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From the Angel in the House to the Femme Fatale The character of Salomé and the New Woman

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The French term *fin de siècle* refers to the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. A period that was widely considered to be the era of decadence, degeneration and changing paradigms. One object in this change was the place of women in society and in general. Their efforts to obliterate discrimination and expunge conventional female roles was hard to be accepted by the general public, and as every dominant phenomenon, this also has left its mark on contemporary art - literature in particular. Losing the *Angel in the house* could mean nothing but getting something that is uncontrollable, rebellious, monstrous back instead. Oscar Wilde's Salomé – despite being an Old Testament character – is a perfect example of the *New Woman*, who embodies everything people have seen as dangerous and decadent in the process of the era's change. A real *femme fatale*. In this essay I attempt to give an explanation to why she is so dangerous as a woman, and how her character relates to the era's new born female principle.

Key concepts: fin the siècle, angel in the house, femme fatale, Salomé, female roles, new woman

Fin the siècle

The end of the Victorian era can be characterised as an age of overwhelming change. New theories emerged that questioned traditional principles whether we talk about economy, science, art, politics, or society.

As Buzwell writes: „with improving educational and employment prospects for women, marriage followed by motherhood was no longer seen as the inevitable route towards securing a level of financial security".[54] A new social layer made up by The New Woman emerged. Brave girls who dared to fight for their rights and stand up against inequalities caused outrage. With the lead of Emmeline Pankhurst a new organisation was founded: the Women's Social and Political Union. The Daily Mail gave them the name Suffragettes.[55] Their tactics and protest actions included civil disobedience, violence on property, voluntary arrests and hunger strikes.

Meanwhile legislation also contributed to the freedom and independence of women. Married Women's Property Act (1882)[56] allowed married women to keep all their personal and real property acquired before and during marriage. Under the Matrimonial Causes Act (1884)[57] a wife deserted by an adulterer could petition for divorce immediately, rather than waiting the two years previously required. Huge milestone was 1918[58], when women's suffrage was introduced: women at the age of 30 and over could vote and stand for Parliament. Their voting age was then lowered to 21 in 1928[59]. The social landscape was slowly changing, leaving old Victorian standards behind.

The Angel in the House

The Angel in the House was one of the concepts that the new era's women tried to fight against. The name originates from a narrative poem[60] by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854, whose heroine perfectly incorporates all expectations society had towards women in the past century.

John Ruskin, leading English art critic of the Victorian era is a great source if we would like to read about the limited spaces of women in

54 https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle (retrieved: 01.05.2017)

55 WALSH, BEN: *GCSE Modern World History – second edition*. London 2005, John Murray Publishers. p. 60.

56-6 further information about the acts: http://www.legislation.gov.uk

60 PATMORE, COVENTRY: *The Angel in the House.* Boston, 1858., Boston, Ticknor and Fields.

the 19th century: "But the woman's power is for rule, not for battle, — and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision. (…) By her office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation"[61]. He goes on: "And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. (…) home is yet wherever she is. (…) This, then, I believe to be, (…) the woman's true place and power. But (…) to fulfil this, she must — as far as one can use such terms of a human creature — be incapable of error… So far as she rules, all must be right, or nothing is. She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise — wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side"[62].

The Angel in the House should have never taken action, thought of herself, left the house, or committed sin. Unrealistic expectations, against which many of the *fin de siècle's* artists raised their voices.

Virginia Woolf goes as far as theoretically killing her "angel-self" in order to be able to practise her profession freely: „I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate, they must– to put it bluntly – tell lies if they are to succeed. Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard"[63].

As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, attempts were made to eliminate the powerless and shallow character. Women became unable to identify with her, and fought for the liberty and the pursuit of independence that did not exist in the world of household angels. By the turn of the century more and more people started to realise how nonsensical the confines were among which women needed to exist. Radical changes appeared not only on the field of rights, but also in

8,62RUSKIN, JOHN: Thoughts on How Girls Should Be Trained The Ladie's Companion 1865 vol. 28. p.111.

63 http://s.spachman.tripod.com/Woolf/professions.htm (retrieved: 01.05.2017)

women's fashion, hobbies, intellectual appetite as well. Public's reactions to this were of course divisive.

