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Final Thesis

Lost in Venice
Maps of Beauty and Terror

The Aspern Papers, Don't Look Now, The Comfort of Strangers

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Abstract

Venice has always had a bewitching effect on writers, who have often portrayed it as a place where beauty and terror coexist. For this reason, the lagoon city represents a perfect setting for Gothic stories, whose characters usually get lost in its labyrinthine streets, encountering mysterious and obscure figures operating in its peripheral alleyways or luxurious palaces.

This thesis aims at investigating three literary works using Venice as their sinister background. All three chapters begin with a brief introduction of the authors and then continue with a detailed analysis of their works. The first chapter analyses Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*, in which Venice is an ambiguous city where past and present intermingle. The second chapter deals with "Don't Look Now", a short story written by Daphne du Maurier and published in 1971, in which the lagoon city starts to be a place of labyrinthine streets and violent deaths. Eventually, the last chapter has Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981) as its focus; in this novella, Venice shares the features of both James' and du Maurier's works, but here violence reaches its peak, ending with a brutal, sadomasochistic murder.

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Introduction

This thesis analyses the representation of Venice in literature through Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*, Daphne du Maurier's "Don't Look Now", and Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers,* focusing on the different roles that the city plays in these literary works.

In literature, the first references to Venice are to be found in travel journals of the thirteenth century, which describe the lagoon city mostly as an exotic, commercial place; from the fourteenth century, Venice starts to be associated with the ideas of love and sensuality. Foreign writers have always been attracted by Venice's main features: its peculiar position on the water, labyrinthine dark alleyways, centenarian carnival tradition, and its mysterious, uncanny appearance contributed to the creation of an immortal literary topos. Because of its ambiguity and its images of decay, Venice became the perfect setting for Gothic novels, such as Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Lewis's *The Bravo of Venice*.

The first novella to be analysed is Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*, which refers mainly to the Romantic tradition; the Romantic poet Jeffrey Aspern is shaped on Lord Byron, who is considered one of the best representatives of Romanticism in England. In this novella, Venice is depicted as an ambiguous, mysterious, dark place, in which the past and present of the Misses Bordereau remain obscure to the man of letters and to all their neighbours, who only know that the two secluded women come from America. Miss Juliana Bordereau can be seen as a personification of Venice: both of them share a heroic past but are now slowly dying.

The second chapter provides an analysis of Daphne du Maurier's tale of the supernatural "Don't Look Now", which belongs to the Gothic genre, more precisely to Gothic horror. While in James' novella Venice is an ambiguous, mysterious place in which past and present intermingle, du Maurier's Venice becomes a dangerous place, whose labyrinthine streets conceal a ruthless murderer who primarily preys on tourists getting lost in the Venetian alleyways. Venice is portrayed as a Gothic setting, in which its poorly lit alleyways and deserted squares recall the traditional intricated corridors of Gothic castles, in which damsels in distress get lost. Italian cities were very popular among Gothic writers because they were seen as a symbol of the sinister, the exotic, and the transgressive.

The third chapter discusses Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, which combines elements of both James' and du Maurier's novellas. McEwan never explicitly mentions the name Venice, yet its typical atmosphere is recognisable through the novel's lines: the labyrinthine streets, the great number of tourists, and the lack of road traffic clearly point to the lagoon city. Not naming Venice is a literary means to generalise the novel, to highlight its deceptive nature, and to position it in relation to a great number of works dealing with the lagoon city. In this way, McEwan's work can exploit everything that Venice represents in the literary tradition of the twentieth century but without becoming a part of it. Venice is so important that it can be read as the novel's fifth character. Moreover, being McEwan's novel rich in references to 20th-century works set in Venice, the chapter also provides a comparison with Mann's *Death in Venice*, which is one of the main sources of inspiration for McEwan's work.

All texts feature Venice as their setting, which becomes more and more threatening from James to McEwan, and tourists as their protagonists, which are victims of both Venice and its inhabitants.

Chapter One

Henry James and Venice:

The Aspern Papers

1. Henry James' Biography

1.1. The Family James' Roots

Henry James' father, Henry James Senior, recounted his childhood and the relationship with his parents in his old age; his father was a strict and resolute figure, always involving the fact that God was always observing him. For this reason, James had to follow a list of "*not-to-do*" [1], which led him to state that he felt better while he was far from home.

