

# A Contribution to the Changing Female Role of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century: L. von Sacher-Masoch's *The Divorced Woman*

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**Abstract.** The encoding of Femininity in the work of Sacher-Masoch is interesting for the impact it had to the developing female role of that time. This article aims to show how the female characters of Sacher-Masoch's novel *The divorced woman* (1986) might be related to the author's psycho-pathological background, but also contribute to the changing female consciousness. After a short mention to Sacher-Masoch's literary female patterns, and a summary of the novel, it will be shown, how these patterns represent different kind of needs: regardless if they expressed in the first place the writer's unconscious desires, they also met the contemporary feministic request for autonomy and self-determination.

**Keywords:** female role, femininity, masochism, 19<sup>th</sup> century, romanticism.

## Sacher-Masochs's Place in the Literary Scene

The main literary thematic of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's work centers upon the same pattern, which completely justifies his name's use for the description of the masochistic perversion by Krafft-Ebbing in his book *Psychopathia sexualis*<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, Sacher-Masoch's contribution to the history of literature does not only keep to the lickerish and lascivious adventures he used to write in order to make a living. The quality of his work comes both from the fact that he meets all literary criteria and from the way he assimilates and reproduces the intellectual movement of his time, namely Romanticism.

In Sacher-Masoch's case, the limits between fiction and reality are vague, as he mostly applied the literary scene, which he created and directed, in his own life. He actually led that

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Krafft-Ebbing 36.

literary scene up to its realization conditions.<sup>2</sup> The only exemption is his novel *The divorced woman* (1986), where rather the exact opposite is taking place: the primary raw material is experience, and directing comes second. That novel deals mentally and literary with his first love experience with Anna von Kotowitz<sup>3</sup>.

If we assume that the value of a literary text is measured based upon the number of projection possibilities<sup>4</sup>, some of these are required to be decoded in this particular novel: its perception creates projections in both sexes, since, in this literary work, we recognize elements of the romantic point of view concerning a life stance guided by the intellectual background of that period. Especially during Romanticism, but also in the *The divorced woman*, special emphasis is given to interpersonal relationships. In consequence, readers are also invited to become emotionally involved, since they project existing or unsatisfied experiences, fears, desires, inhibitions and idealized obsessions. Since the notion of love imposes some specific codes of behavior in each period of time,<sup>5</sup> within the frames of romantic love, we are able to observe in this novel, the main character behaving in a distinctively romantic way, while the female standard is separated into three figures, each of whom is conformed to an aspect of the conflicting needs of the female sex. Since, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the female sex is in a crossroad fighting against its different roles, we are about to watch the historical evolution of the beginnings of the feminist movement, as it is imprinted on the novel's female figures.

Probably, in other writers, the interpretation of the main characters' behavior allows a work-oriented interpretation of the material, but in the case of Sacher-Masoch the interpreter's task becomes more complicated just because of the writer's psychopathological background imposing the dependent interpretation. In other words, the interpreter should take into account the reasons for which the writer creates specific female standards, although in this presentation the psychoanalytic illustration of Sacher-Masoch's psychosynthesis will be avoided.

This is why we will refer to Deleuze who encoded the female forms in the work of Sacher-Masoch; then, we will analyze the model of the main female character as the dreadful woman, based on Treut's study (1982). After presenting a short summary of the novel *The divorced woman*, the feministic aspects of Sacher-Masoch's perversion will be stressed out.

## Sacher-Masoch and the Women

While initially one is under the impression that the whole of Œuvre of L. von Sacher-Masoch, is elaborately surrounded by a mysterious veil, the truth is that the writer remains sincere and true to his imaginary wish, which concerns his life as much as his work. In his world, a fur, a whip, the vivid colors and the intense concept of nature comprise a masochistic scene.<sup>6</sup> His literary, personal myth is characterized by the repeated pattern of this fanciful myth, where the woman occupies a central position. The reason for that does not only lie with the fact that she incorporates his passion object, but also with the common acknowledgement that it is an important 'ingredient' of the heterosexual, individual and social cosmos. Sacher-Masoch

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Farin 33.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Tsiavou 13.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Tsiavou 61

<sup>5</sup> cf. Luhmann 5.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Koschorke 47.

may project his sexual fantasies on the leading female, thus depending his sexual satisfaction completely on her, but he goes on to describe other secondary, female types, trying to justify his choice: he compares many different women types, which are set as an example for avoidance, or constitute the exact opposite to the woman of his choice. Therefore, he creates an alibi and justifies his action, in order to cover the asocial element of his abnormality. By accounting to society for his actions, in this way, he attempts to gain social favor and goodwill, and thus social acceptance.

