woman. Phallic symbolism is a traditional attribute of a witch – a long pointed nose, an extra nipple, a magic wand, a pointed hat and a broom – suggests both her power and her monstrosity.

Tsvetaeva often found herself in a situation of abandonment to which she responded with poetry filled with disappointment, anger and bitterness. While Updike's witches take out their frustration on women, Tsvetaeva's witch is determined to hurt either her lover or herself. Her lyrical heroine turns into a revengeful witch in the poem "Развела тебе в стакане" (Mixed into your drink) that is written as a hex spell. She prepares a drink for her ex-lover to ensure that he: "чтоб не елось, чтоб не пелось, не пилось, не спалось" (no eating, no singing, no drinking, no sleeping).[337] The hexing robs the ex-lover of any kind of desire and pleasure. She wants him to age prematurely, to lose his sight and hearing and wither away.

A different scenario is presented in "Попытка ревности" (Attempt at Jealousy, 1924) in which a lyrical persona refers to herself as "a woman with the six sense" and reprimands her lover for choosing a simple woman over her. Overwhelmed and exhausted by their intense relationship, he chooses a down-to-earth woman "without wonders" over the lyrical persona. The poem's broken lines, uneven rhythm and a repeated rhetorical question "Are you happy?" articulate the lyrical persona's hurt feelings. Here, she does not wish misfortune or death on her ex-lover but blames herself for being more than he can bear.

The poem "Поэма конца" (Poem of the End, 1924) also recounts the pain of a break up. Compositionally, it consists of the lyrical persona's stream of consciousness interspersed with

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[337] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Yesli milim nazovu…" *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 126.

the fragments of a conversation between the lovers. Devastated and desperate, the lyrical persona is overdramatic and emotional while her lover remains cold and indifferent. She begs him to run away or die together, while he is rational and wants to avoid drama. She persuades him into final intimacy in the hope that he would not break up with her, but it changes nothing. As the lover walks away, the world turns cold and grey for the lyrical heroine, who stares at the river contemplating suicide.

Tsvetaeva's cycle "Сугробы" (Snow Hills, 1922) consists of twelve poems monitoring all stages of love from initial infatuation to cold indifference. The lyrical heroine falls in love, struggles to keep her lover faithful, only to grow revengeful and spiteful when he leaves her.

In the first poem of the cycle, the lyrical heroine conjures her lover by repeating a consonant "r" – a letter of his name. The poem describes a situation where the lover is torn between two women and the lyrical heroine urges him to make a choice. Their affair is portrayed as illicit by splitting the pronoun "our" into separate "yours" and "mine." "Marina" regretfully lists all things she and her lover do not and will never share: presents, home, children and conversations.

In the next poem of the cycle, the lyrical persona is desperate to fill a void and to find a lover. She lures the passers-by into her bed-river, craving male attention and sexual gratification. Hungry for love, she is ready to see a potential lover in every stranger:

Чужой человек,

Дорогой человек,

Ночлег- человек,

навек -человек!

Strange man,

Dear man.

Night – man,

Eternity –man![338]

She resolves to marry a stranger and bakes a wedding cake with snake's lard. Ultimately she is disappointed because the strangers are nothing more than fleeting shadows in her life, indifferent passers-by. She continues:

Простор человек

Ниотколь человек

Сквозь-пол- человек

Прошел- человек.

Empty man,

From nowhere man,

Disappearing man

Passing-by man.[339]

In the next poem, "Marina" reveals that the source of her magic power lies not in her

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[338] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Sugrobi", *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 125.
[339] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Sugrobi", *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 126.

body, but in her words and spells, with which she enchants and controls her lovers. Her words are described as "ветерок-говорок" (wind-speech), "сахарок-говорок" (sugar-speech), "воркоток-говорок" (whisper-speech), and "рокоток-говорок" (roar-speech); metaphoric synesthesia combines bright color, silken texture and sweet taste.

Here, incantations bring her lover back as if he is on a leash: "Шелку яркий шнурок, Ремешок-говорок" (A bright silk rope, a leash – speech)![340] Metaphors such as "a leash", "a belt" and "a rope" suggest a tyrannical desire to possess and control the lover. The same desire emerges from the poem "Наворковала, наворожила" (Whispered, conjured, 1922), a spell to ensure that her lover that think only about "Marina." Being possessive, she wants to be the only person in her lover's life. Ultimately, "Marina" admits that her magic did not work as her spells wither away. With the advent of the spring her beloved leaves her.

