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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Rebecca Annette Napier entitled "Active Submission: The Subversion of Gendered Binary Oppositions in Three Post-War Novels Authored by International Women." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Amy J. Elias, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Thomas J. Haddox, Mary E. Papke

Accepted for the Council:
Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

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Mary E. Papke____

Acceptance for the Council:

Anne Mayhew
Vice Chancellor and Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with student records.)

ACTIVE SUBMISSION: THE SUBVERSION OF GENDERED BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN THREE POST-WAR NOVELS AUTHORED BY INTERNATIONAL WOMEN

A Thesis
Presented for the
Masters of Art
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Rebecca Annette Napier
August 2006

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore a controversial dimension of feminist literature: that dimension concerning female masochism. My study centers on international novels written by women after World War II. The novels are *The Driver's Seat* by Muriel Spark, *Gordon* by Edith Templeton, and *The Piano Teacher* by Elfriede Jelinek. This thesis examines three highly individualized tales of control and power that posit female masochism as means for "active submission." I claim that while the feminist politics of these texts is ambiguous, protagonists of these novels redefine masochism as "active submission," and as a result, they challenge the binary oppositions forming patriarchal gender categories. By examining these three texts, this thesis shows how literature intervenes in the discourse about female masochism. It intervenes by focusing on submissive women who often are dismissed by the feminist community as making ignorant or coerced decisions.

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore a controversial dimension of feminist literature: that dimension concerning female masochism. Novels addressing masochism focus sometimes on female characters who fall prey to masochism because they are too ignorant or limited to combat it.[1] Other novels present fictional women, whose masochism seems to be chosen freely, who are so liberated from external or psychological mores that they can be analyzed as pure pleasure seekers.[2] This thesis examines three literary examples of female masochism that locate it between the attitude of hedonism and the response to enforced servitude. I claim that while the feminist politics of these texts is ambiguous, protagonists of these novels redefine masochism as "active submission," and as a result, they challenge the binary oppositions forming patriarchal gender categories.

Defining binaries in feminist theory

"Binary oppositions" is a structuralist term used to describe the differential nature of any signifying system. This concept is important to both structuralist theory and feminist theory. "Man" and "woman" have been opposed as binary oppositional terms since patriarchal society was formed. This binary has been called into question repeatedly by feminist theory and politics.

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[1] For example, Susanna Rowson, *Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth* (New Haven, Conn.: College and University Press, 1964).

[2] John Cleland, *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman's Pleasure*, ed. Peter Sabor (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

It has been said that feminist theory breaks down roughly into three "waves," or historically significant moments. Each of these historically significant moments addresses the notion of gender opposition. A "first wave" feminist theorist who contends that binary gender categories inhibit women's freedom is Simone de Beauvoir. In 1949, de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex.* This book attempts a sociological answer to the question, "What is woman?" Beauvoir explains that because men define women, women are a "second" sex. Beauvoir may not employ the actual phrase "binary opposition," but she uses Jean-Paul Sartre's terminology to explore a very similar idea. Beauvoir asserts that man is an acting subject in society, and thus male gender is the standard for what constitutes the human. The fact that woman is forbidden to create her own identity results in her relegation to the status of "Other." She is "Other," in relation to man, and not fully empowered as an acting subject. Beauvoir recognizes a simple logical binary that defines "man" and "woman" as gender categories. However, she also pinpoints a binary opposition of power that structures the relations between the sexes. This results in her claim that the two sides of the binary opposition "man/woman" are not truly equal in social terms. Beauvoir contends that what might later get called the "gender binary" is not equal on either side because "masculine" represents all-encompassing power and "feminine" holds little or none. The sexes are presented as separate, but they are certainly not equal. The difference implied in the male/female dichotomy is more than mere biological or logical difference. It amounts to a socially constructed difference that is weighted against women. Thus, gender "binaries" limit female freedom.

Simone de Beauvoir further explores the subject of women's "Otherness" inherent in categories of socially constructed power. With her statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 267), she contends that gender roles are a sociological imposition. Beauvoir goes on to explain that rather than biology, or innate psychology, it is civilization that produces the "feminine creature." It is her contention that females must *adopt* femininity: they do not bear femininity as a biological imprint. This is not to say that Beauvoir regarded gender as a pure performance. She understands men and women to be biologically differentiated. However, she does not think gender differences translate into sex-based superiority. In order to reinforce this point, Beauvoir mentions the similar aptitudes and behaviors of children. It is not until the arrival of puberty that young women adopt passivity, or the stance of ineptitude, which Beauvoir's social context links to the *feminine.* Beauvoir seems to view gender binaries not as logical but as social constructions that place men in opposition to an invisible "Other."

A "second wave" feminist, Luce Irigaray, takes a decidedly different philosophical stance regarding the idea of gender binaries. Her idea of "woman's language" hints at a central theme in her work that gendered binaries simply highlight the very real differences between men and women. Irigaray's controversial claim that biological gender differences account for what might be deemed binary opposition between the sexes strikes some feminists as tacit approval of patriarchal norms.[3] In fact, Irigaray is to some degree reversing the power dynamics which de Beauvoir saw as implicit in the

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[3] For an argument that combats the idea of Irigaray endorsing patriarchy, see Ping Xiu, "Irigaray's Mimicry and the Problem of Essentialism," *Hypatia* 10.4 (1995): 76-89.

binary opposition. Irigaray is cognizant that every concept of femininity has always been conceptualized within male parameters. Still, she maintains that female sexuality remains a powerful force. Specifically, female sexuality is powerful because it is one source of pleasure that man can never replicate. For Irigaray, gender binaries are a fact of human existence.

Irigaray reverses power dynamics in order to privilege women's side of the binary. Rather than solidification of the status quo that is male power, gendered binary oppositions, for Irigaray, result from male *lack*. From Irigaray's point of view, "male brutality" results from men's jealousy at women's ability to become pregnant (99). Irigaray also maintains that women's capacity to nurture a fetus results in females having a richer artistic and emotional life. Furthermore, female biology endows women with autoeroticism to the extent that they have "sexual" organs all over their body. (For example, Irigaray's contends that female bodies are more eroticized than are male bodies due to the constant touching of their vaginal lips.) This is a focus on women's bodies that critics might negatively label as "gender essentialism." In this second-wave conception, binary oppositions account for an odd kind of female privileging.

From a "third wave" position, Monique Wittig rebels against binary positions altogether because they establish nothing beyond the logical categories of "male" or "female." Similarly to de Beauvoir, Wittig argues that social constraints are firmly in place to reinforce female marginalization. Wittig refers to the institutionalization of sexual differences as the "heterosexual contract." This theorist urges women to defy gender binaries by reaching beyond the heterosexual contract to define womanhood on

their own terms. For Wittig, heterosexuality serves to perpetuate male dominance and female submission; it functions reductively to define women as their capacity to reproduce. Unlike Irigray, Wittig claims that gender binaries are imposed by society rather than by biological mandate. Wittig speaks of the "heterosexual contract" in the same manner that Adrienne Rich does when she states that "heterosexuality is compulsory" because it functions as a yardstick to measure societal fitness.[4] According to these theorists, heterosexuality reduces every facet of human identity to sex and gender. Those using a materialist feminist approach who deviate from this norm are punished with outsider status or "non-personhood." Monique Wittig might argue that in a society in which marriage and motherhood define womanhood, women who are outsiders might as well not exist. It becomes clear that society falsely constructs binary oppositions to justify women's oppression.

Likewise, for third-wave feminist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, binary oppositions defining male/female relations are harmful because they recognize nothing beyond homosexuality and heterosexuality. In "Epistemology of the Closet," Sedgwick thinks that this binary greatly misrepresents the range of human sexuality. As a queer theorist, Sedgwick believes that queers represent a "third sex" that sidesteps the gay/straight binary. Furthermore, queer theorists such as Sedgwick rebel against the idea that either environment or genetics provide pat biological or sociological explanations for the presence of queerness. Rather than concentrating on either/or constructions, Sedgwick is

[4] See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." This piece first appeared in The United Kingdom. It was distributed in pamphlet form by Onlywomen Press. For an article version, see Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs*, 5/4 (1980): 631-60.

concerned with the relationship between language usage and sexual identity. In contemporary vernacular, she claims, "gay" and "straight" are dangerous terms that imply much without truly meaning anything. For Sedgwick, much the same can be said of gender itself. "Gay" is no more the opposite of "straight" than the "xy" chromosome is the opposite of the "xx" chromosome: Sedgwick notes, "Genders—in so far as there are two and they can be defined in contradistinction to one another—may be said to be opposite; but in what sense is XX the opposite of XY?" (915.) For those who insist that sex-based differences originate in "nature," Sedgwick points out that according to the biological world, man and woman are not really opposites. While she has been criticized for seemingly reducing gay identity to nothing more than a speech act, in fact, Sedgwick reconstructs sexuality as a practice. In doing so, she explicitly attacks binary logics of sexuality and implicitly also attacks the notion of gender binaries, particularly as they take the form "man/woman."

Thus, "first," "second," and "third"-wave feminists approach the problem of binary oppositions in different ways. A "first-wave" approach might examine binary oppositions as a sociological problem. A "second-wave" feminist may view binary oppositions in terms of language or biological differences between men and women. Finally, a "third-wave" feminist might see binary oppositions as gendered language and ideological constructions that need reformulation. In these ways, the binary opposition "man/woman" has been called into question by all three waves of feminist theory, but there seems to be no agreement about how to interpret the power dynamics inherent in that opposition.

The Case for Female Masochism

In *Three Essays on Sexuality*, Freud calls sadomasochism "the most common and most significant of all the perversions" (Freud, 23). This is because "the contrast between activity and passivity which lies behind them is among the universal characteristic of sexual life" (Freud, 25). Freud recognizes the love/hate relationship that connects the mother to the infant as the genesis of sadomasochism. He describes an unconscious process that can link masochism and sadism in relation to the love object. Thus, Freud identifies masochism as originating in an abusive or neglected childhood. When a person is abused or neglected by her primary caregiver, she will recognize pain and pleasure as being inextricably paired. The childhood manifestations of sadism can be an oral destructiveness with which the child protests his unappeased hunger or anxiety. Freud thus reads sadomasochism as a sexual love that is both regressive and aggressive. He characterizes masochism as a passive attitude and sadism as an "active instinct." (This language sounds remarkably similar to terms describing stereotypical male or female behavior.)

Importantly, Freud equated sadism and masochism with sexual perversion. For Freud, sadomasochism is a perverse intensification of normal sexual roles. But many Jungians hold a different view. Lyn Cowan, a practicing Jungian analyst, conceptualizes masochism as a manifestation of religious instinct. She views those symptoms of masochism that might be deemed "sickness" as possibly representing something meaningful from deep within the psyche. This could offer one explanation for the human

need to worship, or to find a "larger purpose." Cowan further claims that masochists locate their pleasure in living close to extreme situations. For the masochist, the intricacy of upholding both pleasure and pain actually manifests in a kind of pride, and might therefore be celebrated. Because she believes this celebration may be justified, Cowan is interested in recuperating the reputations of practicing masochists. Her experience as a psychoanalyst has revealed to her that masochists are often "normal" and "functional" people in all other aspects. She suspects that masochism can be psychologically useful, for masochism helps prevent some successful people from becoming too invested in their personal triumphs. By linking pleasure and humiliation in a single experience, masochists curb their own egos. Cowan uses Jungian theory to propose that masochism might be a useful tool that allows people who are lauded by the world to keep a *healthy* perspective.

Annie Reich is another psychoanalyst who locates masochistic behavior in successful and functioning people, particularly in women. In "A Contribution to the Psychoanalysis of Extreme Submissiveness in Women," Reich suggests the reasons that masochistic women might be understood as passive but notes, "All the submissive women I analyzed were intelligent, distinguished, and highly developed but the impulse towards activity was missing" (Reich, 426). She understands that for these women, independent action does not produce pleasure. Reich finds that many female masochists have experienced childhoods in which they were dependent on their mothers to the extent of not wanting to do anything alone. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Reich argues that a desire for her mother to give her a penis motivated the female masochist's maternal dependency. These

longings that she wished her mother to satisfy reappeared in heterosexual relationships. In order to keep this heterosexual relationship intact, the girl must renounce her desire to possess a penis. With this renunciation, women are poised to further practice submissive conduct. Not surprisingly, this submissive behavior makes them appealing to domineering and abusive men. Reich believes that masochistic women gain pleasure from pain because in their impossible desire to wrest the penis from their partners, they see defeat as an inevitable part of heterosexual love.

Offering a different view is Karen Horney, an American psychoanalyst who produced *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time* (1937) and *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* (1939). Arguing against Freud's belief that drives and biology are responsible for neurosis, Horney looks toward environmental and sociological causes. In *Anatomy of Masochism*, Judith Rathbone quotes Karen Horney's assertion that "masochism" is an oversimplified term for a "complex social phenomenon" that compromises female autonomy: "It is hard to see how any woman might escape becoming masochistic to some degree, from the effects of culture alone, without any appeal to contributal factors such as the anatomical-physiological characteristics of women and their psychic effects" (28). Horney takes a stance that is similar to de Beauvior's. Both theorists assert the sociological view that female masochistic behavior is constructed by society. Horney's view differs from Reich's, which asserts that female masochism is born of biological lack and the dynamics of the family romance, rather than of ideological or sociological conditioning.

If Horney identifies masochism as something akin to a social pathology that must be escaped, Elisabeth Young-Bruehl tries to distance Freud from any charges that his theory

of masochism contributes to female oppression. In *Anatomy of Masochism*, Judith Rathbone writes that Young-Bruehl anthologized Freud's articles. Young-Bruehl also provides informative introductions that detail his writings in regard to certain feminist debates. For example, Judith Rathbone has noted Young-Bruehl's contention that Freud's primary interest in the study of female psychology was pointed in a different direction:

> Among her introductory remarks to *The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality In a Woman* (Freud, 1920), Young-Bruehl notes, "in the essays he wrote on female psychology in the next decade, Freud again and again challenged his female trainees and colleagues to follow in the direction of this case, that is, to investigate the female-mother bond" (Rathbone, 29). In *Freud on Women: A Reader*, Young-

Bruehl also suggests that Freud moved away from defining masochism as pathology. She argues that Freud's research, at the end of his career, moved away from essentialist definitions of gender and did not depict women as victims. Thus, Young-Bruehl recognizes a redefinition of female masochism even within Freud's own work.