Because of the experience with his father, James Sr was ready to state that,

> my father was weakly, nay painfully, sensitive to his children's claims upon his sympathy; and I myself, when I became a father in my turn, felt that I could freely sacrifice property and life to save my children from unhappiness.[2]

1.2. Henry James' Parents

In America, Henry James Senior settled down and married Mary James, born Welsh. The couple had five children: the philosopher William (1842), the novelist Henry (1843), Garth Wilkinson (1845), Robertson (1846), and the diarist Alice (1848).

The relationship between Mary and Henry James Senior influenced Henry James' view of marriage, which is a recurrent theme of his literary production. According to the novelist, indeed, women provided men with strength, but, at the same time, they deprived men of strength and, most importantly, life. In the James family, this is evident; wives survived their husbands, or if they did not, husbands were uncapable to live alone. For this reason, Edel states that Mary James was the source of strength and life, from which Henry James Senior drew. When Mary died, this source and, consequently, Henry James' life was dried up.[3]

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[1] L. Edel, *The Life of Henry James. Volume 1: 1843*-89, London, Penguin Books, 1978, p. 24.
[2] Ibid, p. 26.
[3] Ibid, p. 48.

Henry James' belief emerges in his literary works, in particular through the 'vampire theme', that is the theme of three works, in which the novelist recalls "his father's subservience to his mother and the perhaps less consciously observed fashion in which she in turn took strength from him".[4] The previously mentioned works are: *The Grey: A Romance* (1868), *Longstaff's Marriage* (1879), and *The Sacred Fount* (1901). Eventually, the theme of observing the relationships between people is present in some of James' tales too.

After the death of Henry Senior, father and son were often mistaken or, even worse, taken as a unique person. Indeed, both Henry James Senior and his son Henry James wrote for *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Eventually, Henry James was so discontent with his name because he was the only one among his siblings to have a shared name, which did not pay homage to any important figure of the family. Actually, he perceived the appendix "Jr" that he was forced to add to his signature only as diminishing his importance.

1.3. The Relationship With William James

In James' novels, a predilection for second children emerges; the older sibling, indeed, is either killed or described as a villain. For instance, in *Roderick Hudson* (1875), the main protagonist is the second-born of a slaveholder and his older brother has been killed in the Civil War; in *The American* (1877), the first child embodies corruption, while the second one is romantic and gracious.

Although William James was born only eighteen months before Henry James, the gap between the two brothers seemed an abyss to the novelist, who saw William as a rival, always one step ahead of him. *A Small Boy and Others* (1913) starts with an episode recalling this brotherly rivalry; a crying and shouting Harry is brought to the Dutch House in Albany – which is also described in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), where Isabel has the same attitude of young Henry. The latter is so angered because he knows that William is already in there, sat at his desk, thus being once more ahead of him.

While the younger Henry James fought for asserting himself, the adolescent Henry wanted equality. However, after having retraced William's study path, Henry realised that it was time to choose his own. At Cambridge, seeing William in an advantageous position

[4] Ibid, p. 47.

made him "feel a sort of quickening savoury meal in any cold scrap of his own experience that he might pass on to [his] palate".[5] Henry James could not draw like his brother, but he had an incredible imagination, which allowed him to create a sort of parallel world, in which he could find refuge from the frustrations of his childhood and adolescence. Art, for this reason, took over action, which was impossible with William.

Thanks to his ability to create a new ideal world around him, Henry James finally stood out among his sibling, especially from William. Henry James' father wrote, "l can't help feeling that you are the one that has cost us the least trouble, and given us always the most delight".[6]

1.4. The Literary Initiation and the Love for the Theatre

While in New Brighton, Henry James and his father went on boat to New York, where they used to do some routine work. Among the others, there was a visit to the bookshop, in which Henry Senior always bought many volumes, including a novel for his wife. The latter was entitled *The Initials*, written by the Baroness Tautphoeus. At that time, Henry James was 11 years old; the Baroness' novel made the little boy feel "at home […] in [its] pages".[7] Thanks to *The Initials*, James discovered "what real fiction could be, fiction sophisticated and written with a bright, facile charm".[8]

Another important author who inspired Henry James is Charles Dickens. One evening, after having disobeyed his mother, little Henry sat under a table, listening to an Albany cousin reading *David Copperfield* out loud. Henry was so caught up with Dickens' story that he was unable to hold a loud sobbing and, consequently, was exposed. Dickens' characters were familiar to the young Henry, who could appreciate them even in theatres. Despite his admiration for the English writer, James never wrote a critical article to him, who "figured in reminiscence rather than criticism, and only once did he review one of his novels".[9]

A Small Boy and Others offers a detailed account of James' nights at the theatre. In his autobiography, he indicates Shakespeare's *A Comedy of Errors* as his first play, which

[5] Ibid, p. 54.
[6] Ibid, p. 57.
[7] Ibid, p. 80.
[8] Ibid, p. 81.
[9] Ibid, p. 83.

started his passion for the genre. James had the possibility to go to the major theatres of his time, such as the Broadway and the National.