Abandoned, "Marina" wishes to become invisible to her former lover. In the poem "Дабы ты меня не видел" (You should not see me, 1922), she makes frostbitten honeysuckle bushes grow around her like a fence to provide a shelter. In the last lines, she promises to tear her lover out of her soul, saying that poetry will help her write him out and get over him.

Tsvetaeva's love poetry often has a strong element of magic as she tries to fulfill her desire to find and keep a perfect lover. However, happy endings are rare in Tsvetaeva's poems except for a poem "Молодец" (Swain, 1924) where Marusya falls for a vampire who kills her brother and her mother, and finally takes her from a church into the ethereal realms. Here, the price of love is the destruct 125ion and death of her relatives.

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[340] Marina Tsvetaeva, "Sugrobi", *Sobranie Sochinenii v Semi Tomakh*. Ed. Anna Saakiantz and Lev Mnukhin. (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1995), 127.

In Tsvetaeva's poetry, the witch is a multifunctional and complex image. In the early poems she represents infantile fears but eventually moves to articulate female sexuality and creativity. The witch's multiplicity and ambiguity manifests itself on the linguistic level in Tsvetaeva's use of several words to denote a woman with magic skills: "ведьма" (witch), "колдунья" (sorceress), "чернокнижница" (practitioner of dark magic).

Tsvetaeva repeatedly describes poetic creativity in terms of a Devil's pact (or pact with the devil) that ultimately designates the female poet as a witch. For her, words in poetry are more than words in everyday speech because they acquire a magic expressive and creative power. As creativity intersects with sexuality, Tsvetaeva's love poetry turns into a catalogue of magic spells that articulate female desires, tactics and dreams. Employing a witch as a lyrical persona, Tsvetaeva shifts from the position of desired object to that of desiring subject. Her poetic scenarios often portray the lyrical persona trying to impose her will on a lover who grows ever distant despite her magic. Witchcraft imagery allows Tsvetaeva to express contradictory aspects of her authorial myth, including poetic diction, the affirmative and powerful stance of unrequited passion, the transition between body and disembodiment seeking transcendence.

Epilogue

Psychoanalytical and feminist analytic perspectives on American and Russian twentieth-century canonical texts by Bulgakov, Tsvetaeva, Sexton, and Updike uncover some constant patterns with regard to the witch figures and prove that the literary witch remains paradigmatic for many cultural and ethical attitudes towards femininity. Although the writers portray witches as a full-fledged protagonist in a variety of roles – a victim, an empowered woman, a woman in love, a sexually active woman, a mother, a rescuer, and a lover, the main function of their witches is to blend an everywoman and an "Other." Such doubling becomes an accepted site for representing and exploring ideas about women and turns a witch into a ambivalent symbol hovering between liberation and repression, empowerment and victimization, wish fulfillment and self-delusion. On the one hand, the witch represents striving for self-fulfillment, for wriggling free of the clutches of repression, for letting go. On the other hand, those endeavors are still portrayed as dangerous, often leading to containment and punishment.

It appears that Bulgakov, Updike, Sexton and Tsvetaeva assign magic agency to their female heroines and lyrical personas as compensation. For the Margarita, which Bulgakov creates in *The Master and Margarit*a, witchcraft provides an escape and wish fulfillment unattainable otherwise in 1930s Moscow. For Updike's witches magic initially offers an avenue for female bonding and for overcoming the trauma of divorce. Later, Updike links magic with sexuality and with jealousy inspired by a competition among women for a man. For Sexton, the witch embodies creativity, mental illness, maternal domination, and a desire for freedom. Eventually, Sexton takes up the witch as an axis of poetic creativity and identity as in "Her

Kind," where the witch is freedom personified flying into the night. Her flight is thwarted when she is pulled back into domesticity and put into a cage and burnt at the stake, the image representing public opinion and moral judgments. The claim to power and freedom is punished from the outside.

When Sexton's witch is given a voice as in the *Transformations*, she breaks the rose-tinted fairy tale stereotype to reveal dark patterns of cannibalism, incest, homosexuality and depression. Sexton's witch struggles against culturally approved models of femininity like Sleeping Beauty and Snow White.