A current and popular psychoanalytic theory of masochism regards it as the compulsion to re-enact trauma. B. A. Van der Kolk writes that people who have been violated seek to reenact this trauma. Post-traumatic stress disorder is usually preceded by disruptions and distortions of attachment bonds. Victims can actually form bonds with their aggressors. These relationships cause them to confuse love and pain. [According to Van der Kolk, all primates subjected to early abuse grow up to perpetuate violence. Interestingly, this early trauma manifests in female primates as an inability (or unwillingness) to protect themselves or their children.] The post-traumatic stress

syndrome that is responsible for causing masochism is often difficult to treat. This is because victims experience stressors that occur later in life as if they are in a somatic state. Due to their inability to experience later stressful events as lived events, victims of trauma may become inexplicably hyper-stimulated. This hyper-arousal does more than interfere with their judgment; it also causes disturbances in the catecholamine, serotonin, and endogenous opioid systems. People who have been exposed to trauma can actually suppress painful memories until a later stressful event activates them. This process reveals how new stress is lived as a return to the old trauma; it activates a return to early behavior patterns. Thus, masochism results from abuse survivors retreating to their personal backgrounds of victimization. Masochists react this way because new stimuli can cause fear. Abuse survivors often return to familiar scenarios and patterns, even if it they are painful (Van der Kolk, 389-411).

As shown by these various theories, psychoanalysis tends to view masochism in turn as a psychological disease; personal empowerment; a symptom of biological lack; a complex social phenomenon; and a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. With the exception of Karen Horney and Elizabeth Young-Bruehl--who, not surprisingly, identify as feminist--the psychological community defines masochism as the outcome of internal conflicts. Masochism as a calculated response to social disenfranchisement is barely considered.

Psychoanalysis thus generally tends to view masochism as a pathology or a coping strategy. Both echoing and deviating from views of psychologists, some cultural and gender/sexuality theorists understand masochism not as the product of neurosis or

psychological trauma. These theorists view masochism in terms of social power dynamics. They recognize these power dynamics as being inherent in sexual practice. Ironically building from Freud's notion that sadomasochism is merely a distortion of normal sexual roles, these theorists ask whether it is a distortion or a true reflection. The issue is not what position women are choosing to take in bed but why religion, the state, or even feminism should dictate these choices.

There are, in fact, voices who actually support female masochism as a possibly positive sexual practice of choice. One such voice is feminist and writer Alice Echols who writes that the place of feminism is not to crusade against sexual choice. In her contention that feminists should be skeptical of automatically labeling certain acts as "degrading" and others as "proper," Echols writes that women have a right to express their sexuality:

> Instead we need to develop a feminist understanding of sexuality which is not predicated upon denial and repression, but which acknowledges the complexities and ambiguities of sexuality. Above all, we should admit that we know far too little about sexuality to embark on a crusade to circumscribe it. Rather than foreclose on sexuality we should identify what conditions will best afford women sexual autonomy, safety and pleasure and work toward that realization.
> (Echols 66)

Her view is that creating villains out of women who make unconventional sexual choices distracts feminists from political issues. Furthermore, she breaks with radical feminist views that personal sexual practice must be a precise mirror of political ideologies.

Echols also contends that demonizing some expressions of sexuality will grant undue importance to other forms that reflect a supposedly egalitarian union. If alternative forms of sexuality are automatically labeled as bad, does this mean that conventional relationships are always abuse-free? Not wanting to underestimate the complexities of relationships, Echols believes that an honest dialogue about sexuality includes an admission of its inherent power dynamics: "We should acknowledge the possibility that power inheres in sexuality rather than assume power simply withers away in egalitarian relationships. Perhaps we might achieve more equality were we to negotiate rather than deny power" (66). Echols is the first to admit that society is far from perfect, and that women and men do not operate on equal footing. She suggests that in such a setting, women should not be labeled as enemies of feminism because their bedroom practice is deemed politically incorrect. Importantly, Echols warns against what she calls "prescriptivism." This occurs when broad principles are honed down to rigid standards.

In contrast to clinical or feminist theoretical perspectives on female masochism, there are also more popularized feminist perspectives. Feminist criticism approaches the subject of female masochism from, predictably, two dominant perspectives. The first perspective reasons that within a patriarchal society, female masochism is symptomatic of an overall sickness. These feminists might assert that nowhere is this societal sickness more evident than in the pornography industry, a billion-dollar business predicated on the objectification of women. The issue of censorship surrounding pornography is one that unifies many feminists who believe masochism is degrading to women. Among the best-

known anti-pornography feminists are Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon.[5] Nancy Hartsock, Kathleen Barry, Jill Radford and Robin Morgan represent further feminists who view pornography as destructive.[6] In "Sexual Politics and Sexual Meaning," an essay found in *Feminisms*, Eve Sedgwick quotes MacKinnon's assertion that a female who identifies as a masochist runs the risk that her sense of well-being will be invaded as well as her body:

> Women's infantilization evokes pedophilia; fixation on dismembered body parts … evokes fetishism; idolization of vapidity, necrophilia. Narcissism insures that woman identifies with that image of herself that man holds up … Masochism means that pleasure in violation becomes her sensuality. (Sedgwick 341)

In this passage, Sedgwick argues that for Mackinnon, masochistic women suffer from an emotional sickness. Thus, women who practice masochism are not so much choosing a sexual act as they are manifesting the symptoms of a "disease." This disease threatens to destroy their self-esteem and sense of personal identity. Likewise, for Liz Kelly, Nancy Hartsock's belief that female masochism is nothing more than a justification of patriarchal power is just a way to say that female masochism is a social disease: "Sexuality in our society is defined almost exclusively in masculine terms, and, moreover, hostility and domination are central to the construction of masculine sexuality" (347). Kelly says that for Hartsock, the recreation of myths that heterosexual

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[5] See Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography* (New York: Perigee books, 2002); Catherine Mackinnon, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

[6] All of these feminists are discussed in the anthology edited by Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, *Feminisms,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997): 96, 143, 322, 349.

unions are based on intimacy and mutuality disguises an ugly truth. Hartsock sees danger in identifying female masochism as a feminist gesture because it denies the presence of patriarchal power. It clouds the issue of patriarchal control by giving women a false sense of empowerment.

Yet there are feminist thinkers who inside and outside of the academy champion a woman's right to seek sexual pleasure in any form. Susie Bright, for example, is an outspoken pop-culture proponent of women's rights to be able to enjoy sexual congress in any way that they feel comfortable. She has received criticism from the mainstream feminist community for her unorthodox views. For example, she believes in rights for sex workers, so that they can enjoy safe working conditions and healthcare. For Bright, moral restrictions that differentiate "good" feminists from "bad" feminists according to their sexual practice are dangerous and debilitating for the entire feminist community. She respects feminists of opposing thought such as Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon, but sees their efforts as misguided. Bright is a writer, performance artist and political activist. Even before third-wave feminism acquired a name, Bright was raising important third-wave issues concerning sexual freedom. Susie Bright also, however, was the sex columnist for a gay/lesbian sex magazine titled *On Our Backs*, a pro-pornography, pro-sadomasochism magazine whose title playfully rewrites *Off Our Backs*. *Off Our Backs* was a feminist newspaper that criticized NOW's 1974 Conference on Sexuality for focusing too much on sexual technique and not enough on politics.

Also outside of the academy are "third-wave" feminists who continue to explore sadomasochism as a "normal" sexual practice for women. Another example of a queer

theorist who endorses female masochism is Pat Califia, a lesbian and transsexual writer whose erotica and personal philosophy promote personal sexual expression over political regimentation. Many feminist performance artists also champion a woman's right to practice sadomasochism or any kind of sex. Through her spoken word poetry, Karen Finley explores women's relationships to their bodies and societies. At the center of her concerns is a woman's right to engage in her preferred sexual practice. Lydia Lunch is also a visual artist who uses her creativity to showcase the relationship between female anger and sexuality. She chafes at notions of women as earth goddesses because she believes that the truth is more complicated and dark. In *Angry Women*, Andrea Juno interviews Kathy Acker, who received acclaim as a novelist and performance artist. Acker produced work that advanced the liberatory potential of female masochism.[7] There are thus many feminist voices in the artistic community that champion a woman's right to engage in sadomasochism.

Anita Phillips, feminist and author of *A Defense of Masochism*, thinks that female masochists assert far greater control than most people believe them to have. Her book details the misconceptions that people harbor concerning the "victimization" of female masochists. Phillips also addresses what she perceives as the false misconception that "sadism" is complementary to "masochism." She feels that a true sadist is disgusted by a masochist's need for pleasure and control. Phillips views sadists as those who are seeking unwilling victims. She privileges masochists over sadists because she believes

[7] For an excellent interview in which Acker discusses (among other things) masochism and her body of literature, see Andrea Juno and V. Vale, eds., "Kathy Acker," *Angry Women* 13(1991): 177-185.

masochists to be people who desire sex that requires the intimacy that is associated with trust and partnership. She insists that as a masochist herself, she is an autonomous individual who cannot be defined simply by her sexual practices. Phillips also stresses that "masochist" and "victim" are very different terms. According to Phillips, this simple difference lies in the fact that the "victim" has been forced against his will, but the "masochist" has initiated a controlled situation:

> Sometimes feminists use the word 'masochist' as a derogatory shorthand to mean 'the kind of woman that colludes with patriarchy.' But female subservience is not attributable to masochism, and these women may be responding to the generalized violence that male domination involves, seeming to collude while actually feeling forced. (Phillips 14)

Phillips thinks that the exploration of masochistic female sexuality is something that is highly compatible with a feminist agenda.

There are male feminists who agree**.** Nick Mansfield, internationally published scholar and lecturer in English and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, views his own masochism as a masculine formation rather than an assumption of a "feminine" role. To Mansfield, a man who practices masochism is not disavowing his gender. Mansfield believes that Freud's linkage of the "feminine" and "passive," in regards to masochism, is a faulty one. On this subject, Mansfield notes, "Indeed, the identification of masochism with femininity relies on crude binarism that links masculinity with activity rather than passivity, a complete misunderstanding, I propose to argue, of the nature of masculine power" (Mansfield, xxii). Mansfield writes that neither

men nor women are "naturally" predisposed to masochism. He does note that males dominate the history of masochism, but this only serves to deconstruct the "woman as willing victim" stereotype and argues against gender's having any influence over one's masochistic tendency. For Mansfield, masochism results from a complicated overlap of many cultural and psychological elements. He warns against casting masochism as gender specific because such an assumption forges a false alliance among masochism, femininity and passivity.

Thus the discussion of feminism and masochism is a controversial one. Some feminists see masochistic women as being either unenlightened or manipulated by patriarchal notions. Other feminists view masochism as a savvy way in which women can subvert social power dynamics. Feminists may see masochism as a sexual practice of choice, which should not receive "political regulation" from the feminist--or any other--community.

Female Masochism as "active submission"

The concept of "active submission" offers a way to talk about female power without entering the vexed debate about masochism. For the purposes of this thesis, "active submission" means that the heterosexual female characters allow their heterosexual male partners to assume a nominal position of power. In turn, the female protagonist enjoys a position of sexual submission. "Active submission" is another term for "masochism," but I use "active submission" instead of masochism in this study to underscore the potentially liberating feminist power of this submissive role, something the word "masochism" tends

to obscure. The difference between "active submission" and "passive submission" is that "passive" implies a total relinquishment of control. By practicing "active submission," characters in the novels I will examine are afforded a degree of agency that they could not, otherwise, obtain. Characters choose "active submission" for different reasons, but all choose it ultimately for the same end. Their choice is based upon their understanding that to gain power as a woman, one must stealthily usurp patriarchy. The only other option is to remain in metaphorical bondage, against one's will. These characters actively submit by choosing literal bondage.

"Active submission" thus defined in this study is a sexual practice that challenges the power dynamics of the female/male binary opposition. "Active submission" requires a woman to take male prerogatives of choice and self-definition as her own. She must define herself as an acting subject. It also requires her to fill the role of female (sexual) object.

While the thesis recognizes the ambiguities of active submission, it explores how three contemporary novels present it as a potentially liberating feminist stance. Women, in these novels, make the kinds of choices that many members of the feminist community might dismiss as unenlightened or coerced. This project recognizes, however, that the novels present female protagonists who are "liberated," educated, and citizens of post-industrialized nations. The characters' choice of masochism as means to power therefore cannot be explained by their lack of education, low social standing, or national location. Clearly, there are other reasons motivating these women characters' choices. While the feminist politics of these texts is ambiguous, protagonists of these novels redefine

masochism as "active submission," and as a result, they challenge the binary oppositions forming patriarchal gender categories

This study is organized into three chapters. The first chapter examines Lise of *The Driver's Seat*, who chooses death--the ultimate submission--because she craves visibility. The chapter strongly suggests that a patriarchal society is responsible for Lise's tragic invisibility and end. Chapter two looks at Louisa of *Gordon,* a heroine who offers a different way that masochism gives a woman power. For Louisa, active submission is not linked to the Death drive but to the Electra complex and satisfying sexual relations. Finally, chapter three examines Erika in *The Piano Teacher* and how active submission partially frees her from parental domination by her mother. This thesis examines three highly individualized tales of control and power that posit female masochism as a means for active submission. Rather than choosing either side of the gender binary, these women opt for a "third gender position." This third gender position allows them to exercise an active submission.

By examining these three texts, this thesis shows how literature intervenes in the discourse about female masochism. For first- and second-wave feminists, the imposition of gender roles based on anything other than a woman's unfettered choice is a grievous wrong. However, these feminists do not really consider women who actively choose to be submissive, or victimized. This thesis recognizes the problems provoked by assigning value judgments to how well people perform gender-specific behavior. With this in mind, the thesis uses these three texts to examine female characters who perform female strength in unconventional ways.

Several texts could have served as the basis for the present discussion; I have chosen international women writing after the Second World War. This guaranteed that theory involving at least one wave of feminist thought was available in their lifetimes. I opted for female authors because I wanted to represent women writing about women.[8] Including authors of various nationalities helped insure that an American viewpoint did not dominate the discussion. I also chose to write about educated women of industrialized nations. In this way, I would at least partially circumvent feminist-Marxist critics who might claim that these women were forced into their circumstances.[9] For this very reason, none of these novels feature women involved with men of social class higher than themselves. Furthermore, none of these women have children. Children might represent a compelling reason for a woman to be chained to a sadomasochistic partner, particularly if it is the child's father. It was also important to choose novels featuring female protagonists who were not financially coerced into choosing masochism as their sexual practice.