1.5. James' Pastime: Observing People

Counting the James family and the Welsh family many members, James had much material to deal with. He provided his readers with many portraits, sketches, thus constituting a "'chronicle of early deaths, arrested careers, broken promises, orphaned children'".[10] His father's relatives received much less attention than his mother's; indeed, from his mother's side there were many strong-minded women, whose men were dependant on them. These powerful women undoubtedly inspired some fictional characters of James' works; in particular, his Great-Aunt seems to be the source for Juliana Bordereau in *The Aspern Papers* (1888), which will be later discussed, while Cousin Helen may have inspired *Georgina's Reasons* (1884).

1.6. Education

Henry James Senior provided his son Henry with "no standard by which to judge the facts of the life he saw around him".[11] In fact, Henry James felt himself forced to examine everything around him, in a way which allowed him to reorganise the chaos of the world into order. For this reason, it could be said that,

> [i]n a sense the circle came full round: William of Albany sought to impose discipline and order on the senior Henry; the elder Henry carefully refused to impose such order upon his novelist son, who in the end imposed it, as a consequence of inner needs, upon himself – with the aid always, however, of his mother's greater rigidity and firmness.[12]

Henry James' father enjoyed travelling and, for this reason, his children had the possibility of getting in contact with different languages, cultures, and arts. In 1855, the James family was in Geneva; here Henry James and his siblings were sent at first to the

[10] Ibid, p. 87.
[11] Ibid, p. 98.
[12] Ibid, pp. 88-89.

Institution Haccious, which was famous for teaching languages to Americans, but then their parents decided in favour of a home education.

Two days later, the family was in London and the children were tutored by Thomson, who, as Henry Senior explicitly asked, gave the James siblings "instruction in Latin [...] and the ordinary branches of an English education".[13] The Scottish tutor also took the James children on long walks. Years later, James discovered that Thomson became the tutor of another future novelist, Robert Louis Stevenson. In the meantime, Henry James and the others were also taught French.

In 1856, Henry James and his family moved to Paris, where they were tutored at first by Monsieur Lerambert and then were sent to a Fourierist school, the Institution Balzac. This school was experimental and the classes were made up of pupils of different ages and sex.

In 1858, after three years abroad, Henry Senior and his family moved to Newport, Rhode Island. However, they still travelled, first to Switzerland then to Germany, and then back to Newport. Henry James defined this continuous travelling disturbing, because it "seemed to testify too eloquently [...] a lack of purpose in his father".[14] In Newport, to which James came back in 1870, he felt as an outsider; here, "'[...] the great black ebony God of business was the only one recognized'. He had known only the other gods: the gods of art, of culture, of educated talk, the life of the spirit".[15] Moreover, for James Newport was different from Europe but also from the other places in America, because it seemed to be an idle place, suitable for people like his father, who lacked economic purposes.

The unstoppable family again left for Paris in 1859, where Henry James enrolled in the Institution Rochette, in which he found himself among students interested in engineering and architecture, very far from literature. James withdrew, after having unsuccessfully tried to overcome his scientific difficulties. After this parenthesis, James entered the Academy, in which he studied French literature and Natural Philosophy.

James arrived in Bonn in 1860, where he and his brother were registered in the pension of Dr Humpert, a Greek and Latin professor.

[13] Ibid, p. 105.
[14] Ibid, p. 115.
[15] Ibid, p. 118.

Eventually, the family came back to Newport, where William started painting and Henry participated as an observer. Here, he met the painter La Farge, who "was not only willing to talk to him about books and about writing; he listened; he bestowed, in effect, paternal sympathy, for he was older and knew the world".[16] The latter encouraged Henry James to start writing, set painting aside, and introduced him to Balzac and Mèrimèe.

After 18 years of familiar cheerfulness and optimism, the Civil War broke out. For a sensitive man as Henry James, the sight of violence and the noise of gunshots were unbearable.

In 1862 Henry James enrolled in the Harvard Law School; as Edel points out, "[l]ooking back at his young collegiate self, he felt that his act was similar to that of a young man joining a mustered army".[17] According to James, Harvard was the best solution; indeed, law was the most practical field of study, strictly connected to reality and suitable for an observer, as he was. For literature, he could always rely on libraries and the closet in his house.