Beyond the deeper causes of the female figures' description,<sup>7</sup> Deleuze believes that Sacher-Masoch creates female role models based on Bachofen's work *The maternal law*.<sup>8</sup> As Deleuze summarizes,<sup>9</sup> there are three types of women, namely the uterine, the oral and the oedipal. The first type is the multi-religious, the courtesan, who is represented by Aphrodite, the goddess of love and death. She symbolizes the primal, uterine mother, who lives for love, beauty and pleasure. She is sensual and gives in to each lover. Often, the goddess refers to the independence of women, to the short-term relationships and to the equality of the two sexes. She criticizes all social, moral and religious standards and thinks of them as male-made 'inventions'. This picture contains the fear of man towards female sex, who knows no fear or physical or social boundaries when it comes to the true power of love.<sup>10</sup>

Athena, the goddess of wisdom and spirit, is the exact opposite pole. She incarnates the third type of masochist female and, at the same time, represents the oedipal mother. She appears as an Imago of the female love and plays the role of the victim or of the sadist father's co-conspirator. It is true that she tyrannizes and pesters, but the cause of that is always a man, whose victim she may become. Often we have the intervention of a third party pulling her away and distracting her from that sadistic behavior. That female type's ideal is love without pain.<sup>11</sup>

The ideal female standard according to Sacher-Masoch is the second type: Demeter, the goddess of land, the fertile and lethal goddess. She symbolizes the oral mother who shows understanding, who is mild, caring and sensitive. Although she is friendly and pleasant, she shows strictness and coldness and is the dame of torture. Demeter is the symbol of law, culture and stability, while the existing contrast among these components operates in the following way: motherhood competes against sexuality, but it is the "oppressed unity in the bipartition courtesan – mother" (Treut 181). We should stress that a masochist has great need of the mythical symbols and the myth in order to name the "eternally standing" (Deleuze 222) and this way it is explained why the writer refers to the ancient goddesses.

Demeter, on the other hand, incarnates all characteristics that Sacher-Masoch attaches to his heroine: cyclothymic, arrogant and heartless, a powerful female who knows exactly how to dominate and rule over male, how to subdue, humiliate and underestimate him to such an extent, that his life as well as his comfort depend utterly on her moods. That power of hers is given to her by the male, and thus it can be definite only ostensibly as an absolute one. In this game of power, the masochistic aspect is an attempt to rule over pain, which is spontaneous, and thus under control, which also constitutes a hint for the sadistic aspect of that phenomenon.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> cf. Tsiavou 119-190.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Deleuze 169.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Deleuze 206-215.

<sup>10</sup> cf. Deleuze 206.

<sup>11</sup> cf. Deleuze 207.

<sup>12</sup> cf. Deleuze 208.

The trinity of the masochistic ideal can be: coldness - motherhood - strictness, or else, chilliness - sensitivity - terror. Sensuality is replaced with ultimate sensitivity, instead of warmth there is coldness, while disorder is replaced with a strict order. The cold nature of the ideal masochist woman rejects sensuality while, in her own sensitivity there is an impersonal element. The function of the third aims at the triumph of sensitivity against coldness, since cold oppresses sensuality.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the existence of sensuality is questioned and rejected, which results from defense. Cold outlives sensuality. This sensitivity presents the basic principle of the life-giver as a specific form of fear and anger. Otherwise said, cold functions as a cocoon and at the same time as a propeller force: it protects the excessive sensitivity by interiorizing it, while it is exteriorized as anger and strictness.<sup>14</sup>

While the writer attaches the leading actress to specific attitudes, he uses intellectual fabrications, -such as the theory of the romantic period-, that give him a social alibi and help him maintain control and be emotionally remote. From a psychoanalytic point of view, he uses various mechanisms of defense (such as intellectualization, sublimation and idealization),<sup>15</sup> while, in his relation with the leading actress there are elements of an unresolved oedipal complex.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the dreadful woman constitutes the most important element for the completion of the masochistic and masochic universe.