Another reason that these texts were chosen is that two of them have recently enjoyed a revival of critical and popular interest. In 2003, *Gordon* was reissued, and thus available for the first time in America. In 2005, *The Piano Teacher* was made into a movie, and it then gained attention that it had not received from an American readership,

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8 See Ron Hansen, *Mariette in Ecstasy* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1990) for an example of a *male* author tackling this issue.

9 My study does not address the complicated question of whether the authors of these novels and/or their characters are simply victims of false consciousness; my study is focused more on the psychoanalytic approach to masochism than on Marxist-feminist analysis.

despite its winning of the Nobel Prize for literature. Importantly, *Gordon* and *The Driver's Seat* were introduced before queer theory was an acceptable academic lens through which to view female masochism. *The Piano Teacher* remains ripe for this analysis but much of the English language criticism focuses on the film.[10] Focusing on issues central to gender, sexuality, and queer theories, these novels open new conversations about the highly fraught and political nature of female sexuality.

I specifically picked these texts because they illustrate my thesis claim that while the feminist politics of these texts is ambiguous, the protagonists of these novels seem to challenge gender binaries. These female characters seem to subvert the social logic of the male/female binary opposition by redefining masochism as active submission.[11] They sacrifice their personal power in superficial ways to gain something larger. Furthermore, they seem to enjoy the sexual aspect of their performance.

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[10] Incidentally, the film is marketed as a "love story."

[11] See Flannery O'Connor, *Wiseblood* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1949) for a literary example of a male who asserts active submission.

Chapter One

Lise

The Driver's Seat by Muriel Spark details the last days of a masochistic woman who sacrifices her own life. Because this woman lives in a society in which her talents are not recognized, she responds by seeking another kind of "womanly" recognition. This recognition comes from playing the part of a victim. However, Lise does not behave in the manner that we typically ascribe to "victims." This character does not passively submit to a violent demise. Lise creates her own death because she wants to be the agent of her own destruction. In a culture where patriarchy determines even small details of women's lives, Lise seeks to exercise complete power over her death.[12] She seizes this power by arranging her own elaborate murder/suicide. This novel is about a woman who subverts a paradigm that tells her that passive submission is the sole route to gaining empowerment. While hardly a feminist heroine, Lise does empower herself in this novel. Lise reacts against gender binary oppositions by redefining masochism as "active submission," and actively orchestrating her own destruction.

In *The Driver's Seat*, a disturbed young woman flies across Europe to Naples, Italy in hopes of badgering a man into murdering her. The author offers no narrative explanations of events, and the novel is told from an objective third-person perspective. The novel begins in an unnamed European nation around the mid-to-late 1960s. Early in the novel,

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[12] Throughout this thesis, the repeated usage of "patriarchy" denotes the meaning assigned by Mary Evans. which means a ruling class populated by men. See Mary Evans, "In Praise of Theory: The Case for Women's Studies," in Gloria Bowles and Renate Duelli Klein (eds.), *Theories of Women's Studies* (London: Routledge, 1982).

the geographic setting shifts when the main character flies to Naples, Italy. Some basic facts about setting and historical climate are only made apparent by the clues scattered throughout the novel.[13] The novel begins *in medias res*. The main character is in a resort shop purchasing a traveling dress. This protagonist is Lise, an unmarried and childless thirty-four-year-old woman. She holds a responsible position as a middle-manager at an accounting firm. There is only one aspect of her past that is revealed: it is mentioned that five years earlier, she suffered a nervous breakdown.

From the beginning, Spark situates Lise as a mysterious and erratic character.[14] This idea of Lise's instability is reinforced by the discomfort that she inspires throughout the novel. Lise's appearance signals her behavior, for she wears obnoxiously-colored clothing. She also gets into tiffs with airport officials, concierges and various clerks. However, it becomes clear that she creates mayhem so that she will be remembered. From the time that Lise leaves work until the last few hours of her life, she carefully plans the details of her "adventure." An indicator that Lise is not completely mad is her detailed travel plans. Furthermore, she makes friends with her elderly travel companion named Mrs. Fiedke. Lise in fact discovers that the man for whom she is looking is the nephew of Mrs. Fiedke. She waits for him at his hotel. When he arrives, Lise orders Mrs. Fiedke's nephew, a mental patient convicted of murder, to take her to a secluded area. She

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[13] Lise repeatedly communicates in various languages, and this makes it difficult to determine which is her native tongue. The historical setting seems to be the mid-to-late sixties because of the references to "hippies," and political demonstrations.

[14] Lise offers various stories to strangers. Sometimes she is a schoolteacher from "Iowa, New Jersey." In other incidences, she is the widow of "an intellectual." The only details about herself that she consistently mentions are her gift for languages and that she is searching for a man.

even provides him with the murder weapon, and some swaths of fabric with which he binds her. In a darkly humorous twist, Lise must bully the murderer into killing her because she does not anticipate his rehabilitation. The force of Lise's will proves stronger than her murderer's reluctance. Lise actively submits to her own death by planning her own bloody demise. Because Spark provides no glimpse into Lise's interior motives, her readership is left to wonder why Lise creates for herself such an elaborate and violent death. In this chapter, it will be argued that Lise strives to empower herself by choosing active submission.

Criticism concerning Spark's fiction currently consists of a large number of secondary studies. However, these are primarily articles and monographs that concern Spark's best-known novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Articles that focus solely on *The Driver's Seat* are few. When this novel does bear mention, it is usually within the context of Spark's overall literary opus. This is not to say that the book has not provoked discussion; critics tend to wonder why there is no grand explanation that serves to justify Lise's unconventional choices. Critics differently regard Spark's refusal to present Lise's interior motives. As Spark is renowned for creating fascinating and provocative narratives, it appears that this omission is more than a stylistic oversight. In *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers,* Tracy J. Sukraw argues:

> In many ways she is a traditional novelist, as she goes about creating intellectual narratives with more or less complex plot schemes and patterns of events about people, and their thoughts, feelings and actions. At the same time, however, she takes the traditional conventions of the novel-things like point of view, climax, and

> chronological progression-and does surprisingly crafty things with them. (Sukraw, online)

This critic acknowledges Spark's penchant for realistically rendering the unlikely. Thus, Sukraw contends that the ruthless exteriority of Lise in *The Driver's Seat* seems an intentional move.

Other scholarly criticism about *The Driver's Seat* tends to construct two positions on Lise's "exteriority." Some critics claim that Spark writes this novel from an objective point of view because she wants Lise to be enigmatic. Patricia Stubbs notes, for example, that Lise is an indecipherable element in a plot-driven narrative. She compares Spark's blending of plot action and character paranoia to that in *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James. For Stubbs, Lise's enigmatic nature serves to make the novel both hard-hitting and chilling (Stubbs, online).

However, other critics contend that Spark deliberately refrains from making Lise multidimensional because this work is about alienation within post-modern society. These critics think that Spark deliberately withholds insight into the character's thoughts in order to reinforce the thematic idea of alienation. This theme structures the progression of plot and catharsis in the text: an emotionally "cleansing" ending is impeded because readers do not understand Lise's past, or how it motivates her. Because readers cannot identify with her, they experience no catharsis of pity and terror when she dies.

In addition, one might argue with this critical camp that Lise's "exteriority" is a kind of contemporary realism. Postmodern theorists have argued that post-modern culture

reduces everything to historyless surface and consumer desire.[15] In a depthless society, promoting only surfaces, all we can see of one another are "outsides," exteriorities. What remains is an uncanny feeling that something has been lost. Kimberly Engdahl seems to refer to this perspective when she writes:

> Spark's application of Realism in her fiction is almost always undermined or complicated by the bizarre and sinister. In the trio of novels she produces during the early 1970's--*The Driver's Seat, Not to Disturb*, and *The Hothouse by the East River*--Spark's dark comedy simultaneously questions the stability and credibility of many of our most cherished institutions and denies our ability to take comfort in those same institutions. Each of these novels explore the occult not as illusion but, rather, as a powerful extension of the material world. (Engdahl 2)

This critic sees many of Spark's characters as living in a frightening carnival of failed connections and unfulfilled longings. It could be further stated that in this climate Spark questions the power dynamics between the sexes.

This chapter argues that both cultural readings misread the genre of this tale. Lise reacts against gender binaries by redefining masochism as "active submission," and actively orchestrating her own destruction. Though Lise is hardly a feminist heroine, she does seem to have a larger purpose than suicide within the novel. In *The Driver's Seat*, Spark seems to critique heterosexual institutions just as savagely as she attacks fascism in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. The Driver's Seat* is a novel in which Spark examines

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[15] See Fredric Jameson's definition of postmodern culture as "depthless," without a sense of history or community, because it is built upon the impersonal presentism of late capitalism. Gayh, Leebran, and Levy, eds., *Postmodern American Fiction* (New York: Norton, 1988).

one woman pushed to a dangerous ledge by society. Death equals fulfillment for Lise because she takes an active role in her own murder. She arranges her own murder, but makes a man responsible for it. Such a version of fulfillment makes readers uneasy because it does not denote blissful emotional health. *The Drivers Seat* delivers a maddeningly ambiguous view concerning whether passivity and female masochism can be rewritten as "active submission" in order to empower women. On one hand, Lise is an obviously disturbed woman who seems hell-bent on self-destruction. Her behavior seems more symptomatic of mental illness than empowerment. On the other hand, the very source of Lise's issues could be her consignment to a bleak life within patriarchal culture, in which oppression is inevitable. In this case, Lise is exerting power. Her violent wrenching back of her body only to hand it over to a killer is an extreme and disturbing version of control. Could Lise's perverse act of self-constructed murder actually be a cry for empowerment? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to examine passive submission, gender binaries, active submission, and masochism in *The Drivers' Seat*.

First, it must be noted that Lise rejects opportunities for passive submission when they are offered to her. The inclusion of Bill as a character proves that Lise is not just looking for a man to act as her master. Bill is ridiculous; he is Spark's parody of the enlightened New Male of this era. Versed in the pop psychobabble of his cultural context, Bill is eager to let Lise know that he understands her "type" though he has no idea what this means. Stranger still is Bill's own admission that he is "Queer for girls" (Spark 100). This confession serves to mark his outsider status and raises ironic questions about his heterosexual maleness. Bill's ostensive role in the novel is that he grants legitimization

to Lise's desire to stand apart from the heterosexual dating world. Her rebuffing of his advances proves that she desires more than merely a firm hand in the bedroom. Their curious dance that masquerades as conversation paints Lise as sometimes yielding and indulgent even as she lets him insult her. Through it all, Lise is brusque and does not reveal herself.

Lise's near-rape at the hands of Carlo the cabbie and the "seduction" that Bill the enlightenment leader manages to bungle provoke an identical reaction from Lise:

> "Stop at once," Lise says. "Or I put my head out of the window and yell for help. I don't want any sex with you. I'm not interested in sex. I've got other interests and as a matter of fact something on my mind that's got to be done. I'm telling you." She grabs the wheel and tries to guide it to the curb. (Spark, 87)

Within this passage, we are treated to Lise truly plopping herself right into "the driver's seat." Later, in a scene that further presses the novel's metaphorical title, she goes for a drive with Bill:

> "If you think you're going to have sex with me," she says, "you're very much mistaken. I have no time for sex."
>
> "Lise!" says Bill.
>
> "I mean it," she says. "Sex is no use to me, I assure you." She gives out her deep laugh. (Spark 103)

There exists no textual evidence that suggests Lise is sexually attracted to women instead of men. However, her disavowal of heterosexual sex could equal a reluctance to passively submit to the rigors and indignities of the heterosexual dating world.

While Lise refuses to conform to traditional roles of the passively submissive female, Spark treats the notion of gender binaries ironically, by making Mrs. Fiedke their spokesperson. Mrs. Fiedke and Lise both wish for the younger woman's submission: Mrs. Fiedke wants her to be a "special girl" and Lise wants to control her death. Both views play with larger issues of power dynamics between the genders. One of the most interesting soliloquies of the novel belongs to Mrs. Fiedke, when she talks about how things have changed. Initially, her speech seems like an old woman's adherence to silly and arcane notions. Yet ironically, Mrs. Fiedke actually sees gendered binary oppositions in a way similar to some essentialist feminists who understand men as weaker than women:

> There was a time when they would stand up and open doors for you. They would take their hat off but they want their equality today. All I can say is if God intended them to be as good as us he would not have made them different to the naked eye. They don't want to be all dressed alike anymore. Which is only a move against us. You couldn't run an army like that, let alone the male sex. With all due respect to Mr. Fiedke, may he rest in peace, the male sex is getting out of hand. Of course Mr. Fiedke knew his place as a man, give him his due. (Spark 7)

Mrs. Fiedke's speech disrupts notions of which sex is stronger or weaker. While Mrs. Fiedke is no feminist, she is clearly a "female supremist." Her stance justifies Lise's "active submission" because she feels that men must be assertively subdued. Mrs. Fiedke absolutely believes in gender binaries, but her take is a surprising one. She mentions the obvious biological differences and less obvious psychological differences between the

sexes as proof that gender equality is a sham. Lise's plight seems to suggest that the social reality of any form of implemented gender equality is also fiction.

In fact, Lise willfully and deliberately chooses "active submission" by orchestrating her own death. Lise's manner of setting up evidence so that the police can easily solve her murder shows her willful determination to control her life and future. She manipulates the police; they don't control her. Thus, Lise does not want a stain-resistant or "plain" outfit because she is meticulously setting up public evidence for the police investigation after her body is found. She wants potential witnesses to remember her. An active creator of her own after-death narrative, Lise realizes that if she wears garish clothing more people will carry her memory. She also deliberately drops verbal clues that hint of her unfortunate demise. The following passage makes clear in Lise's cryptic speech that she is forecasting her death:

> As she ran to the lavatory she shouted to the whole office who somehow or other were trying to follow or help her, "Leave me alone! It doesn't matter. What does it matter?" Half an hour later they said, "You need a good holiday, Lise. You need your vacation." "I'm going to have it," she said, "I'm going to have the time of my life," and she had looked at the two men and five girls under her, and at her quivering superior, one by one, with her lips straight as a line which could cancel them all out completely. (Spark 7)

Lise seems to be making a ruckus so that people will remember her. She is the master of her story. For example, she deliberately makes a scene in line at the airport (18). In

addition, she makes sure to "lose" her passport by shoving it down in the backseat of a taxicab (55).