1.7. James' Love for Europe

In 1869, Henry James started his journey throughout Europe, starting from London. The city was full of incentives and possibility and he was eager to discover it. James spent a total of eleven weeks in England, of which five were in London, three in a water-cure and three in travelling.

He then reached Italy, which he defined "'a beautiful dishevelled nymph'"[18] in late 1869, which he visited many times during his life. He went back to Paris and Geneve, to the places of his childhood. Later, he reached Milan and then Venice,

> It was not, however, Venice in its details, but Venice in its totality that fired his imagination. With Ruskin in his pocket he walked or floated through the city. From this first moment it became a golden link in the chain of cities that comprised Henry James's life, and one has only to read the pages devoted to Venice in *The Wings of the Dove* to discover how enduringly the spirit of the place had entered his being.[19]

[16] Ibid, p. 134.
[17] Ibid, p. 160.
[18] Ibid, p. 246.
[19] Ibid, p. 251.

Florence stole his heart, because of its picturesque atmosphere.

After 15 months in Europe, James went back to America; he settled in Cambridge with his elder parents, William, and Alice. During his two years in Cambridge, Henry James wrote a short novel, two dramatic sketches, a series of tales, eight travel-sketches, and three art-notices.

Some of James' letters hinted a possible return to Europe in 1872, which became reality in May of the same year, when he reached Rome. After a brief stay in Paris, James moved to London in 1876. Here, his tales and essays reflect his high level of observation.

In 1881, James decided to return to Italy: he stayed in Genoa, Milan, Florence, Rome, and eventually Venice, which possessed an endless fascination and was rich in people and things to observe. In the city of the Doges, he met Mrs Bronson, whom he had already met while travelling to Europe for the first time. This lady lived in an old Venetian house and her figure inspired Mrs Prest in *The Aspern Papers*.

After six years of absence from America, James decided to go back to his homeland, to stay with his family. However, while in New York, he was told about his mother's death; for this reason, he left everything to go back to Quincy Street. Not much time after his mother's death, his father passed away and was buried near his beloved wife. William James published *The Literary Remains of the Late Henry James* in 1884, which contained some of his father's writings and a long introduction by himself. Besides the loss of his parents, James also had to cope with the death of his friend Emerson (1882), his brother Wilkie, and his friend Turgenev (both in 1883).

At the age of 40, James went back to London, which was his "true home".[20] In 1885, he moved to Bournemouth, where he started writing *The Princess Casamassima* (first published as a serial in *The Atlantic Monthly*) and *The Bostonians* (also published as a serial in *The Century Magazine*).

In 1887, a stay in Venice gave him the perfect setting for a tale entitled *The Aspern Papers* (1888), whose idea, however, was born after a stay in Florence.

The last years of his life were spent between America and London. James wrote and published his two autobiographies *A Small Boy and Others* and *Notes of a Son and Brother* in 1913. He became a British citizen and was assigned the Order of Merit in 1915. Henry James died in 1916 in London and his ashes were buried in Massachusetts.

[20] Ibid, p. 694.

1.7.1. *Italian Hours*

James' interest in Italy was lifelong and it deeply influenced both his life and many of his works, which are either set or written in Italy. The collection of essays entitled *Italian Hours* (1909) collects all James' essays written from 1872 to 1909 regarding his travels to Italy.

When James arrived in Italy in 1869, the country was undergoing deep political and social change: the Italian unification, which began in 1861, was completed in 1871 with the Capture of Rome and its eventual designation as the capital of the Italian Kingdom. Given this background, *Italian Hours* contains James' ambivalent thoughts on a country slowly entering the 20th century; for this reason, the volume "is unquestionably a celebration, but part of [its] interest derives from the ambiguity of the tribute, from the ebb and flow of approval and disgust concerning the transformations in progress".[21] When James recollected his essays for the 1909 edition, he did not arrange them in chronological order; Gutorow suggests that by reading the essays chronologically or in James' order,

> [the reader passes] through stages of initiation into the nature of things. Italian landscapes, buildings, and paintings are viewed so intensely, so attentively, in so detailed a manner, that after a while they become transparent […]. In the eyes of the devoted observer […] the smallest items are vibrant with life.[22]

As previously mentioned, *Italian Hours*' opening essay is "Venice", which starts with James clearly stating his intentions,