Much like Sexton, Tsvetaeva refers to poetry as witchcraft and employs the witch as a lyrical persona in her poetry that assumes features of incantations and lamentations, Russian folkloric genres traditionally performed by women. Tsvetaeva's poetic witchcraft redresses her lack of agency and creates an illusion of potency as her witch tries to understand, articulate and thereby control her own wishes and her lovers. Her lyrical personas are often women with magic skills who suffer from loneliness because they cannot find a male lover who meets their high expectations.

While Updike links witchcraft mostly to sex and consumption, Bulgakov links it to love and political resistance. The latter's Margarita is an altruistic witch, while Updike's witches are selfish as well as unforgiving. For both male writers, a woman as a witch is not a gender deviation but a norm. The agent of Margarita's magic is the Devil, while Eastwick witches derive their power from their femininity and sisterhood: they had magic powers before they met Darryl.

Both male writers seem lenient and well disposed towards their witches, but still they slip into sexism and chauvinism. For example, Bulgakov's female characters are mostly naked, stripped and exposed, while male characters[341] are always left dressed. In the case of Updike, the witches are portrayed as unscrupulous and manipulative women on a hunt for their next lover. His authorial conceptualization of witches is informed by contemporary male angst about feminism and results in a portrayal of men who are victimized and manipulated.

Genre and gender seem to influence the treatment of the witches: prose demystifies and trivializes witches, while poetry exalts and celebrates them. Anne Sexton and Marina Tsvetaeva often focus on the witch's solitary existence apart from male figures. The poetic mode seems to reinforce their female perspective on witches. For Sexton and Tsvetaeva, the mystical force of poetic language and the magical power of the witch are intertwined.

Mikhail Bulgakov and John Updike portray their witches as connected to the devil, while Marina Tsvetaeva and Anne Sexton describe them as connected to nature. Both Bulgakov and Updike present heterosexual marriage as a cure for witchcraft. Their portrayal points towards the domestication of the witch and at least partial acceptance of her magic powers, especially when they benefit the male protagonist. Tsvetaeva and Sexton refuse to create happy endings for their witches, who suffer from loneliness and alienation. What is symptomatic of their portrayal of the

[341] In Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, male bodies get beheaded, mutilated, driven crazy and straitjacketed, arrested, transported from Moscow to Yalta in a split second. His approach reaches its highpoint in the episode when the body of the bureaucrat disappears, but his suit continues to function as it curses, bullies his secretary, signs papers and gives orders. For Bulgakov, masculinity is defined by function and status while femininity is bodily essence.

witch figures is that despite their supernatural powers, witches cannot get what they want: their magic powers collide with economic, social and gender obstacles.

All four authors project culturally and individually repressed material onto their witches. Bulgakov's and Updike's witches can be read as a reaction to the threats posited to masculinity by Stalinism and femininity respectively. In the repressive and paranoid atmosphere of Stalinism, Bulgakov fabricates his witch as an agent of revenge and a dream of self-fulfillment. Margarita, portrayed as a protector and healer, who is driven by love and desire to save her man from the asylum and to restore his creativity. A "perfect" woman, she sacrifices her interests for the wellbeing of her male lover. Even though Bulgakov imagines Margarita as a witch, yet he makes her a self-sacrificing woman, a celebrated and traditional figure of Russian literature.

At first glance, there seems to be little in common between Tsvetaeva and Sexton but closer examination reveals uncanny parallels between the two women in terms of their lives and poetry. As Sexton and Tsvetaeva inject the repressed into their lyrical personas thus articulating their desires, the poetic mode seems to reinforce their female perspective on witches. For Sexton and Tsvetaeva, the mystical force of poetic language and the magical power of the witch are intertwined. Both poets use the witch as a lyrical persona to claim a voice if not an agency and to overcome victimization and silencing, and both poets resort to images of witchcraft to render themes of female creativity, sexuality and power.

Overall, my project on literary witches reveals three trends. First, the witch is a powerful double strategy of containment that attempts to keep repressed material in check but ultimately fails. Second, the authors of the literary works under investigation override the traditional

physical and moral monstrosity of the witch and present a nuanced modern version of the witch emphasizing her ambiguity and capacity for good and evil. Third, in their literary works Bulgakov, Updike, Tsvetaeva, and Sexton participate in a reevaluation of the witch as a problematic/positive symbol of femininity and thus anticipate the contemporary proliferation of witches in American and Russian literary and cinematic productions. My prognosis is that the literary witches will morph into a variety of new forms and acquire new meanings as they continue to be symptomatic and symbolic of cultural attitudes toward femininity.

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