Lise also redefines sexual masochism as "active submission." In *The Driver's Seat*, masochism has nothing to do with a modern definition that involves whips and chains. Indeed, it has little to do with orgasmic pleasure. The version of "masochism" that surfaces in *The Drivers' Seat* is similar to Monique Wittig's conception of the word. Wittig believes that female masochism manifests in subservient acts that define womanhood. Wittig points out that a sexist society justifies females holding lesser stature by naturalizing female (biological or cultural) passivity. A case could be get made that Spark also views this societally sanctioned masochism for women as constituting an aspect of patriarchal control. What makes *The Driver's Seat* subversive is that it features a female character who uses this sexist paradigm to reclaim control. If female submission is a condition for her societal recognition, Lise demonstrates to well-planned perfection that she can certainly play the masochist.

Lise takes power into her own hands when her active submission "successfully" culminates in her own murder. She waits for her murderer at his hotel. He is tired and disheveled when he arrives. Lise plays on his vulnerability by brusquely demanding that he accompany her for a drive. His weak protests do not deter Lise and he goes with her as if he is under arrest (111). Lise drives them to a deserted park that has been the setting for previous murders. It is here that Lise must cajole and bully her murderer into killing her. She actually instructs her murderer as to how he should kill her. Despite the fact that he has experience in maiming women, Lise must lead:

> She says, “I’m going to lie down here. Then you tie my hands with my scarf; I’ll put one wrist over the other, it’s the proper way. Then you’ll tie my ankles together with your necktie. Then you’ll strike.” She points first to her throat. “First here,” she says. Then, pointing to a place beneath each breast, she says, “Then here and there. Then anywhere you like.”
>
> “I don’t want to do it,” he says, staring at her. “I didn’t mean this to happen. I planned everything to be different. Let me go.”
>
> (Spark 116)

Lise’s “active submission” marks this novel as feminist because it subverts the archetypal rape narrative as well as the literary cliché of heterosexual normativity, which presents a passive female who must get subdued at the hands of men for her own good. Lise is the aggressive planner of her own destruction. Her lack of remorse is matched by lack of self-preservation instincts. *The Driver’s Seat* can be read as a parable detailing the merits of active submission as a deliberate choice.

> “Will you feel a presence? Is that how you’ll know?”
>
> “Not really a presence,” Lise says. “The lack of an absence, that’s what it is. I know I’ll find it. I keep on making mistakes, though.”(Spark 76)

Such a passage implies that Lise is intending to do something deeper than snuff out her own life. It appears that through her own destruction, Lise is seeking a kind of inner fulfillment, a “lack of absence.” Because Lise appears to be actively seeking this fulfillment, even as she endures setbacks and strife, a traditional definition of masochism that implies a “passive submission” does not define her.

Critics have read *The Driver's Seat* as a tale that illustrates the alienation and emptiness of life in postmodern society. Undoubtedly, this interpretation of the novel has merit. However, carefully examining Lise's actions reveals that this is not the whole story, for the novel also implies lessons about female subjectivity and power within patriarchal cultures. The novel may, in fact, be in dialogue with a central parable of first-wave feminism. This feminist parable is the "Shakespeare's Sister" chapter from Virginia Woolf's essay collection titled *A Room of One's Own*. *The Driver's Seat*, like Woolf's story, may also be a feminist parable that teaches that (even today, in post-modern culture) the only options for a creative woman are insanity or death. But Spark's novel, unlike Woolf's story, also implies that female "active submission" may be a way for women to regain--albeit disturbingly--a portion of autonomy.

In Virginia Woolf's "Shakespeare's Sister," Woolf states that a creative woman living during Shakespeare's time had only the options to go mad or to kill herself. Woolf writes this essay to explain why writings of Rennaisssance-era women are scarce. As the essay unfolds, Woolf imagines what would have happened if Shakespeare had had an equally talented sibling. She invents "Judith Shakespeare" as a stand-in for a creative woman who might have been thwarted. This character attempts to launch her career in the same manner as her brother. She travels far from home, and seeks employment. She is laughed at for being a woman with such aspirations. The only heed that she is paid is by an actor-manger who impregnates her. Shamed and penniless, she commits suicide. Her brother achieved immortality. His equally gifted sister lies in an unmarked grave. In this

feminist parable, Woolf examines history's lack of creative female output. She concludes by explaining that a disastrous destiny was afforded to creative females.

Lise is obviously creative because she orchestrates this whole "drama." Indeed, she is the star in a drama that she is also authoring. As stated earlier in the chapter, Lise meticulously plans her demise. She may be mentally unhinged, but her plan is effective. She hatches a plot that spans two countries. She manages to make an impression on everyone with whom she has contact. She is savvy enough to understand that ensnaring many people in her story will guarantee that it receives greater media attention. Not only is she wildly successful at creating a spectacle, she is also smart. It must be remembered that Lise does not "happen upon" a stranger who is disturbed enough to carry out her morbid fantasy. The man for whom she is looking is the first man that she follows at the airport (26). Indeed, Lise was right all along.

Lise's creativity is demonstrated during her shopping trip. She seeks to garner attention by creating her own style instead of succumbing to "lady-like" norms. Her plan is to get noticed, and she brilliantly succeeds. For the novel informs us that after her death, many witnesses remember her fantastic colors. At one point early in the novel, Lise goes to a resort shop. Her intention is to pick out the dress in which she plans to die. She does not pick out a drab garment that would seem suitably somber, but chooses a dress based on nothing but its sensuous appeal. As soon as the salesgirl begins to point out its practical social value, however, Lise pretends to feel demeaned and rejects it. She makes a theatrical production out of acting indignant:

"Do you think I spill things on my clothes?" the customer shrieks. "Do I look as if I

don't eat properly?"

"Miss, I only remarked on the fabric, that when you tell me you're going on vacation, there is always the marks that you pick up on our journey. Don't treat our clothes like that if you please. Miss, I only said stain resisting and then you carry on, after you liked it."

"Who asked you for a stain-resisting dress?" the customer shouts, getting quickly, with absolute purpose, into her own blouse and skirt.

"You liked the colors, didn't you?" shouts the girl. 'What difference does it make, so it resists stains, if you liked the fabric before you knew?" (Spark 4)

The dress that Lise eventually picks resists social definitions of "proper" or "lady-like." Lise loves the wild colors of the coat because they are eye-catching enough to guarantee that she will be remembered. Such seemingly outlandish choices do not imply "passivity" or a traditional "death wish." Furthermore, this is not someone who is debasing herself because she seeks *approval*. If Lise held such priorities, she would have picked an "appropriate" garment.

Flagrantly *going against* the dictates of fashion demonstrates that Lise is smart enough to have an "eye" for color and style. These unconventional choices cause Lise to become the object of ridicule from strangers. This mockery does not cause Lise to remove her coat. Her purchase of the crazy-colored coat proves that her clothing choices are powered by an agenda that has nothing to do with societal approval.

Lise's creativity is thwarted, however: she seems thwarted by economic necessity. She works in an accounting office. The text indicates that Lise's tension-filled facial expression is the result of holding this position:

> Her lips are slightly parted; she, whose lips are usually pressed together with the daily disapprovals of the accountant's office where she has worked continually, except for the months of illness, since she was eighteen, that is to say, for sixteen years and some months. Her lips, when she does not speak or eat, are normally pressed together like the ruled line of a balance sheet, marked straight with her old-fashioned lip-stick, a final and judging mouth, a precision instrument, a detail-warden of a mouth. (Spark 6)

Indeed, it seems that Lise's entire countenance has been distorted by the rigors of working in the accounting office. She has begun to take on the appearance of an accounting instrument. Unlike a less creative person, she is unable to accept becoming more of a machine than a human being. Lise's long tenure at her accounting job demonstrates that she possesses the brains and ability to conform to the detail-oriented business world. Yet her abject misery indicates that this setting is, quite literally, "driving her crazy."

Lise goes mad. She demonstrates bizarre behavior during her last day at the accounting office. The text indicates that she is showcasing the same kinds of symptoms she demonstrated during her last nervous breakdown:

> Then she had begun to laugh hysterically. She finished laughing and started crying all in a flood, while a flurry at the other desks, the jerky backward movements of her

little fat superior, conveyed to her that she had done again what she had not done for five years. (Spark 6)

Throughout the novel, Lise bursts into laughter, which turns to tears. This behavior is indicative of mental disturbance, and it proves that Lise is fraught with tension. Such behavior causes Lise to emerge as an erratic and deeply troubled character. Her demonstrated intelligence and creativity combine with her self-destructiveness and madness when she concocts her "master plan" to be a star in her own suicide drama.

Virginia Woolf notes that if Shakespeare had had a sister, she would have been disenfranchised. Her destiny would have been madness or death. Spark's Lise does go mad, and does end up orchestrating her own death. However, she deviates from the paradigm that Woolf outlines in "Shakespeare's Sister." This important deviation happens when Lise makes the cultural or ideological process visible by literalizing it in her own murder. Rather than dying passively, she "dies actively." Lise ends up being the author of her own drama/play, with herself as both the author and the star of the show. She hand-picks her "antagonist" among the entire male population. This is her revenge.

Thus, this novel may be read as a parable of female revenge on men. *The Driver's Seat* is a feminist parable that asserts "active submission" as a response to the power dynamics inherent in a patriarchal society. Lise perceives that through her *active* submission, she is seizing power by the only means available. This means that she chooses the man who abuses her and how he does it. This is why the novel might be read as feminist even though it culminates with Lise's murder/suicide at the hands of a reluctant serial killer. It reverses the ending of Woolf's parable.

Lise challenges gender binary oppositions because, in this parable, she plays the stock role of victimizer. This role is usually reserved for a sadistic male who brutally enforces his "authority." In this novel, a masochistic female takes revenge. She hunts and follows her victim. She forces him into her car. They have a conversation in which he begs her to stop. After it is finished, it is he who gets interrogated and blamed.

This reading provides an answer to critics' questions concerning why Lise seems to be underdeveloped. Spark renders Lise in an exterior way because parables always have stock characters. Perhaps she is not assigned an inner life because Spark does not intend to depict her as a fully realized human being. It is not that she is "enigmatic." Lise is meant to stand in for all creative, but thwarted, women of her time. Because she is a broad representation, it is not important for Lise to seem "real." This is because it seems that Spark is not trying to convince readers that Lise is a carbon-based life form any more than Woolf is asserting that "Judith Shakespeare" was an actual historical figure. Lise is a player in a larger story. She acts out what happens to a creative woman in post-modern society. Unlike Judith Shakespeare, Lise has a third option beyond the binary of insanity or a passive death. Given today's statistics on women who "kill themselves" through anorexia, drug use, and other means in order to be seen or exercise some level of control, the parable does not seem completely far-fetched.

The novel implies a lesson about female subjectivity and power within patriarchal cultures. Alienation appears to be an inherent aspect of post-modern society. However, there is a societal problem beyond alienation that Spark seems to indicate. Spark's feminist parable teaches that insanity and passive death are *not* the only options for

creative women. The post-modern setting allots Lise choices not granted to "Judith Shakespeare." Women of earlier historical periods could not hold jobs, own property, or exercise a moderate amount of freedom. Lise can do all of these things. Ironically enough, her management position in the accounting firm affords Lise a "room of her own." This is an apt description because, despite sixteen years at her job, she can only rent a room. Lise has the freedom to travel alone that "Judith Shakespeare" could scarcely imagine. Yet Lise's various encounters with men prove that this freedom also "invites" loneliness and sexual attack.

In Spark's dark and ironical fictional world, this multiplicity of freedoms grants a creative woman exactly one choice more than the "death or insanity" options facing Judith Shakespeare. This choice amounts to "active submission," which allows women to regain a sliver of personal identity. Lise uses her creativity to create her "story." She is able to earn her own money and travel freely. She can purchase the murder weapon with which she is killed and her unlimited mobility allows her to choose her attacker. She can also check into a hotel without a male escort. This lets her lay in wait for her murderer's arrival. She writes other people's "lines" by inventing what others will say about her after her death. "Active submission" allows Lise to exercise a shred of agency, even though that agency is paradoxical and ironic. Lise's scenario is not intended for idealization. She is not meant to be a model for female empowerment. It was not Spark's intention to glorify her. However, this might be a parable warning readers about the effects of disempowerment.

Chapter Two

Louisa

The first chapter of this study concerns Lise of *The Driver's Seat*, a female protagonist who commits suicide. *The Driver's Seat* is a cautionary novel exploring the alienation of a post-modern woman, for whom death is better than fulfillment defined within patriarchal culture. The female protagonist assumes that the female role, within a society predicated upon heterosexual norms, demands passive submission. She rejects this in favor of an active submission, acted out, paradoxically, in terms of sexual sadism. Similarly, the main character of *Gordon*, by Edith Templeton, also chooses an active rather than a passive submission. In *The Driver's Seat* and *Gordon*, female masochism is the route to female liberation. Yet in Templeton's novel, one sees a female protagonist for whom active submission is less final, and perhaps less destructive, than suicide. For Templeton's Louisa, active submission results in the suicide of her sadistic but chosen partner, rather than of herself. While Gordon views Louisa's sadomasochistic tendencies as an unresolved Electra complex, her masochism might be seen as active submission, and thus might be understood as a challenge to patriarchal gender categories. Thus, like Angela Carter's moral pornographer, Templeton unmasks the power relations operating in sexual relationships.

Gordon is about a sadomasochistic relationship between a man and a woman in post-WWII London. Gordon is a psychiatrist. Louisa is an army officer who served in the war. Gordon is significantly older than Louisa. He could be characterized as a sadist, and she

could be seen as a masochist. By literally dragging Louisa out of a pub, Gordon initiates their sexual relationship, and thus launches his reign. Gordon aspires to quell his own need for inflicting emotional and sexual sadism by coercing Louisa into believing he is the father figure she always lacked.