Demeter is indeed a 'dreadful woman', as characterized by Treut's research bearing this title. There, she stressed that the symbolization of the 'dreadful woman' stimulates the creation process, which weakens systematically her primal, semantic material, thus blocking and freezing fantasy. This results in the removal of the subject from its impulse needs and the coeval transfer of satisfaction to an unclear and uncertain future. Consequently, the dreadful woman distracts the readers' attention, so they will not focus on the causes that drive the hero/writer to such a behavior.<sup>17</sup>

### ***The divorced woman: Summary***

The above described procedure and these specific women types turn out especially in the novel *The divorced woman*. Regarding the plot of this work, the story starts with the appearance of a mysterious woman, who the writer meets accidentally and immediately starts looking for her. An old friend of him, Katinka, gives him most of his information but after she has already commented on the nature of the woman. When the narrator locates Anna, she tells him all about her love affair with Julian. Having decided to experience the ultimate love, the two lovers leave their partners - he leaves Eliza, and she leaves her husband and children. After a while of bliss, the relationship starts to consume away, to fade, as Anna is not able to correspond to the role of a dreadful woman, imposed on her by Julian. Then he starts losing interest gradually, but he carries on supporting her financially, until Anna cheats on him. That was the end of that relationship.

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<sup>13</sup> ib.

<sup>14</sup> cf. Deleuze 209.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Tsiavou 122.

<sup>16</sup> cf. Tsiavou 150.

<sup>17</sup> cf. Treut 157-173.

## Work-oriented Interpretation

Like in most pieces of Sacher-Masoch, the presence of a terrifying female figure as well as his voracious wish to reinstate the relation to the mother and at the same time his nameless fear towards intimacy, are the main characteristics.<sup>18</sup> The writer presents all three female types in the course of his narration, but nevertheless they are always in an indirect relation to his heroine: Katinka, Eliza and Anna.

At the beginning of the novel, we recognize Aphrodite in the figure of Katinka: she is a sensual courtesan, who gives her heart and body to anyone she ever likes. She fights for independence, equality and an equal treatment for women. She would gladly keep control over the male population. Then later on the play, we have Eliza, who owns a secondary part in the novel and has none of the maternal characteristics of Demeter. What she definitely lacks, is Demeter's spiritual sensuality as well as her supersensory sensibility.

Eliza appears in some critical moments of the play just to stress her temporary, compassionate and asexual worthiness. In this way, she covertly incriminates sexuality as a source of hardship, anxiety and moroseness. Eliza is Julian's oasis, his own sanctuary. She is the only woman who does not stress the hero, as she is full of understanding and feels with her motherly instinct the boundaries of herself and also of the relationship, allowing Julian to develop and act freely.

A momentum characterizes Anna's role in the novel: initially, she gives the impression of the perfect courtesan, meaning a hedonist courtesan. Then she tries appearing as a dreadful woman. Julian works hard in order to fabricate and create the image of the dreadful woman, who strictly follows a masochistic role model. Nevertheless, Anna cannot and will not follow these instructions. She needs love, intimacy, communication and understanding - things she does not receive from Julian. Besides, she cannot ignore the physical dimension of her nature as a courtesan. As soon as the first difficulties come on the scene, her maternal instincts come to light, thus ignoring Julian and their passion.

In Anna's inability, Bang sees the cause of Julian's reaction:<sup>19</sup> the stubborn behavior of a masochist who wants to punish Anna with his absence since she does not meet his wishes and demands. He is in pain by the fact that Anna has the potency of becoming a dreadful woman without wishing to make it real. At the end of the erotic story, she becomes a real sadist as she cannot stand his indifference and she treats him in a cold, indifferent, insensitive and emotionless way. We observe Anna changing roles quite often: at the beginning, she looks more like Demeter, but has also elements of Aphrodite. When she feels that she is being observed like an object, that she is forced to pretend someone else, that her feelings are not being considered, she realizes that she has crossed the borders of an intimate relationship. At that time she recognizes that Julian has given her a role not in a game, but in its fantastic play. As soon as Anna becomes conscious of that fact, she cannot live without having an emotional contact to Julian and therefore she crosses the borders of the dreadful woman, turns into Athena and has no mercy of her lover. But Julian retreats because he has no need of a sadist: he could not have her under control and he would have no authority on her. The dreadful woman is his ideal just because she is his own construction, since he can set the parameters, the limits and thus maintain dominance. If one takes into account the fact that the idealistic images are a

<sup>18</sup> cf. Tsiavou 133.