> Venice has been painted and described many thousands of times, and of all the cities of the world is the easiest to visit without going there. […] Everyone has been there, and everyone has brought back a collection of photographs. […] it is not forbidden, however, to speak of familiar things, and I hold that for the true Venice-lover Venice is always in order.[23]

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[21] J. Auchard, "Introduction", in *Italian Hours*, ed. H. James, Sabon, Penguin Books, 1995, p. ix.
[22] J. Gutorow, "*Figures of Fulfilment*: James and "a Sense of Italy"", in *Henry James's Europe: Heritage and Transfer*, ed. D. Tredy, A. Duperray, A. Harding, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2011, p. 151.
[23] H. James, *Italian Hours*, New York, Grove Press Books, 1959, p. 1.

After this introduction, James reflects upon the feelings that dominate the typical tourist who visits Venice thinking that one week is enough to know the city and its main attractions. According to James, however, Venice's charm can be fully discovered and appreciated only by living in it; he compares the city to a "nervous woman"[24], whose mood is dangerously seesawing, and the Venetian places seem to "become human and sentient and conscious of your affection".[25] James further suggests that one cannot say to fully know Venice without having visited Torcello, which was the "mother-city of Venice"[26] where "there is nothing but light to see".[27]

The image that Venice recalls in James does not imply its most famous attractions, such as the Great Square and the Grand Canal, but "a narrow canal in the heart of the city–a patch of green water and a surface of pink wall".[28] On this background, a gondola slowly floats on water and passes under a bridge, on which there is a woman with a shawl on her head: "the whole place is enchanting".[29]

According to James, "the essential present character of the most melancholy of cities resides simply in its being the most beautiful of tombs"[30]: tourists pay to visit the great mausoleum that Venice itself is and all Venetian people depend upon it and are, for their part, objects of the exhibition. The contemporary Venetian life is "so alien, so discontinuous, so like a crows in a cemetery without garlands for the grave"[31] and characterised by irresponsible tourists.

The classical gondola scene appears several times in both James' novels and essays. For instance, in the second essay dedicated to Venice, James writes,

> There is something strange and fascinating in this mysterious impersonality of the gondola. It has an identity when you are in it, but [...] it has none, or as little as possible, as you see it pass before you. From my windows on the Riva there was

[24] Ibid., p. 6.
[25] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
[26] Ibid., p. 55.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., p.13.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., p. 32.
[31] Ibid.

> always the same silhouette–the long, black, slender skiff, lifting its head and throwing it back a little, moving yet seeming not to move.[32]

These passages are useful to understand James' haunting perception of Venice, which escapes time.

After a brief description of Verona, which he defines a "delightfully interesting city"[33] and in which the more traditional ways of life are intertwined with new ones, James describes Turin as a city in which every object reminds of a different Italian city.

Milan is portrayed as "the last of the prose capitals [and] the first of the poetic"[34], whose important history and past are clearly in front of everyone's eyes, as evidenced by the Cathedral and Leonardo's frescoes, which are even more remarkable than the Cathedral itself.

Given his recurrent travels to Italy, James is every time more impressed by the contrast between the Italian artistic period and the "vulgarity"[35] characterising the contemporary period. Being Italy the motherland of great artistic personalities, such as Leonardo, Raphael, Michael Angelo, and Titian, it should not appear as a poorly decorated place, in which "the hopeless frivolity of everything […] pretends to be a work of art".[36] However, James is aware that the past has been relegated to museums so that it cannot interfere with the present, which foreshadows a more modern Italy, "united and prosperous, [...] scientific and commercial".[37]

James dedicates six essays to Rome and likewise to Florence. In Rome, James is struck by the typical Italian landscape, "so bright and yet so sad, so still and yet so charged […] with the supersensuous ear, with the murmur of an extinguished life […]"[38], and by the atmosphere surrounding Pope Pius IX. Concerning Florence, James spent much time in it, especially in Bellosguardo, where he finished *The Aspern Papers*.

[32] Ibid., p. 14.
[33] Ibid., p. 60.
[34] Ibid., p. 88.
[35] Ibid., p 110.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., p. 112.
[38] Ibid., p. 155.