The female protagonist Louisa is a former army officer returned to post-war London in 1946, ostensibly to extradite herself from a marriage that she increasingly finds unbearable. Louisa hopes that amid the rubble and re-growth of the city, she too will emerge from a spiritual limbo that causes her to remark about her circumstances,

> I was twenty-eight years old, and though unsettled and lonely, I had not reached the phase of life of which it is said: "He who has no house will not build one anymore. He who is alone now will stay alone for long. He will awake, will read, will write lengthy letters, and will pace the avenues amidst the drifting leaves. (Templeton 4)

Not yet consigned to a lonely drifter's life, Louisa longs for the enchantment that she finds represented in her mother's and grandmother's tales about European royalty. Considering her own historical climate in regard to her mother's, Louisa is jealous:

> She had it all. And when I was born, in 1918, the old Emperor Franz-Josef was dead and there was the break-up of the empire and we lived in a republic with a president, and of course, he wouldn't dare have a birthday. She had everything and I had nothing. Neither the empire or the long hair. (Templeton 36)

Prostrating herself before these childhood stories that a modernist cultural context might deem antiquated, Louisa attempts to soothe her restless soul. In a state of fevered inertia,

she falls into an affair with psychiatrist Richard Gordon. The novel ends with Gordon committing suicide, and Louisa launching an affair with Gordon's former mentor and colleague, the god-like Dr. Crombie.

Criticism of the novel is split between condemnation and praise. In a 2002 interview in *New York Times Magazine*, Templeton said that her fiction is drawn from her own life experiences. Concerning her short story, "The Darts of Cupid," Templeton insists, "Every word of it is true! There is not one word of invention in it" (Campbell, online). Fascinatingly, *Gordon* might be an actual memoir of a woman who locates freedom in slavery. Fascinating does not equal happy, for *Gordon* ends shockingly, but not in the manner that a reader might anticipate. Yet in interviews, Templeton's aristocratic haughtiness puts off some critics. Templeton's honesty and unwillingness to explain her motives for writing such a novel causes one writer to comment, "Of all the writers I know, only Vladimir Nabokov commanded anything like Mrs. Templeton's aristocratic hauteur, and there is nothing in his work to compare with the steely class arrogance beneath her prose" (Campbell online).

While Templeton the author alienates some critics, her character Louisa morally repulses other critics. Martin Rubin of *The San Francisco Chronicle* perceives Louisa to be shallow: "Templeton faithfully records the encounters between Louisa, the heroine, and the eponymous anti-hero of her novel (a psychiatrist!), but this author evinces no real understanding either of Louisa's character or her experiences." Rubin further scorns *Gordon* for lacking creativity and analysis:

> Why then should one read a novel so devoid of creative invention and analytical

> insight? Perhaps to make the very judgments on this case in sexual pathology that Templeton lays out in such detail but seems not to comprehend. Some writers explain so much that they may feel their responses are overdetermined. No such danger here. (Rubin online)

From the vantage point of a survivor, Templeton tells of thwarted romantic ambition, but she and her creation morally repulse Rubin.

Unlike Rubin, Marc Kloszewski of *Library Journal* views this novel as sociologically important. However, he cannot endorse the novel:

> Quite possibly the main interest of this novel now is historical and sociological rather than prurient; indeed, Templeton doesn't seem to be writing to titillate here—many of the events are dryly reported, and the passage of time has turned this once daring novel into an odd artifact, considering the few boundaries remaining in today's media. Not the most stimulating companion of a novel, but presumably it was good for Templeton. (Kloszewski online)

Focusing on the novel's failure to titillate, Kloszewski indicts it for the same reasons he might reject a poorly done pornographic magazine. In the end, Zaleski and Kloszewski view this novel as fascinating but as having few liberating possibilities.

In contrast, new feminist readings of the novel offer positive interpretations. Critics such as Jeff Zaleski of *Publishers Weekly* are fascinated by the depiction of such a blatant power struggle between the sexes. Zaleski reveals no sign of moral outrage, and he reads Louisa's masochistic submission as disturbingly honest:

> The erotic interludes are intriguing, and Templeton adds a delicious bit of comedy

> when Gordon and Louisa attend a dinner party as a couple. Louisa's predicament, however, is believable and captivating. Templeton's study of submission is psychologically acute, and she brings the couple's oblique power struggle to a fascinating climax. (Zaleski online)

Zaleski is impressed with Templeton's handling of her character's psychology. He finds this novel to be both authentic and interesting because of its believability. Zaleski sees Templeton as having presented a multi-dimensional character rather than a "victim."

What makes Louisa relevant to other feminist critics is that she keeps choosing to work through her issues, and is a woman unafraid of her sexuality. Laurie Stone of *The L.A. Times* writes, for instance, "To hear Templeton's voice is to realize how rare it is and how valuable. Compared to the assured, swaggering male sexual memoir, the female sexual story is just learning to walk, and for the most part it has ventured forth with decided leanings"(Stone online). Stone argues that a feminist reader might find *Gordon* relevant because it redefines the sexual memoir by gendering it as female. This supposedly male genre gets written in a decidedly female voice. Because the masculine-gendered sexual memoir usually presents female characters that are written as bodies rather than as voices, the female body gets rendered as Other. Yet in *Gordon*, female sexuality does not dehumanize the female protagonist. In fact, Templeton's depiction of Louisa's sexuality serves to reinforce her character's humanity. This is because, with the utmost candor, Templeton details Louisa and Gordon's affair.

In her review titled "Sex in the City," written for *The New Statesman*, Zoe Williams is likewise moved by *Gordon's* honesty. She views Louisa as terrifyingly aware of her own

self-destructive tendencies. Similarly to Stone, Williams discusses this novel as a gendering of form. Williams mentions the way in which *Gordon* attacks the idea that fiction is "female" because literature is circuitous, while critical analysis is "male," and linear in form. Williams argues that Templeton mocks these gendered assumptions. She also asserts that Louisa's submission is realistically documented:

> The central helix of Louisa's masochism is expertly and movingly presented--the appeal of her lover is that he can see right through her, guess her innermost workings immediately; she repeatedly voices her delight at this, yet fears him vastly, even before she becomes aware of his capacity for violence. That is because with a mournful, Germanic certainty, she knows at her core, she longs for death: if he is to satisfy her longing to be understood, as well as act on this understanding, he must understand this, and ultimately kill her. It is terrible, believable, and inexorable. (Williams online)

Williams views this novel as valuable because of its honesty and linear progression, but unlike Stone, she sees no feminist liberation in the novel.

Maureen Corrigan views this novel as presenting such liberating possibility because Louisa learns to embrace what I am calling "active submission." Corrigan gave the first public review of this 1966 book on National Public Radio's March 10, 2003 broadcast. She admits that many readers would not find this supposedly erotic novel titillating. They might be made uncomfortable by the public way in which Gordon enjoys "humiliating" Louisa. Gordon's way of condescendingly chastising Louisa in public is mutually satisfying to them both, but it resembles run-of-the-mill domestic bullying, or abuse.

Corrigan maintains that in the context of this novel, this scene of conflict is actually empowering for Louisa.

This thesis chapter strives to identify what propels the intelligent, literate and attractive Louisa toward the coupling that leads her into willing servitude with Gordon. From Gordon's perspective, the answer is that being denied a father figure, Louisa wishes to make one out of him. Louisa, however, wants to enjoy their mutually pleasurable sadomasochistic sex, apart from what she deems as useless psychoanalytic jargon. However, her relationship with Gordon does not allow her full satisfaction. Louisa's masochistic desires are not so simple that they might be fulfilled through her role as Gordon's passive submissive. While Gordon views Louisa's sadomasochism as an unresolved Electra Complex, her masochism might be seen as "active submission," and thus might be understood as a challenge to patriarchal gender categories.

Gordon and the Electra Complex Theory

In this novel, Gordon is a psychoanalyst, and he understands that in mainstream society, his sexual proclivities are hardly considered normal. He is trapped between enjoying his relationship with Louisa and feeling that he is exploiting her. Gordon's deeply rooted guilt and fear compel him to interrupt his decadent sessions with Louisa, which are a mixture of sex and violence. I wish to argue, however, that Gordon is so steeped in his vision of Louisa as a victim of the Electra complex that he fails to realize that she is not truly a passive submissive. This is evident in the fact that Louisa rebels against the restrictions of their relationships, but it is she who dictates that their union

will continue. Eventually, Gordon commits suicide because he can no longer balance his own sexual needs with the ethics of his profession. His psychiatric training has led him to believe that sexual submission is the only way in which Louisa's Electra complex manifests itself.

Sigmund Freud's definition of the Electra complex asserts the daughter's desire for the father, and by extension her awe and desire for his power. For Freud, this is a female version of the male-centered Oedipus complex. In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Sigmund Freud defines the Oedipus Complex as follows:

> This preface is not superfluous, for it can heighten our realization of the intensity of The Oedipus complex. When a boy has entered the phallic stage of libidinal development, is feeling pleasurable sensations in his sexual organ and has learnt to procure these at will by manual stimulation, he becomes his mother's lover. He wishes to possess her physically in such ways that he has divined from his observations and intuitions about sexual life, and tries to seduce her by showing her the male organ, which he is proud to own. (SHE13 par 7.12)

Sigmund Freud is often credited for conceiving of both the Oedipus and the Electra complexes. However, it was Carl Jung who realized that Freud had not conceived of a female version of the Oedipus complex. This prompted Jung to coin the term "Electra complex" to describe the girl's developmental drama.

Gordon decides to exploit what he perceives to be Louisa's Electra complex. He hopes to solidify their relationship, which fulfills his fantasies. In a 2003 book review for *The New York Times*, James Campbell remarks:

> When she bursts out, near the end of the story: “It’s never occurred to me before. But it’s true. You are -- you were -- like a father to me,” the reader can only wonder why she would be the last to know. Nevertheless, there is a feeling of authenticity about the relationship, and the impression deepens as the balance of power between the lovers slowly changes.

Louisa’s love for the aristocratic patriarchy that was pre-war Europe may actually be a veil for her need for a father. Furthermore, Louisa’s spiritual hunger may be a longing for God the Father. Indeed in Freudian terms, Louisa has repressed psychological drives. In *The Future of Illusion*, Freud writes:

> When the growing individual finds he is destined to remain a child forever, that he can never do without protection against strange powers, he lends these powers to features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself, the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection against the consequences of human weakness. The defense against childish helplessness is what lends the characteristic features to the adult’s reaction to the helplessness which *he* has to acknowledge--a reaction which is precisely the formation of religion. (Freud 37)

Thus, Louisa looks to Gordon perhaps because of an unsatisfied spiritual hunger. (Later in the chapter, there is a scene in which Louisa ponders teleological religion.)

There are clues that signal that Gordon might actually be right in his diagnosis of Louisa’s Electra complex. One clue to her repressed conflict may be her reverence for the “old and the beautiful.” Louisa comes from an aristocratic family background. The

patriarchal notions upon which this aristocracy was built only reinforced her family's wealth and power. Louisa openly reveres the memory of old Europe, in which the royal families exercised much more influence than in a post-war historical context. Similarly, her reverence for both the emperor and her unapproachable and stern father causes her to associate male power with fear and domination. In *The Future of Illusion*, Freud explains the combination of fear and awe with which the child receives the father:

> The father himself constitutes a danger for the child, perhaps because of its earliest relation to the mother. Thus it fears him no less than it longs for him and admires him. The indications of this ambivalence in the attitude toward the father are deeply imprinted in every religion, as shown in *Totem and Taboo*.
> (Freud online)

Louisa loses her father early in her life, and he becomes as distant a memory as the emperor, because both men are available only through tales received from her mother. Not surprisingly, Louisa develops a jealousy towards her mother's lovers and even allows one to seduce her. This operates as her method of locating father figures among heterosexual male partners. If Gordon is correct in his diagnosis, Louisa seeks out these figures to satisfy her unconscious needs. Defined by Louisa herself, those needs are articulated in the phrase "old and beautiful," which she repeatedly mentions. This association reinforces the idea that Louisa is working through an Electra complex, because for her "old and beautiful" does link age, beauty, and patriarchal power.

In fact, it may be that Louisa understands that her pliability and worshipfulness make her extraordinarily valuable as a victim. To Gordon, Louisa mentions her first lover, who

was actually both skilled and kind enough to offer what she remembers as a satisfying life encounter. Still, she never mentions having any emotional response deeper that the gratitude of someone recalling a kindness paid. In her first marriage, Louisa abruptly decides to stop having sex with her husband, and has little conscious comprehension of her reasons for doing so. Her husband suffered through this treatment for over a year until frustration caused him to become "unbearable to live with" (Templeton 33). Louisa leaves this marriage. It may be argued that Louisa provoked her husband because his anger was precisely what she needed to play her masochistic role. Perhaps, she learns from the experience that upon a willing victim, the so-called master has great dependence. In her marriages, when her husbands were not willing to seize the role of master, Louisa was denied the power to submit so beautifully that she earned their devotion.

Louisa's second husband, whom she marries after the end of her affair with Gordon, possesses conventionally positive qualities, and he prefers a partner rather than a slave. When Dr. Crombie asks why Louisa has not (yet) left her second husband, she replies:

> "It would be wrong of me," I said. "After all, we've been married for four years now, and he likes being married to me; I never bore him. Most women do, though. And he is what is called a model husband."
>
> "Is that all? Asked Crombie. "Then all you feel is a sense of duty."
>
> "Yes, that's true" I said. (Templeton 215)

Louisa finds and marries not one but two good men. Yet her need to work through her Electra complex seems so pronounced that she finds them boring compared to Gordon.

While Gordon seems the perfect sexual partner for Louisa, his sadism is tempered by the mores instilled by his own psychoanalytical profession. He understands that as a psychiatrist he is acting unethically by exploiting Louisa, and could lose his professional license. Gordon's warns Louisa that their relationship is too twisted to continue: "It's come to a point where it has to stop. Besides, I'm going back into analysis now. I can't do it with you. You'd be in my way. So that's that" (191). Gordon attempts to play the role of controlling father to Louisa's controlled daughter right to the end. But he also cannot see her as anything other than a passive submissive.

By diagnosing her Electra complex, Gordon constructs Louisa as a stereotypical victim. True to his psychoanalytic training, he "reads" Louisa's passive submission as the way she indulges her Electra complex. While elements of Louisa's past indicate Gordon might actually be right in his diagnosis of her Electra complex, Gordon can only see his continued sexual involvement as a serious ethical breach, and his suicide is a logical resolution.

