

A Woman Scorned, or the Adventures of a Woman of a Certain Age

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

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Aims and General Description

The proposed thesis will be a novel of approximately 120 pages spread over six chapters titled *A Woman Scorned, or the Adventures of a Woman of a Certain Age* about a woman's lust and love-life. The novel follows the protagonist, a woman in her very late 40s who suffers the serial philandering of her husband. When she catches her husband trying to cheat on her for the third time, the woman decides to take a three-month break from her marriage in order to explore her sexual fantasies. The novel depicts this period of marital interregnum by following the protagonist's sexual adventures as she examines her life. The novel takes place in contemporary Tel Aviv and is narrated in first-person voice.

Conceptual Background

The proposed thesis offers creative engagement with the long history of the English novel as a form that fosters examination of the female psyche. From the earliest English novels, such as *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, to the work of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison, the novel has been used to expose the interior, private workings of women's mind. In keeping with that tradition, the novel that will make up this thesis will take an in-depth look at the psyche of a woman who has reached a point in her life where everything is in question. In undertaking this effort, I am striving for an honest depiction of the character's inner life. I do not wish merely to describe a woman's erotic escapades in the gratuitous mode of *Fifty Shades of Grey*; rather, the novel will explore the narrator's psyche and romantic life in tandem. Here, I take my inspiration from Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Mrs. Dalloway is based on a linear narration of the novel's plot while undermining this linearity with the narrator's consciousness. In other words, it is the novel's *chronotope* I am using as a guide since the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway* unfolds over one day even though Clarissa Dalloway's consciousness travels back and forth in time.

In my novel, the story will move forward chronologically together with the narrator's evolving sexual adventures, yet the plot will focus on the narrator's consciousness and self-exploration. Clarissa Dalloway's inner life is articulated through her thoughts and consciousness as the narrative carries her through her exterior life, revealing a tension between her life circumstances, her successful marriage and respectable place in society and her fragmented, self-questioning inner life. In that sense, my narrator has more in common with Clarissa Dalloway than she would like to admit. Like Clarissa Dalloway, my protagonist is very much dependent

on her husband in daily life and finances, yet, unlike Clarissa Dalloway, she is an unsuccessful housewife, which causes her to question her self-worth. Thus, the narrator of my novel also experiences a tension between her exterior comfortable life and her inner turmoil. Like Clarissa Dalloway, she is always engaged in an inner struggle, a restlessness that will not be pacified.

In contrast to *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, my novel is narrated in the first person, since first-person narration does away with any intermediary and thus allows for a greater intimacy to be formed between the narrator and the reader. My narrator is also committed to rigorous self-honesty. She writes her life in order to examine and reshape it and this process necessitates staring into her reflection in the mirror both physically and ontologically. One could say that my narrator is inside one of Foucault's heterotopias, while recording the whole process. Heterotopia is an experience rather than an actual place. It is a place that is both in the world and out of it, just like the person looking back at you from the mirror who is you, yet not you, as Foucault writes:

I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent. (Foucault 4)

The novel will thus offer a literary version of such a mirror.

Such literary self-reflection is of course not limited to women. Jean-Jacques Rousseau is indeed a man looking in a literary mirror. Rousseau's *Confessions* represent a man determined to reveal everything about his personal history, be it embarrassing or funny or even unsavory. I was inspired by Rousseau's admission of character flaws and mistakes, but I was even more deeply struck by his ability and willingness to self-expose. I find it appealing when narrators share even the most reprehensible or unlikable aspects of themselves with their readers, allowing for a full

and round character to emerge. In other words, it is his honesty that is so remarkable in Rousseau, and it is this kind of honesty I strive for in my narrative. The notion of self-exposure for the sake of self-understanding and self-reflection is at the heart of the confessional genre, and the reason why I find it useful as a model for the emotional exposure and honesty that is fundamental to it.

At the same time, Rousseau's *Confessions* are not merely an act of self-exposure, but rather self-exposure for the sake of self-comprehension, as Stacy Strong makes clear in her analysis of Rousseau and the nature of self-knowledge:

The purpose of knowing himself is not in the end self-knowledge. If he knows himself, by standing outside himself, he will be able to paint a portrait of himself as he is, as a human being. This portrait will then be available to others. (Strong, 17)

This self-portrait Strong sketches relates to the object of this project: to depiction, through the prism of sexual desire and love, of the narrator's self as she understands it in the moments when her life falls apart.