"Women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will and government by self-control, but submission and yielding to the control of others. What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing: the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others"[64] – states John Stuart Mill, in his book *The Subjection of Women*. At the same time Punch, and other magazines endeavoured to make the New Woman a figure of fun, presenting her as an embittered, over-educated spinster.

Eventually art and public opinion found a different picture to attribute to the new century's females, and next to the frigid suffragists soon a more mysterious, passionate, and hostile figure emerged.

The femme fatale

Women demanding more freedom did not overlook a particularly controversial subject, sexuality either. According to Buzzwell[65], last-century medical experts' view of the ideal woman's sexual desires (or the lack of it) looked like this: „As a general rule a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attention[66]".

The "*fin de siècle*" emphasis on pursuing new sensations however, inevitably, led to sex and sexuality playing an increasingly important role in looking for new boundaries and new experiences.

Femininity earned a somehow menacing overtone as male society faced the yet unknown (or suppressed) nature of female sensuality. Male writers tended to cast the New Woman as either a sexual pred-

64 MILL, JOHN STUART: The Subjection of Women. In MILL, *On Liberty and Other Writings*. London, 1869. Longman, Roberts & Green. p. 132.

65,14 https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/daughters-of-decadence-the-new-woman-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle (retrieved: 01.05.2017)

66 ACTON, WILLIAM: *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age and Advanced Life Considered in the Physiological, Social and Moral Relations*. London, 1862., John Churchill p. 101–102.

ator or as an over-sensitive intellectual unable to accept her nature as a sexual being.[67] "Man fears that his strength will be taken from him by woman, dreads becoming infected with her femininity and then proving himself a weakling."[68]

Women reading newspapers, women voting on elections, women wearing trousers, women riding bicycles. It comes as no surprise that men saw a threatening progress everywhere and that perilous, malign female literary characters lived their renaissance in this period.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote about Lilith, Adam's first wife, the old-testament demon, whose sexual desires are strong enough to contradict her Creator and leave Eden. Sirens, mermaids, vampires appear as painting subjects. What is common between them is their unearthly beauty, voluptuous passion, mortal temptation and absolute incapability of conceiving life. Their sexuality is always fruitless, and the only thing they search for is pleasure for itself. For patriarchy however women's sexuality must be tied to ovulation, and hence to procreation.

One very important seductress to be mentioned here is another Biblical figure, the murderer of Saint John the Baptist, Salomé. She is the „the quintessential representation of the femme fatale, appearing in paintings, poems, opera, and of course Wilde's Symbolist play, first performed (in French) in 1896."[69]

Salomé

Oscar Wilde's Salomé tells us about the well-known biblical story of the beheading of Saint John. The holy prophet (Jokanaan) is kept prisoner in the palace of Herod, where at the beginning of the play a great reception is taking place. The stepdaughter of Herod, the beautiful Salomé escapes from the ballroom to avoid the hungry male gazes that follow her everywhere she goes. In the garden she feels an irrepressible desire to see and later to kiss Jokanaan, who is absolutely forbid

68 Freud, Sigmund: *THE TABOO OF VIRGINITY*. IN. Rieff, Philip (ED.): *SEXUALITY AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LOVE*. New York, 1963., Collier Books. P. 76.

69 Tookey, HELEN: The Fiend that Smites with a Look: The Monstrous/Menstrous Woman and the Danger of the Gaze in Oscar Wilde's Salomé. In. *Literature and Theology*, 2004. Vol. 18, No. 1. p. 24.

den to be seen by anybody. Salomé tries to persuade a Syrian (Narraboth) serving his stepfather to let her meet the prophet. He fulfils the wish, but under the spell of the girl's beauty, he later commits suicide. After Jokanaan's repeated rejection, Salomé tries to find another way to carry out her will, and kiss the prophet. She dances the dance of the seven veils to her lustful stepfather, because thus she can wish for anything she wants in exchange. After the dance scene she asks for the head of the Prophet, and when she gets it, she makes monstrous love to it. Herod is horrified at the sight of the terrible scene, and demands that she has to be killed. Salomé indeed is one of the most terrifying femme fatale characters, and Wilde's play is full of images that help us see why.

Her beauty and her very passionate desire are revealed right in the very first lines after she appears. Her sexuality however contradicts the rules of patriarchy mentioned above, because the object of her desire is a prophet, a holy man. Ergo, she represents those rebellious women in *fin de siècle* society, who cannot or do not want to fit into traditional rules set up by men.