<sup>19</sup> cf. Bang 126.

reflection of the psychoanalytic notion of ego,<sup>20</sup> the presumptions about Sacher-Masoch's psychogram are indirectly confirmed, namely that he suffered from his unresolved oedipal complex which constituted the source of defense for his impulses.<sup>21</sup>

As we integrate this novel in the social and cultural frame of that time, which is characterized by the romantic movement, we realize that the romantic way of viewing life, as a work of art, is expressed in Sacher-Masoch's work as much as in his life: his main attempt in that novel is to create the ideal conditions for love to grow and blossom, and to find fertile ground for his masochism. During this attempt, he is using an elaborate costumery material; he stresses nature's effect as an environment as well as part of human nature. However, his basic 'weapon' is intellectual. By using different kinds of evasions and maneuvering, he manages to use romantic love as an alibi in order to sanctify his instincts.<sup>22</sup> Thus, he connects rationality with spirit and emotion. Besides, that is what romanticism demands. The romantic demand for assimilation of contrasts is reflected in the fact that Sacher-Masoch does not describe just a female type but three ones with different characteristics that complete each other. In these figures, he assimilates the intellectual and social tradition, demonstrates the women's effort for self-determination and, finally, questions the social conventions.<sup>23</sup>

Although the writer's fantasies as well as those of the collective unconscious are projected on the above described women, we can also detect men's ambivalence towards the alteration of the female role. While the romantics realize that, certain freedoms must be granted to women, they meet the application of that idea with puzzlement, reservation and intimate fear. Within the environment of creating different - often contradictory - trends and dispensatory sensualism, the voice of women is no longer suppressed. Women exploit the fertile ground, they become united and create the feminist movement which expresses their right to equality.<sup>24</sup> Sacher-Masoch does not literarily condense the multi-level female role into one corresponding figure, but breaks it down to several ones in order to show the heredity, the present and the evolution of the position of woman as well as the effects on intersexual relations.

The description of the three women in the novel *The divorced woman* outlines indirectly the sexual roles that correspond to the near past, the present and the future of that time. Eliza, Anna and Katinka personify these roles, thus signaling the evolutionary phases of the woman. Eliza represents the traditional female role model, who lives in her husband's shadow. Her role is projected on the model of a knightly beloved, who starts as an object of passion and afterwards fulfills herself by becoming a mother. She has no opinion of her own and is full of understanding and compassion. She depends indirectly on Julian financially; she is unprofessed and does not intend to claim such thing. The description of that woman brings out the polarization of all sexual characteristics, supported by the conservative bourgeoisie of that time: passivity, sensibility and devotion are some of the core characteristics of Eliza, that create the impression of a classical female, while Julian is expressed through energy, independence, logical coherence and professional orientation.

The fact that during the romanticism period it was the first time when freedom of speech was gradually granted to women, and a slight broadening of their activities became

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<sup>20</sup> cf. Anna Freud 111.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Tsiavou 149.

<sup>22</sup> cf. Ehrich-Haefeli 77.

<sup>23</sup> cf. Kluckhohn 9.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Düding 87.

noticeable,<sup>25</sup> is clearly witnessed by Anna's character. She incarnates the woman's prototype of the romantic period, who develops herself within her husband's sphere and environment. Consequently, we observe that the predominant female role model does not release itself from the patriarchic commandeering and from the sexual role of its past. The only thing that is different is that the female is given mythical proportions and her sensuality is considerably stressed. In this play, Anna owns the place of the sensual lover, who is at the same time a spiritual companion. Yet, her spiritual role is restricted, as Anna has not yet developed autonomous thinking, but she only reproduces and asserts the male mind. In that case, we can discern the romantic aspect of the female, who, as a natural being, is seen as a complete 'plant', but is a static existence, excluded from the interminable development.<sup>26</sup> The man's secret wish to keep the woman in a subordinate position, under his control, becomes indisputably clear through that model for the reason that his is actually in fear of confronting her.

According to the spirit of that time, Anna focuses on the first objective of the feministic attempts for emancipation, which concerns the equality of women within the frame of "equal worthiness, but differently"<sup>27</sup>. At the same time, that point of view propagandizes the patriarchic, sexual roles. Initially, during the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the feministic movement accepted the polarization of sexual characteristics according to the patriarchic norm. That can also be detected in the determination of its goal. The claims and demands are not based on the idea of equality, but contain the image of an equal but 'different' woman, who would fulfill herself through her job as a house-wife and a mother.<sup>28</sup> The right to a profession was the very first feministic claim: the feminist movement intended to turn housework into a profession for women, so as to be able to earn a living for themselves, though the financial interest was not among their top priorities. So, we observe Anna orienting towards that, a fact that justifies the assumptions that she personifies the contemporary feministic demands of that time.