Louisa and The Love of Power Theory

While Louisa feels that her relationship with Gordon could last forever, there is a decidedly undaughterly edge to her outward submission that forecasts Gordon's destruction:

> When he was about to take me, I was yearning for him to shatter and break me down, and perhaps that was the reason I made difficulties. Perhaps I put up this defense in order to provoke him to shatter and break. But at the same time,

> my resistance had another, a different meaning. I was also longing to shatter and break him down. Every time we lay together, I was hoping to achieve it and to drag him into my darkness, and each time, when I regained my senses and opened my eyes and found him clad in his dressing gown and moving about the room quite unconcernedly, I felt a fury of disappointment which, in turn, added depth to my delicious feeling of defeat. (Templeton 57)

Her "fury of disappointment" may indicate that Louisa enjoys power. She attempts to play the role of passive submissive, but is ill-suited for it. While Gordon struggles to act out an authoritarian father's role, Louisa is far too sophisticated to be just anyone's daughter or little girl. She admits later to Dr. Crombie that all of her lovers, she was only happy in bed with Gordon (Templeton, 33). The only part of her relationship with Gordon that was pleasurable was the sex:

> And what I minded most about it," I said, "was the way he had to fling this father- figure business at me. And it was nonsense, too. I never thought about my father till I met Gordon and he started in on him. He really invented him."
>
> Crombie laughed. I never mentioned my father again, nor did he. (Templeton 214)

Louisa's skepticism does not necessarily invalidate Gordon's reading of her, but it does tempt the reader with an alternate interpretation of Louisa's activity: for her, this is healthy sexuality.

Louisa is also skeptical of Freudian psychiatrists in general, people whom she sees as untutored in the classics, but insisting that they can label patients with conditions that

allude to Greek mythology. At a dinner party with Gordon, she humbles his colleagues who are classically ignorant of the classics:

> I said, "I'll tell you about your twins and their Oedipus complex…
>
> This was the riddle the Sphinx asked him when he came to the gates of Thebes."
>
> "Who?" she asked.
>
> "Oedipus" I said, "the gent you were talking about."
>
> "That's a new one to me," she remarked…
>
> "But that has nothing to do with the Oedipus Complex," she said.
>
> "Of course it has," I said. "How can you use the term if you don't even know the story behind it?" (Templeton 116-17)

Sensing that Gordon is irritated by her outburst, Louisa ignores him. Gordon does not seem to measure up to the god-like figure Louisa longs to worship, and she does not prostrate herself to win back Gordon's favor. Louisa reveals that she "spent the time imagining what dinner at his (Crombie) house would be like" (117). It is clear Gordon is destined to lose his mystique, in comparison to the deity-like Dr. Crombie.

This is not the reaction of a fearful daughter or child who fears punishment. It is the behavior of a precocious child trying to provoke her parents, and assess her power over their rules. It is also, ironically, the attitude taken by controlling men over submissive women.

Throughout the text, Gordon continually maintains his diagnosis of the Electra complex, but Louisa's masochism does not extend so far as to allow him this indulgence:

> "And yet I am so very kind to you," he said. "Here I am, even undoing your hair. so very kind. Just like a kind father."
>
> I sat up and said heatedly, "Yes, you are quite right, I'd love to injure you."
>
> (Templeton 35)

Injuring the father to possess the mother is what Freud claims that boys want to do as a stage in the Oedipal complex. There is thus a startling reversal of gender roles in Louisa's outburst. Here and in the scene with Crombie, Louisa seems to assume a male prerogative. Moreover, at their initial meeting in a bar while Louisa is dazzled by the power that Gordon summons, she at first dismisses him as a "Mayfair pansy" (Templeton 7). It is clear that she feminizes him immediately. Louisa admits that he is of an "unimpressive physique that I did not care for," but she is nonetheless fascinated that his features bespeak "romantic ruin." Louisa may act in the female space of submissive masochist, but she also acts as a controlling force on Gordon, and her environment.

Yet while Louisa assumes male prerogatives in some contexts, she mocks them in others. One of the ways that she mocks male power is through her rejection of patriarchal religion. Arguing with another boarder who happens to be a philosophy lecturer, Louisa appears doubtful not of God, but of the easy answers with which teleological religion attempts to make Him understandable:

> A half-eaten orange lay beside the peelings on the table. I said, "The orange was created by God, in ready-made slices, to be eaten by people with large families. How's that for teleology?"
>
> She said, "Teleology is very much in fashion again, whether you like it or not."

"I don't," I said. (Templeton 124)

Like many others disillusioned by war, Louisa rejects teleological religion and philosophy that offer a false sense of security. This is important, for Freudian psychology is another such teleological system. While she rejects God the Father and Freud the Father, one wonders how much fear she actually has of Gordon.

In her willing servitude, Louisa's relationship to Gordon may be less Electra-like than it is similar to the union between Mephisto and Faust, in which Faust fancies that he is Mephisto's master. This is because Louisa only appears to serve Gordon, just as Mephisto only appears to serve Faust. In both *Faust* and *Gordon*, it becomes difficult to tell apart the master from the servant. Louisa engages in dishonesty with not only the reader, but also with herself, if she wishfully assigns the role of Mephisto to Gordon instead of herself. For Louisa, it is easier to conceptualize Mephisto's level of power as existing outside of herself:

> There was one part for which he was cut out and I knew it; he was "natural" for it, as Reggie Starr, the film director that I lived with for a year before going to Germany, would have said. He could have, to use Reggie's parlance, "walked on" without any make-up. He was, of course, the role of Mephisto in Faust, the role of the destructive, jeering intelligence. But there is nothing evil about Mephisto, and he is supremely good company, and I reproached myself for having imagined he was nasty only because he had queer eyes. (Templeton11)

Louisa prefers to pretend that Gordon is Mephisto, but this does not invalidate the fact that she exercises considerable agency in her relationship with Gordon. She may have miscast the actors in their sexual drama.

Faust depicts the slow decline of Faust, who mistakenly believes that he has sold his soul for a "perfect" companion who offers the ultimate servitude. As Faust the master grows dependent upon Mephisto, he realizes that the "servant" is actually the one who has been controlling their relationship. His mistake, of course, is the belief that this dubiously labeled servant "belongs" to him, when Mephisto actually answers to Satan. In versions of the tale that have not been re-written, Faust dies and Mephisto returns to hell where he is reunited with his true master, Satan. In an odd parallel, *Gordon* ends with Gordon committing suicide, and Louisa embarking upon a love affair with Gordon's elder colleague, the prominent Dr. Crombie.

It may be that in Templeton's novel, Louisa actually plays the role of Mephisto to Faust, for there is something puzzling about Louisa's Mephisto/Gordon equation. It seems as discordant as the one that Louisa describes between herself and *Faust's* Gretchen:

> I was not a Gretchen. I was not fair and clear-eyed; I had no round pink face and no snub nose. I was neither demure nor naive nor shy. And yet I had one essential Gretchen quality, only I did not know it then; it was still hidden, but he must have discovered it at once. Gretchen is seduced by Faust with Mephisto's help, has a child, goes mad, crowns the child, kills the mother, is responsible for her brother's death, is sent into prison, and is executed. I do not mean to say this was in store for

> me. I only mean that he must have guessed in me the same willingness to go under, to play Gretchen to a Mephisto-driven Faust. (Templeton, 35)

While Louisa thus draws rich similes from *Faust*, she also demonstrates two sides of herself. On one hand, she is the vulnerable child (Gretchen) with an Electra complex (she metaphorically kills the mother). On the other hand, unlike Gretchen, who loses everything for love, Louisa makes clear that the seemingly destructive relationship is more dangerous for Gordon than for her. Consider the slow and deliberate shift of power that ends with Gordon dead of suicide, and Louisa enjoying yet another relationship with a man even more powerful than Gordon. It would appear that Louisa is not Gretchen but Mephisto, and Gordon is Faust. Louisa is the powerful and unexpected controller, the supposed "servant" pulling the strings. In *Faust*, this servant is gendered male.

Clearly, Louisa does not entirely fit the role of passive submissive. Her relationship with Gordon seems contingent upon their upholding unswerving roles such as female/ masochist and male/sadist. It is for that very reason that Louisa cannot fully submit. She is far too savvy of power relations to simply let Gordon take complete command. Perhaps Louisa temporarily accepts the role of passive submissive because of her traumatic past. A total denial of responsibility might seem attractive to this survivor of war and a traumatic childhood. Louisa also desires the enchantment of pre-war Europe; her family were wealthy members of a pre-war aristocracy whose status was dependent upon recognition from the Emperor. Louisa may long to serve something more powerful than herself, and she agrees to the role of "passive submissive" in her and Gordon's relationship. But the text provides plenty of evidence that this is not all that she is, and

that her relationship with Gordon is only a middle stage in her sexual *bildungsroman* journey.

Dr. Crombie

Gordon's success with Louisa lies in his force of will, but this causes him to expend tremendous energy. This might explain why during the course of their relationship, Gordon must take respites. Louisa speculates that perhaps he is dating other women, but the truth might be that the insatiable Louisa exhausts Gordon with her never-ending masochistic desires. Gordon seems to understand that if he were a more god-like figure, he could better understand, and thus better satisfy, Louisa. Gordon rightly identifies Dr. Crombie as someone who commands this level of power that he does not possess. During his life, Gordon understands that his colleague and superior is far better equipped to offer Louisa access to power that satisfies her version of spiritual hunger. Gordon tells Louisa, "what you really want is the powerful old man" (Templeton 165).

Louisa ends up with Crombie instead of Gordon perhaps because the two men read her masochism and decadence differently. Crombie can accept these traits as representing a liberating kind of decadence, but Gordon is fraught with pangs of conscience. While Gordon presents himself to Louisa as the ultimate sadistic torturer who has come to life so he can no longer haunt her dreams, he might really be a victim of his own profession. In contrast, Crombie is unconcerned with labeling Louisa. His understanding allows Louisa to experience her masochism as "active submission," which is sexual liberation rather than sexual pathology.

Gordon and Crombie have different views of unconventional sexuality, and these opinions are evident in the manner with which they regard Louisa's masochism. Crombie treats Louisa with respect, as opposed to Gordon's mortification of her. While Gordon finds encounters with Louisa to be physically satisfying, he is professionally compromised and morally conflicted. Crombie expresses acceptance and this liberates Louisa to accept herself. While Gordon is eager to label Louisa as having an Electra complex, Crombie is more concerned with freeing her to enjoy her own version of "working-through."

Even before meeting Crombie, Louisa regards him with a mixture of wonder and reverence. This forecasts the seeming adoration that she comes to feel for him. Gordon is aware of Crombie's charms, and becomes prickly when Louisa mentions him. He seems to sense that she is already regarding Crombie in religious terms:

> Crombie was Gordon's guardian angel, friend and patron saint. He was somewhat older than Gordon, held many official appointments, and was feeding Gordon with dinners, patients, and consultant jobs. When, in view of this, I had once remarked Crombie must think well of you, *mirabile dictu*," Gordon had said, "Don't talk rubbish. It's got nothing to do with that. It's only because we are nearly from the same village." (Templeton 55)

Gordon senses that it is only a matter of time before Louisa sees that the powerful Crombie effortlessly trumps him. Gordon attempts to stall Louisa's realization that Crombie is a superior master by manipulating Louisa into feeling disgust for Crombie, even before they are formally introduced, "Did you know last night I had dinner with Dr.

Crombie, he said, "and when the maid came round with the dishes, I looked at her hands and they were full of scabies" (Templeton 54). This attempt to make repulsive associations with Crombie even before they meet is Gordon's method of purchasing more time. He seems to know that even apart from the psychological symbiosis two such personalities could share, Louisa and Crombie will be predisposed to like one another. A dinner guest articulates this connection between Louisa and Crombie at the dinner to which Gordon invites her. The guest is amazed that Louisa mentions something upon which Dr. Crombie also remarked: "The commissioner turned to Gordon: 'You should tell this to Crombie,' he said. "Crombie would love it. Do you know his latest? He wants everybody who gets training to be familiar with the masterpieces of literature" (Templeton, 117). Gordon seeks to dismantle the power of Crombie, but he kills himself, and the "powerful old man" becomes the new guardian of Louisa, just as he predicted.

Louisa is mournful at their break-up (she does not discover Gordon has died until months after the fact) but is not so distraught that she is prevented from taking another lover. Referred to by Louisa and Crombie during their sessions as "the rich old man" (not to be confused with the powerful old man who is surely Crombie), Louisa's newest lover is wealthy, older, and indulgent. Once again, Louisa's inability to receive satisfaction from a "kind father" is revealed by her boredom. She goes on to obtain yet another lover, whom she marries. It is to this man that Louisa is married when she finds out Gordon has committed suicide. Presumably, it is the grief and confusion caused by this realization that prompts Louisa to seek Crombie's psychiatric counsel.

Louisa and Crombie speak of Gordon, but this topic is mere preamble to their erotically charged conversation. Crombie is no Gordon who must pinch, tweak, and physically coerce a reluctant Louisa. In fact, he seems to obtain effortlessly what Gordon had to extract painfully. Louisa and Crombie share a laugh over Gordon's diagnosis of her Electra complex, and Louisa states that she never again will think of it. Is this more of Louisa's dishonesty, or does she really give Crombie a level of power which annihilates Gordon's memory? For Gordon, Louisa is a victim of female pathology that he must exploit. For Crombie, Louisa seems a lovely and precocious young woman who is unafraid to play sexual power games normally reserved for men.

Crombie does not replace Gordon just because he is a nicer man, though he is in fact more pleasant. The stark fact of his superior income is not the sole reason why Louisa prefers Crombie, though it can be noted that she never takes a lover who is poor. Furthermore, she does not prefer him simply because of his age. If this were her main criterion, "the rich old man" whose special moniker distinguishes him among Louisa's lovers as the eldest would satisfy every requirement. Louisa chooses Crombie because in his amazing demonstration of even less sentimentality than Gordon, he proves he is a true decadent. He is magnanimous enough to recognize and appreciate Louisa's "active submission" as a positive expression of her sexuality. Much like a god, Crombie is so assured of his power that he can be expansive or enticed when Louisa admits to her decadent and unconventional sexual practices. Unafraid to have a maid with scabies-covered hands serving the food, Crombie suggests the possibility of supernatural impermeability to health hazards. Daring to venture that psychiatrists-in-training should

read classical literature when such a belief is hazardous to one's career places him above the need for professional popularity.

Crombie can easily summon Louisa's submission. He does not need to cajole or bully her. As a god-like figure, Crombie seems equipped to offer understanding. It is Crombie who frees Louisa to enjoy active submission, so that she no longer must passively submit to Gordon's tedium. For Crombie, Louisa's active submission is not a freakish perversion. He appears quite enchanted with this woman, with whom he converses on equal footing. Simply put, her active submission gives her the power/subjectivity of both genders. This third gender position seems far more natural for Louisa than passive submission.