As Helen Tookey points out[70]: the dominant images in the text of Salomé are the moon, blood, and the gaze – all strictly connected to her. Following the lead of these, it is easier to understand the dangerous, dark side of her femininity.

The presence of the Moon accompanies Salomé throughout the story. Almost every character stepping to the scene makes comments in connection with it, usually referring to the nature of their relationship with the Princess. After the opening line of the Syrian and his page, 'How beautiful is the Princess Salome´ tonight!' the two go on to describe the moon: 'She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. You would fancy she was dancing.[71] At the same time Herod remarks: 'She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. You would fancy she was looking for dead things' She is, in Herod's words, 'like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked, too ... She shows herself naked in the sky. She reels through the clouds like a drunken woman'[72].

It is clear now, that the woman-figure attributed to the Moon cannot be anyone else but Salomé, whose search for lovers and death both

70 TOOKEY, p. 23.
71 WILDE, OSCAR: *Salomé*. Boston, 1989, Branden Books. p.1.
72 WILDE, p. 14–15.

predict the fatal outcome of the play. The moon-woman, then, is sexual, predatory, and beyond control. She is dangerous; in particular, dangerous to men.[73]

The other very significant image throughout the play – which can easily be in association with the previous one – is blood, cyclicity and female menstruality. Tookey claims: "for all cultures throughout human history blood is both revered and feared because it symbolises the power of life and death"[74].

Menstrual blood, on the other hand, is associated with 'evil and impure powers', a force in relation to which men feel 'a fear into which horror generally enters'[75] This fear is represented in the play by Herod's hysterical reactions when he encounters blood. "There is blood on the ground; Herod cries out, 'I have slipped in blood! It is an ill omen. It is a very evil omen' On the literal level this is the blood of the young Syrian, who has killed himself for love and fear of Salomé. Symbolically, however, the connection of this blood to Salomé is the important one: her sexuality has caused this blood to flow. The connection is made absolute when she dances on the blood with her naked feet"[76]

Salomé's deadliest weapon however is the one she takes out of male hands, and uncompromisingly uses against them. This is the gaze. Tookey points out that the looking relation is the most important form of relation between characters, and the fate of a character is often determined by her or his status in this relation, whether looking or being looked at.[77] To understand what we mean about gaze as a masculine tool, Laura Mulvey's explanation can come in handy: „According to post-Lacanian feminist discourse and film theory, the looking relation is understood as gendered: the subject, the looker, is male, while the object, the looked-at, is female. The gaze is therefore the 'male gaze', whereby women are deprived of subjecthood, frozen into images and displayed for the scopophilic gratification of the male looking subject"[78].

73 TOOKEY, p. 27.
74 TOOKEY, p. 28.
75 DURKHEIM, EMILE: *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York, 1995., The Free Press. p. 455–456
76TOOKEY, p. 28.
77 TOOKEY, p. 29.
78 MULVEY, LAURA: Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In. MULVEY: *Visual and other pleasures* 2nd ed. New York, 2009., Palgrave Macmillan. p. 6–19.

Salomé's visage however is special in this aspect, because she is not only dangerous when she looks, but also when being looked at. Narraboth has to die after the sight of the Princess, Jokanaan on the other hand is murdered because of the woman's lustful look at him. Salomé takes the role of a deadly Medusa-figure, whose victims are the ones who try to make her the object of their gaze. Although, she is not strong enough to defeat or overcome the power of her stepfather's eyes. The New Woman is strong, but not necessarily stronger than the Man.

Summary

The changing era of the *fin de siècle* brought several opportunities for women to search for identity. The fight for suffrage and other movements established by women created a new female identity: *The New Woman*, who gradually supressed the until then ideal feminine character, *The Angel of the House*. This change provoked an intense reaction from the part of society, causing distress mostly among the dominating layer, men. Art's response to this process was the revitalization of such ancient *femme fatale* figures, who could impersonate the fears of society, regarding the emergence of strong, determined women. Oscar Wilde's Salomé is the incarnation of what makes *The New Woman* dangerous – the way she learns to use her mysterious femininity, her sexual power, and her own independent will are the factors that contributed to the arrival of the new era.

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