The dialogue between the emancipated Katinka and the narrator centers upon marriage, the woman's role and, indirectly upon sexuality. Katinka pays great regard to employment of women and indirectly to her obtainment of independence from men. She is well aware of the fact that the patriarchic structure defines the rights of women and therefore their free development. The demand for right to equality, political rights and education come to light, but at the same time the deep roots of patriarchic mentality reveals itself: the polarization of sexual characteristics (man as the energetic being and woman as the passive one). The reference to the self-fulfillment of women is a secondary issue, but it always relates to the feministic claims and demands. According to this point of view, we are able to comprehend the women's claims for self-determination, autonomy, independence, education and equality. Katinka is setting an example for the future female role model, because she embodies all requests of the women's movement, developing at that time. Katinka's monologue is very characteristic of the spirit of that period: it combines the women's claim for their right to education, a claim that became even more intense especially during the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>25</sup> cf. Brockhaus 496.

<sup>26</sup> cf. Beutin 207.

<sup>27</sup> cf. Gestrich 6.

<sup>28</sup> cf. Gestrich 7.

## Author-oriented Interpretation

At this point, if we change our perspective and we focus on the author-oriented interpretation, instead of analyzing the writer's work result, we will detect the writer's decisive contribution: it is not Katinka talking of course but Sacher-Masoch through her. In Katinka's views we see the male way of thinking: it is the patriarchic view that sexual characteristics are rooted in the biological substance of sexes, a view that was enforced by various medical research of that time. Taking Masoch's studies on history into consideration, we can explain why he besets many moments of his life with a veil of history.<sup>29</sup> In that way it is showed that he had the necessary sensitivity to realize all social and cultural changes of his time, part of which is also the feministic movement. In other words, he was in a position to grasp the historical importance of feminism and to process it intellectually within the frame of romanticism. Moreover, that was his way to satisfy his role as an 'accuser' of all amiss conditions of that time, who reprehends the rotten moral and supports progress and change. The writer was strongly opposing to any kind of social injustice, and the feministic approach offered him a good cause for that attitude. Therefore, it is not a casual event that Sacher-Masoch indirectly dedicates this novel to that revolutionary movement, maintaining that, this play is a "contribution to the natural history of women"<sup>30</sup>, a claim which is finally justified. Indeed, the three female figures symbolize women's inner struggle to handle their redefined sexual role and to fulfill their selves on a social and a personal level.

Sacher-Masoch brings forward all women's claims as a focal point, but he also stresses a further side of the issue: he warns women not to undermine and mine their sensuality and sexuality. Although these two elements are not the decisive ones for the nature of women, the writer focuses on these in order to support the priority that personal needs should be given. Seeing from that point of view, that play contains elements of a fictional novel. On the other hand, it stresses the important influence of the cultural superstructure, which obtrudes regression (for example: social demand for conformity), thus it represses and stamps out personal development. In Sacher-Masoch's case, the sexual factor is also involved, which renders the satisfaction of needs as well as the social acceptance even more exacting. This sensitizes him and makes him support the weak who, in his case, are the strong, as the female sex is the one from the authority of which he tries to break free. By partially identifying himself with the woman, he identifies with power and acquires a temporary control over his oedipal complex: thus, he manages to restrain the attraction exercised on him by the female sex and the fear of castration, while he identifies with the father without experiencing feeling of envy and rivalry. Nevertheless, in this effort, he shifts between desire and terror for the independent woman. Surely, this does not underestimate the contribution to women's movement: regardless of the motives and the choice of its subject, he acknowledges and indirectly supports women's rights to equal treatment and fulfillment of their personal needs.

## Summary

Summarizing, Deleuze's model emphasizes the psychoanalytic dimension of the three-women-pattern and justifies the roots of repetition. All the same, the female readers have the

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<sup>29</sup> cf. Farin 21.

<sup>30</sup> cf. Sacher-Masoch 3.

chance to identify with one of these three female role models and observe the dynamic progress of their sex's role. Therefore, the play functions as the precursor of women's new place in the society of that time. Regardless from his choices and motives, the writer keeps on believing in his High love, sensuality and sexuality, thus incarnating the spirit of romanticism which actually sets the ground for the development of Psychoanalysis. Consequently, Sacher-Masoch may seem to be reactionary, as far as his personal sexual choice is concerned, but at the same time he appears to be revolutionary due to his contribution to women's maturing during their fight for equal treatment, equality and equal rights.

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