In her linkage of power, privilege, and libertinism, Edith Templeton exhibits many of the characteristics of "moral pornographer" defined by Angela Carter's in The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History. Carter is interested in a pornography that acknowledges sexual power dynamics. Furthermore, Carter views pornography that acknowledges sexual brutality as offering a "moral" alternative. This is because it admits the existence of erotic violence. For Carter, our family backgrounds, socio-economic standings, educational backgrounds and myriad other social conditions are all factors that influence the character of any sexual encounter. Her idea of a moral pornographer is the Marquis de Sade, unflinching in his depiction of erotic brutality. Interestingly, the same aspects of de Sade's work that cause Carter to label him a moral pornographer might also apply to Edith Templeton.

Templeton may be a moral pornographer because she creates a female protagonist who lives her masochism as a sexual practice of choice. Gordon is all too aware of the negative connotations swirling around the sex they practice, for which their cultural context has no name other than perversion. Ironically, the pleasantly benign Crombie is revealed as more jaded than Gordon. This is because Crombie alone smilingly sanctions Louisa's active submission and allows her to access a "third gender position." Blending characteristics of an indulgent father and open-minded lover, Crombie emerges as the "moral pornographer" in the text itself. He is also the most powerful person in the novel.

The novel ends hopefully for Louisa, and in a sense she is not much a victim of patriarchy, for she reveres much of what it represents. The pornographic love she shares with Crombie is sex between equals; what is revealed about sex itself in this book is that it is always about power. Rather than working through a complex or being exploited as a female victim, Louisa (with Crombie) finds the true meaning of "love." Louisa's coupling with Crombie performs the "good relationship" because they actually seem to like one another. This relationship is "moral" in Carter's terms because it does not attempt to mask its power dynamics. Templeton's world is one in which women must choose a dual male/female identity and a dual role as masochist/destroyer in a patriarchal society. *Gordon* asks what sex really is. It questions why we need Cinderella tales and Freud to mask over the brutal realities (and brutal pleasures) of love.

Chapter Three

Erika

This chapter examines a text that seems to refute all of the claims that I have made thus far about the liberatory potential of "active submission." Elfriede Jelinek's *The Piano Teacher* is a brutal tale of masochism and abuse. It seems to offer little if any hope for the protagonist to enjoy a happy ending. First, the raw psychological realism of the text may grow out of Jelinek's own life experience (Jelinek herself was an aspiring concert pianist who was heavily motivated by her mother), and this adds to the power of the story. Second, in interviews Jelinek has stated that she wanted to expose female servitude and abuse; this makes it difficult to argue that her protagonist has agency. Finally, the story itself seems to present a hopeless tale of female subjugation. The protagonist is a failed musician who is emotionally and physically isolated from others in public and mutilates herself in private. How then can this text be understood as evidence of female submission that is positive and liberating?

In this chapter, I will argue that Erika seeks control as she actively seeks to recreate her mother/daughter relationship with a male partner. She seems to feel that to choose the conditions of her personal bondage is to usurp those very conditions. The novel explores the extent of woman's agency to choose her sex partner and determine her own fate under the worst of psychological conditions. Because she is neither emotionally nor psychologically healthy, Erika dreams but she cannot become liberated. Yet Erika's tragedy is that she is intellectually gifted enough to reconcile her need for agency and control to a punitive and monastic experience through self-punishment and masochistic

sex. Her actions undermine the dichotomy between watcher and watched, submissive and dominant, male role and female role. In this novel moreso than any other that we have examined, it becomes difficult to judge whether this is an abuse survivor's pathological response to trauma or an empowered choice to live outside of gender mandates. Erica redefines masochism as active submission and challenges binary oppositions forming patriarchal gender categories, yet her extremely tenuous "liberation" illustrates the ambiguities and potential dangers of active submission as a feminist strategy.

The Piano Teacher is set in Austria during the late twentieth century. This novel examines the life of a Viennese piano teacher who is in her mid-thirties but has always lived with her mother. When Erika is a child, her mother is convinced that her daughter will become a nationally renowned concert pianist. Erika never attains this level of fame, but she does secure a tenured position, teaching piano at the Vienna Conservatory. Though Erika financially supports her, Mother obstinately views Erika as a failure because she is a mere teacher. Within the novel, there is reason enough to believe that Erika is not as good as her mother thinks she is, or that she is so psychically damaged by the mother that she has no courage, finally, to perform on stage.

Erika is utterly naïve about human relations except for her special expertise in simultaneously cajoling her mother and capitulating to her mother's demands. For example, Erika is not "allowed" to wear suggestive clothing, maintain a social life outside of her life with mother, or even sleep in her own bed. In return for this, "The daughter is the mother's idol, and mother demands only a tiny tribute: Erika's life.

Mother wants to utilize the child's life herself" (Jelinek, 26). Within the paradigm of this mother/child relationship, Erika has never been given any freedom, but she is also kept protected from influences that threaten to thwart her artistic career. These negative influences range from the housework (all of which Erika's mother performs) to male interlopers: "The adolescent girl lives in a sanctuary where no one is allowed to bother her. She is shielded from influences, and never exposed to temptations. This hands-off policy applies only to pleasure, not work" (33). In return for total obedience, Mother gifts Erika with total protection. This is why Erika rebels against her mother's authority while embracing it.

Erika reverts to her mother's own tricks to teach her piano students. She assumes that her students are her inferiors and must be forced into any level of musical appreciation. This attitude probably reveals Erika's own early lack of enthusiasm, which her controlling taskmaster of a mother ignored. As a result of having her own emotional needs deliberately thwarted by a hyper-controlling mother, the daughter lacks the empathy so crucial for human sociability. A mutual dislike exists between her and her students because she can recreate only the sole relationship she has ever known. Because Mother's relentless browbeating causes Erika to perceive herself as inferior, her daughter compensates by attempting similar extreme control over her own charges.

One of her students is a man many years her junior named Walter Klemmer. Klemmer hatches a plan to seduce, then discard, Erika. Erika resists his advances because she is too emotionally enmeshed with her mother to be receptive to any kind of romance. However, she is attracted to him and suffers painful ruminations over how she should handle this.

Erika decides to write Klemmer a letter detailing her desires. This is not a traditional love letter. Erika's relationship with her mother has left her so frightened of emotional abuse that she decides to take preventive measures. She does this by writing a "love letter" that is actually a plea for Klemmer to commit acts of sexual sadism. Klemmer is not interested in reading Erika's letter because his interests are more carnal and immediate. However, Erika insists that she will not have sex with him until after he reads it. Klemmer's reaction to Erika's erotic prose is a mixture of laughter and disbelief. He pursued Erika because he thought she would make an "easy" conquest. He is shocked to find out she is wholly different than he expected. Klemmer's disbelief quickly turns to rage. The depth of Erika's sexual desires seem to make Klemmer feel emasculated. He becomes so enraged that he beats and rapes Erika. He locks Erika's mother in her room while he attacks her daughter. Afterwards, he leaves and Erika goes after him. She follows him to the college campus only to find him talking and laughing with a group of coeds. This novel ends with a badly beaten Erika limping back towards her home, randomly slashing herself with a knife.

The critical archive of English language articles concerning *The Piano Teacher* has far more material on the 2003 movie adaptation than it does on the novel. Critical reaction to Jelinek's novel breaks down into two positions. Some critics view this author's work as opening possibilities for female liberation. Other critics see it as too dark and disturbing even to hold liberating possibility. Readings of this novel are thus very polarized. This polarization was illustrated by the controversy generated by *The Piano Teacher's* selection for the 2004 Nobel Prize. Elfriede Jelinek's official website

offers this insight: "Jelinek's political philosophy, in particular her stance regarding feminism and her views regarding Austria's political parties, is of vital importance in assessing her work. It is also part of the vitriolic public controversy surrounding her" (http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/elfriede/). The manner in which Jelinek expresses these political sympathies is the subject of much debate. However, all critics seem to agree that Jelinek's political agenda informs much of her literary output.

Some critics applaud the bleakness of this novel as the outgrowth of Jelinek's political sympathies. They view the disturbing nature of this novel as the author's refusal to portray an inauthentic representation of the world. For instance, Sture Packalen sees this novel as oddly triumphant because it uncovers dark but meaningful truths:

> Jelinek perceives herself as a combatant feminist with clear left-wing sympathies. Remorselessly, she exposes the hypocrisies, the facades, and the hollowness of social conventions, rituals and patriarchal traditions which lead to the oppression of women and the abuse of power. According to Jelinek herself, everything she writes is "a paradigm of the division of power in society." Her task is to show how economics, sexuality, discrimination, and racism are all intertwined with one another. (Packalen)

Thus, Jelinek aspires to represent realities that disrupt comfort levels. Packalan seems to believe that Jelinek does this in order to serve what she sees as a greater good.

Other critics only partly agree with this assessment. Nancy Huston writes:

> It is impossible to characterize Elfriede Jelinek's literary works as anything but works of hatred. Even typographically, they are aggressive; the reader strives in

> vain to grasp the logic behind the different paragraph indentions and print types. The predominant tone of the voice is devastating irony. And the main subject: the war between the sexes. (Huston online)

Huston argues that Jelinek creates Erika, the female protagonist, using some of her own biographical information, and thus transfers her distaste of Erika to the author:

> Elfriede has quite a bit in common with the novel's heroine, whose name is Erika. Like Erika, in her early childhood she displayed an exceptional gift for music, and her mother put her on a strict regime of piano and composition lessons. All forms of pleasure were forbidden--going out, having friends, taking part in life. She had the right to do one and only one thing--work. (Huston online)

For Huston, the novel is as disturbing as the author's own biography, and she regards it as destabilizing rather than liberating. This critic sees the novel as being rife with irony instead of liberating potential.

In contrast to these critical views, this chapter contends that Erika redefines masochism as active submission and challenges binary oppositions forming patriarchal gender categories. *The Piano Teacher* attacks a high-culture arts community that feeds the social fantasy of male-gendered genius, and exposes the abuses that exist to perpetuate it. This attack somewhat empowers its agent, Erika, who tenuously challenges the power dynamics underlying gender dichotomies.

Erika actually undermines the highly stratified gender politics of Viennese classical musicianship. First, she is not subservient to a male musician. Indeed, mother seems to be the only person who exercises a modicum of control over Erika. She interprets the

masters such as Schubert and Bach, and she did once enjoy the possibility of being considered a prodigy. Second, she is not passive in the classroom; she exercises her power over her students in every possible way. Because Erika's mother exercises so much power over her, Erika overcompensates for her own lack of personal empowerment by exerting extreme control in other areas of her life. This level of control is one that serves to enhance her piano skills, as discipline is a crucial tool. Erika employs these traits to great effect, but they seem to undermine a basic connection with humanity that would only serve to strengthen her musicianship. Though Erika is a gifted pianist, she alternately resents and fears her students. Erika pours passion into her music but she craves another outlet.

In addition to actively asserting her presence in the male world of classical music, Erika embraces the male prerogative inherent in visual spectatorship. She violates both class and gender boundaries in order to attend peep shows and go to the Prater district. Erika's decision to visit the peep shows instead of enjoying a more traditional sexual life is one of willful control. Until later in the novel, when Erika considers the possibility of sexual masochism, she avoids partner sex. Going to live sex shows allows Erika to quell her natural urges and refrain from human contact. This frees her of the female gendered role of "watched" and allows her to assume the male role of "watcher." (In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger states that watching is the male position and females watch themselves being watched.) However, this gender subversion also turns her into a kind of female automaton, with no female genitalia:

> All Erika wants to do is watch. Here, in this booth, she becomes nothing. Nothing

fits into Erika, but she, she fits exactly into this cell. Erika is a compact tool in human form. Nature seems to have left no apertures in her. Erika feels solid wood in the place where the carpenter made a hole in any genuine female. Erica's wood is spongy, decaying, lonesome wood in the timber forest, and the rot is spreading. Still, Erika struts around like a queen. (Jelinek 51)

Significantly, when Erika goes to shows reserved for men, she loses her "holes" and gains "wood." She has actively taken over the male prerogative of the gaze and has assumed the role of a phallic woman. Voyeurism allows her a control that she fears an actual romantic relationship will never let her attain. In a 2002 interview with Marie Riviere, Elfriede Jelinek reflects on Erika's voyeurism:

> The unlived sexuality expressed in voyeurism: a woman cannot partake in life or desire. Even the right to watch is a masculine right: the woman is always the one watched, never the one who watches. In that respect, to express it psychoanalytically, we are dealing here with a phallic woman who appropriates the male right to watch, and who therefore pays for it with her life. (Jelinek interview)

Thus, Jelinek sees Erika as a woman who challenges gender binaries by appropriating the male right to watch. Erika Kohut must be acknowledged as more than a victim because as a woman who chooses and watches, she resists traditional categories of gender. By the author's own account, Erika is a phallic woman because she appropriates rights that society will not naturally extend.

What Klemmer sees in Erika is an opportunity for a series of sexual encounters, which will culminate in his leaving Erika for a younger woman:

> He is of the highly personal opinion that Fraulein Kohut is the very woman a young man desires as an overture to life. The young man starts out on a small scale and climbs rapidly. Everyone has to start sooner or later. Soon he will be able to leave the beginner's level behind him, just like a new driver, who first buys a new small secondhand car, then replaces it with a newer and bigger model as soon as he becomes a driver. (Jelinek 64)

Klemmer's shock, which turns into violence against Erika, results from Erika's presentation of her own humanity. Klemmer is interested in Erika as body rather than as a human being:

> She ought to discard her teacher personality and turn herself into an object that she can offer to him…The time has come: so much for Erika's vagueness and dimness. She will no longer be hedged in like Sleeping Beauty. She should be a free person, presenting herself to Klemmer, who is fully informed about her secret desires. (Jelinek 174, 175)

In their first sexual encounter--which takes place at the lavatory of a children's school—Klemmer craves physical release and Erika seeks control. She does this by once again making the phallus part of her own body:

> Erika digs her teeth into the crown of his dick, but the crown doesn't lose any points, the owner shrieks nonetheless. He is told to shut up. So he whispers like a spectator in a theater: It's coming, now, now! Erika removes the tool from her

> mouth and instructs its owner: In the future, she is going to make a list of all the things he can do to her. My wishes will be jotted down and made available to you at any time. For such is a man in all his contradictions. Like an open book. Klemmer has something to look forward to! (Jelinek 174)

Just as it was in the peep show, the penis here is described as a "tool" that is wielded not by the man, but by Erika. In this scene, she willfully refuses Klemmer climax, and plays the role of the phallic woman.