Another theme explored in the proposed thesis is that of desire, in particular the conflict between desire and love. In St. Augustine's *Confessions*, for instance, the inner battle that characterizes St. Augustine's work between his love of God and desire is translated in my novel as a conflict between the narrator's love for her husband and her desire to fulfill her sexual desires. My narrator's love for her husband is as genuine as St. Augustine's is to God, and it is that love that is at the heart of her struggle: does she succumb to temptation by submitting to her desire and choosing to live with the consequences, or does she sacrifice her desires for the sake of her marriage?

Female sexuality is a significant aspect of my novel in that it is through the protagonist's sexual history and erotic desires that the character examines herself. Accordingly, I find literary inspiration for this sexual characterization in the way that

Erica Jong addresses female sexuality in a frank, honest, and—most importantly to me—humorous tone in her novel *Fear of Flying*. Jong's narrator describes her sexual escapades down to the most embarrassing details while also divulging her sexual frustrations and fantasies.

Jong, like Anais Nin and others, is part of a tradition of feminine confessionals which seek “the creation of a 'safe zone in which women can articulate their sexualities without fear" (Gammel 8). The narrator of my novel decides, as the novel begins, to exit that “safe zone” and act out her fantasies while simultaneously recording the process. In that sense, the novel is not a confession of past sins, as St. Augustine's was, nor is it retrospective review of her life, as Rousseau crafted, but rather a confessional of emerging life with a target the move. The narrator looks back at her life choices as her life unravels, while engaging in sexual adventures is the framework of Jong's novel, and my narrator finds herself in a similar position to that of Jong's narrator. However, my narrator is Clarissa Dalloway's age, and there is a vast difference between having one's life fall apart at thirty than if at fifty. In this thesis I aim to explore the unique challenges that contemporary women of this age face, whether physical, emotional, or circumstantial. Jong, like Woolf before her, explores the place of a woman within her marriage and the issue of monogamy and its implication on a marriage. With the proposed thesis, I will attempt to do the same.

Shape of the Project

This manuscript of the proposed thesis is a 120-page novel in six chapters preceded by a critical introduction. Following the opening essay, which will account for the literary background and development of the thesis, each chapter in the novel will follow a sexual adventure while simultaneously looking back at the protagonist's personal history. The text thus combines contemporary narration with personal retrospection told in the first-person voice. The text follows the protagonist, May, a woman whose 50th birthday is approaching. But May does not want to think about that. She would also rather not think about the fact that her novel did not sell and that she is experiencing writer's block. The novel opens with May watching cat videos while she is supposed to be writing. She has a son in the army and a sixteen-year-old daughter, two cats, a dog, and a husband who repeatedly tries to cheat on her. When she catches him philandering for the third time in eighteen months, she decides to claim her freedom for a period of three months. Her sex life with her husband is good, yet she would like to try a few things she has not experienced, recognizing that her attractiveness has an expiration date — or so it feels to her. While she embarks on her sexual adventures, she will find herself looking back at her life choices, the history of her marriage, her motherhood, and herself, trying to come to terms with the place she finds herself in at this point of her life. She feels like a failure in almost every aspect of her life as the narrative begins. She also

suffers from cyclothymic disorder, for which she is treated, but she still suffers from occasional mood swings.

Over the course of the narrative May will have to contend with the possible consequences of her actions, particularly her decision to grant her husband his own freedom and the dangerous possibility of getting emotionally involved with someone else or worse.

Each of the novel's chapters involves a sexual encounter, which will develop a particular theme. There will be six chapters:

Chapter 1 will introduce the narrator and the circumstances of her life as well as the event that generates the plot—her husband's adultery. May will also meet a fellow writer to whom she is attracted.

Chapter 2 will involve a tryst with the writer where May will find herself able to go through with the act, causing her to acknowledge her emotional and physical attachment to her husband as well as their history.

Chapter 3 will see May as she encounters a young woman in a bar, leading her to fulfill one of her fantasies— to have sex with a woman. She will also look back at her sexual history and how it shaped her.

Chapter 4 will involve a bisexual man and his friend and will fulfill another fantasy, while maintaining a connection with the writer that will lead her to think about her writing and her future as a writer.

Chapter 5 will depict May's discovery that her husband is seeing someone else, which will make her determined to sleep with the writer, yet their meeting will

bring unexpected consequences, further prodding her to contemplate the nature of marriage and monogamy.

Chapter 6 will describe how May meets a man who will bring into question everything she thought about her relationship with her husband and force a reckoning with her romantic history.

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