But Klemmer has not yet witnessed the fruition of Erika's desire. This revelation is made clear to him only after he reads her letter. Erika's letter represents details her sadomasochistic fantasies. She writes of various ways in which she desires Klemmer to "abuse" her:

> My letter demands blissful things from you. You can easily guess the greater delights that I wish for. I don't dare write them down. The letter shouldn't get into the wrong hands. Slap me hard, over and over. Ignore my protests. Ignore my cries. Ignore my begging. As for Mother: Pay no attention to her! (Jelinek 225)

Because she has been repressed and emotionally damaged by her mother, Erika seeks to recreate this situation with a romantic partner. Like Louisa in Templeton's novel, Erika believes that if she can choose the conditions of her personal bondage, she can also usurp them:

> Erika Kohut is using her love to make this boy her master. The more power he attains over her, the more he will become Erika's pliant creature. Klemmer will be her slave completely when, say, they go strolling in the mountains. Yet Klemmer

> will think of himself as Erika's master. That is the goal of Erika's love. That is the only way that love won't be consumed prematurely. He has to be convinced: This woman has put herself entirely in my hands. And yet *he* will become Erika's property. That's the way she pictures it. (Jelinek 207)

It is crucial to understand that this letter represents Erika's preemptive strike against real abuse. Erika writes this letter to curtail the pattern of victimhood ignited by her mother, not to perpetuate the abuse itself:

> I hope Klemmer won't hit me, she thinks fearfully. She stresses that he can do anything to her. Anything, she stresses, so long as it hurts, for there is hardly anything I don't desire. Klemmer should forgive her for not, she thinks, writing beautifully. I hope he doesn't hit me unexpectantly, the woman thinks. She reveals to the man she has been longing to be hit for many years now. She assumes she has finally found the master she has been longing for. (Jelinek, 229)

For Erika, the letter is a kind of insurance in which she dictates that her own boundaries must be first violated in her imagination before Klemmer's footfall is allowed: "She would like to cede all responsibility to external aids. She wants to entrust herself to someone else, but on *her* terms. She challenges him!" (215).

It is precisely because of this challenge presented by Erika that Klemmer lashes out.

After Klemmer reads the letter, he realizes he is not capable of fulfilling Erika's needs, so he punishes her by beating and raping her. Rape is Klemmer's sorry compensation when he actually wishes to castrate the phallic woman: "Erika, bleeding slightly, curls up like an embryo, and the world of destruction progresses. In Erika, the

man sees many other women he wanted to get rid of" (268). Klemmer is punishing Erika for daring to dictate the terms of their relationship but he justifies his act as defense against Erika's "insanity."

In an interview concerning the movie version of this novel, Elfriede Jelinek was asked to "explain Erika's insanity." Jelinek's responded that Erika is perceived as mad only because she chooses the circumstances of her own bondage rather than letting a man choose it for her: "The right to choose a man and also to dictate how he tortures her--that is, domination, in submission--this she is not permitted. Indeed for a woman almost everything beyond the bearing and raising of children is presumption" (Jelinek, interview). Erika Kohut's letter offends Klemmer, not simply because it reveals her unconventional sexual tastes but because, as a phallic woman, she dares to dictate the terms of female servitude.

Certainly, Erika also plays the masochist in her relationship with Walter Klemmer as a displacement of her conflict with her mother. Emotionally damaged by her mother, Erika seeks to recreate painful situations with a romantic partner because choosing the conditions of her bondage allows her to displace those conditions. Because her mother exercises so much power over her, Erika overcompensates for her own lack of personal empowerment by both exerting extreme control over sex and simultaneously submitting her will during the act. Erika deals with her emotional turmoil through a combination of retreat and protest.

Erika's mutilation of her own body is a physical manifestation of this psychic movement. Cutting as a masochistic act combines retreat and protest into a single gesture.

By cutting herself, Erika is at once the person who enacts violence and the victim of that violence. This may become, ironically, a grotesque form of therapy and self-medication. Significantly, the first time in the novel that Erika cuts herself is when she sexually notices the penis of her male cousin. As adults, they are engaging in horseplay, when through his bathing suit, Erika notices the shape of her cousin's genitals. Erika's reaction to this event is to barricade herself in the bathroom and begin furtively cutting the back of her hand:

> No pain, no gain, she's told. Her mother demands obedience. You take a risk, you perish. That advice comes from Mother too. When SHE'S home alone, she cuts herself, slicing off her nose to spite other people's faces. She always waits and waits for the moment when she can cut herself unobserved. No sooner does the sound of the closing door die down than she takes out her little talisman, the paternal, all-purpose razor. (Jelinek 86)

As this character is a "phallic woman" by Jelinek's own admission, it is telling that Erika mentally genders the razor male and associates it with the father, because the "paternal razor" provides a means of power. Erika is coveting a penis, and her frustration at not having one is directly linked to her relationship with her mother. It causes her to be masochistic or, as Anne Reich earlier noted, to take the male prerogative as her own. She penetrates herself; she literally gives herself a "tool." This power extends only to the right to mutilate her body. Erika appropriates power, for she is able to punish the body that betrays her with its sexual response just as her mother punished her daughter for the

slightest infraction. Cutting is Erika's compensation for not being able to control her own body. It's also, of course, a sex substitute for male penetration.

Erika's behavior is self-destructive, but it is likely that she performs her cutting rituals as a twisted version of "therapy" rather than as a flirtation with suicide. Erika turns to cutting as a coping mechanism. In the August 1989 issue of *Hospital Community Psychiatry*, A.R. Favazza explains self-mutilation:

> Self-mutilation, the deliberate destruction or alteration of body tissue without conscious suicidal intent, occurs in a variety of psychiatric disorders. Although no one approach solves the riddle of such behaviors, habitual self-mutilation may be best thought of a purposeful, if morbid, act of self-help. (Favazza 856-7)

Erika's cutting is a way in which she tries to reign in her turbulent emotional life. Erika seems to wish to survive, but she is so emotionally damaged that she must "self-medicate." Having detailed such a pattern of behavior, the text demonstrates Erika's need for control as an offshoot of her rampant insecurity, rather than as a death wish.

Diana Denton Dunton wrote a psychology dissertation that posits cutting as cry for help. Her subjects are all adult wrist-cutters. Most of her subjects are native Appalachians who lack formal education. Despite this obviously different background from Erika Kohut, these subjects showed surprising similarities. Denton's subjects came from deeply troubled backgrounds in which they usually experienced the death or separation from a parent. (Erica was just a child when her mother sent her father to an asylum.) Dunton also notes that her subjects displayed gender ambiguity that she views as backlash against a

society that they fear will reject them. (This is not unlike Erika's demolition of gender boundaries.) Overall, Dunton's findings lead her to believe that cutting is her subject's way of handling, rather than escaping, the social rejection that they view as inevitable (28).

Cutting is also central to the ending of the novel, however, and it is here that the text illustrates the ambiguities and potential dangers of active submission as a feminist strategy. In the novel's closing paragraph,

> Erika's back, where the zipper is partly open, is warmed. Her back is warmed by the ever more powerful sun. Erika walks and walks. Her back warms up in the sun. Blood oozes out of her. People look up from the shoulder to the face. Some turn around. Not all. Erika knows the direction she has to take. She heads home, gradually quickening her step. (Jelinek 280)

Up until this moment, Erika has concealed her habit of cutting into her own flesh during times that she is not psychologically equipped to process the stress. The morning after Klemmer attacks her, warm knife tucked in her bag, Erika decides to look for Klemmer at his department at the Engineering School. She almost immediately spies Klemmer talking and laughing among a gang of his school friends. Though the text offers no evidence that they are discussing Erika, she imagines herself as the source of their youthful laughter. A pain and embarrassment that Erika cannot articulate, let alone emotionally digest, compels her to begin slashing randomly at her body. She appears unaware that she is creating a spectacle, so entranced is she by the mission that must receive fulfillment at home.

Erika's cutting can be read as an attempt to wrest control, but it also reveals just how emotionally damaged that she is. While Erika is seeking to reclaim control, she goes about this in a destructive way. Her cutting may well be a cry for empowerment, but empowerment it is not. She copes with her situation in the only way that she knows how. Erika suffers from crushing insecurity brought on by her status as an abuse survivor. Emotional and physical pain are what signify Erika's life. Therefore, there is a disturbing logic to her cutting. Erika is not trapped by her physical environment. She is a financially independent adult who could leave her mother's home. Erika cuts because it is only she who limits her life. Cutting at her own flesh functions as a kind of therapeutic blood-letting ritual. It is Erika's way of releasing her inner pain without having to suffer the emotional tedium of willfully confronting her own past.

Third-Wave Feminism, Pop Culture, and Softening the Blow of Masochism

In 2005, *The Piano Teacher* was made into a movie. In it, female masochism gets rewritten as simply a natural affliction of an old-fashioned girl. Puzzlingly to readers of the novel, Erica Kohut is that "old-fashioned" girl who is looking for a romantic version of love. This is almost exactly how the film star who plays Erika, Isabelle Huppert, describes the movie. Erika's status as abuse survivor and the impact of this background upon her sexual proclivities are not addressed.

The movie's denial is compounded as a problem for feminist politics by its collusion with commercial and third-wave feminism. As Hollows and Mosely note, when feminist

philosophy and commerce become bedfellows, such an association often dilutes feminism:

> Those elements of feminism can be 'sold'--for example, ideas of liberation, independence, and freedom-are appropriated by consumer culture but, in the process, become detached from the feminist discourses that anchored their radical meaning. From such a position, popular feminism is tamed and divested of its radical meaning, so that it can be articulated with more traditional notions of femininity. (Hollows and Mosely, "The Meanings of Popular Feminism")

For example, Hello Kitty lunch boxes and breast implants are just as likely third-wave feminist accessories as a subscription to *Ms.* magazine. The movie version of *The Piano Teacher* is such an interesting reworking because it markets two Erika Kohuts. In an interview included in the film's DVD version, Huppert makes no mention of having read the novel but does allude to her initial feelings after finishing the movie script. As Jelinek herself does, Huppert refers to Erika as "a phallic woman." She goes on to say that, "She [Erika] does behave like a man, she does it without awareness. That is the way she can't be hurt." This is not an unfair assessment of Erika's character but Huppert's further comments about the script and Erika's masochism seem to contradict this statement.

When Huppert tackles the question of Erika and Klemmer's relationship, she avoids the sadomasochistic element of their union. Instead she maintains that Erika rejects Klemmer (in the novel she is secretly torn between accepting and rejecting from the very start) because during his audition for her class, he plays the piano like "a seducer." This is

repugnant to Erika who wants to be "loved not seduced." In other words, Erika rejects him because at first his love is not true or honest. This whitewashing of Erika's character can be best combated by the words that Erika herself commands Klemmer when he badgers her to relieve his sexual frustration: "read my letter."

In the movie, as in the novel, the letter tells of desires far different and more complex than a simple need for love. Erika enjoys, or at least needs sadomasochistic sex, and this cannot be explained away with essentialist platitudes. Perhaps, to satisfy some version of feminism in Hollywood, Erika gets rewritten as a ball-busting hypocrite. This safe configuration avoids having to handle a depiction of a woman character who is intelligent but happens to like sadomasochism and pornography.

Another whitewash of the film surrounds the peep shows. In the novel, Erika derives pleasure from risking her safety by visiting peep shows in the seedy district of Vienna. In the film, Erika lurks around the adult bookstore in which the peep show booths are housed so that she can discover and embarrass her own male students. Later, during his piano lessons, Erika humiliates one unfortunate young man she catches looking at magazines. These scenes tame the disturbing gender reversals of Erika's peep show ventures. Rather than lurking around the adult bookstore as a dour warden, in the novel she participates as a phallic woman.

In conclusion, *The Piano Teacher* is a dark and disturbing novel that offers a hint of redemption for the main character. At least, Erika has not given in to full-scale passivity. She continues to pursue her career and even attempts to have a relationship. Erika practices active submission because she believes that she is in constant danger. This

character attempts to blunt her fear of intimacy by choosing her own destruction. Erika cannot trust anyone to show her kindness, so she retaliates by being her own worst enemy. Though there is bleakness to Erika's narrative, some of her most disturbing traits offer a glimmer of hope. For instance, the fact that she watches peep shows instead of engaging in a more traditional romantic life might appear twisted. In this circumstance, Erika is assuming the role of watcher to exert a bit of control. Furthermore, Erika cuts herself when she is upset. This is a rudimentary form of therapy and, paradoxically, represents Erika's need to heal. Erika Kohut is deeply troubled but there is hope. Active submission is not the means that would seem to offer Erika's deliverance but it is a wild cry for help. Active submission seems too complicated and problematic to be permanently adopted by someone with Erika's shaky self-esteem. It seems that Erika's promise will not attain fruition until she keeps traveling further and beyond active submission.

Conclusion

My thesis examines three post-war novels and claims that while the feminist politics of these texts is ambiguous, protagonists of these novels redefine masochism as “active submission.” As a result, these novels challenge the binary oppositions forming patriarchal gender categories. The thesis calls into question how power dynamics operating in society inflect the logical binary opposition man/woman. Female sexual masochism is shown in these novels sometimes to be a sexual practice of choice that should not receive “political regulation” from the feminist--or any other--community. There is also an implied warning in these novels about casting masochism as gender specific because such an assumption forges a false alliance among masochism, femininity, and passivity. This thesis recognizes also that while female masochism may be empowering in these texts, they also contain a warning that there are many ambiguities and potential dangers in adopting “active submission” as a feminist strategy.

Muriel Spark’s *The Driver’s Seat* is the first novel addressed as a parable of this ambiguous empowerment. The exteriority of the novel never allows readers to feel close enough to the main character to mourn her death. Thus, “active submission” is detailed in a cold and matter-of-fact manner that reduces realism to moral fable. Edith Templeton’s *Gordon* shows the main character’s expert manipulations as an active submissive. I chose to end with Elfriede Jelinek’s *The Piano Teacher* in order to remind readers that active submission is a very tenuous strategy, fraught with deep ethical, moral, and social problems.

By examining these three texts, I illustrate how literature intervenes in the study of female masochism. This thesis uses literature as the lens through which to examine women who perform female strength in unconventional ways.

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