2. *The Aspern Papers*

2.1. Summary

The Aspern Papers is a novella written by Henry James and published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1888. James defined this work a 'tale' since it is "too short for a novel and too long for a short story".[39] Currier Bell points out that *The Aspern Papers* is "designed with the suspense of a detective thriller".[40]

The Aspern Papers is told in the first-person, through the words of its main protagonist, a nameless American critic. The latter, who is writing a biography of a poet named Jeffrey Aspern, goes to Venice in order to see Miss Juliana Bordereau, who is believed to be one of Aspern's lovers and the owner of some unreleased letters written by the poet himself. Juliana and Tina (Tita in the first editions) Bordereau live "obscurely in Venice, […] on very small means, unvisited, unapproachable, in a sequestered and dilapidated old palace" (*AP*, 1). The narrator, thanks to a "*nom de guerre*" (*AP*, 11) concealing his identity of a critic, manages to lodge at the Bordereau's palace to have the chance to get hold of the letters; he is also ready to court Miss Tina, Juliana's niece, who he defines a "high tremulous spinster" (*AP*, 18). The narrator's friend John Cumnor had already tried to obtain the letters via a polite, written request but he received a six-lines answer written by Miss Tina, stating that Miss Juliana Bordereau did not own Mr Aspern's letters and "if they *had* had wouldn't have dreamed of showing them to any one on any account whatever" (*AP*, 10). According to the man of letters, the fact that Tina called the poet "Mr Aspern" "proves familiarity, and familiarity implies the possession of mementoes, of tangible objects. […] You don't say "Mr." Shakespeare" (*AP*, 10).

The narrator meets Miss Tina and gives the reader a description of her appearance,

> [h]er face was not young, but it was simple; it was not fresh, but it was mild. She had large eyes which were not bright, and a great deal of hair which was not 'dressed', and long fine hands which were – possibly – not clean. (*AP*, 15-16)

[39] H. James, *The Aspern Papers*, London, Penguin Books, 1994, p. I; henceforth, all quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited in text as *AP*.
[40] B. Currier Bell, "Beyond Irony in Henry James: "The Aspern Papers"", in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 13, N. 3, 1981, p. 283.

After this, Tina introduces him to Miss Juliana, who "had over her eyes a horrible green shade which served for her almost as a mask" (*AP*, 21). The narrator is immediately intimidated by this figure, so that he compares her to a "grinning skull" (*AP*, 21). Miss Juliana and the critic agree on a very expensive price for a room; Miss Tina tells him that Miss Juliana is greedy for money because she wants her to have more in case she dies.

Six weeks later, the literary historian does not make any advance; on the contrary, he finds himself staring at the door leading to Miss Juliana's part of the palazzo, eager to put his hands on the letters and never doubting that the "sacred relics" (*AP*, 41) are hidden there.

One day, the narrator finds Tina waiting for him in the garden; when she sees him, she almost throws herself in his arms. The two end talking about Aspern and Tina reveals to the critic that his aunt personally knew him; the poet, indeed, even asked her to go out. Miss Juliana saw him as a god. After these revelations, the nameless narrator admits that he is a literary historian and he is looking for more material; Tina is shocked, leaves and avoids him for fifteen days.

One afternoon, Tina tells the narrator that Miss Juliana wants to see him. The nameless protagonist is confused about the rapid change in Miss Juliana's attitude; indeed, until that moment, the old lady would not stand the presence of the guest near her. Tina reassures him that his secret is safe; she did not say a word to her aunt about his identity as critic and his interest in Aspern's letters. Miss Juliana, during her meeting with the undercover critic, suggests, or rather 'commands', the latter to take Miss Tina out in a gondola. Tina, however, is not happy about this forced trip because she knows the area very well but her aunt answers coldly, "'Well, then, go with him and explain!' [...] [which] gave an effect of cruelty to her implacable power of retort. This showed her as a sarcastic, profane, cynical old woman" (*AP*, 70). At the end of the same week, Tina steps on the gondola with the critic. She admits that her aunt has been written to and requested about the papers, which she jealously guards. The critic lights up and a rapid dialogue between the two starts,

> 'Do you suppose it's something to which Jeffrey Aspern's letters and papers – I mean the things in her possession – have reference?'

> ‘I dare say it is!’ my companion exclaimed, as if this were a very happy suggestion.
> ‘I have never looked at any of those things.’
> ‘None of them? Then how do you know what they are?’
> ‘I don’t,’ said Miss Tina placidly. ‘I’ve never had them in my hands. But I’ve seen them when she has had them out.’
> ‘Does she have them out often?’
> ‘Not now, but she used to. She is very fond of them.’
> ‘In spite of their being compromising?’
> ‘Compromising?’ [...]
> ‘I allude to their containing painful memories.’
> ‘Oh, I don’t think they are painful.’
> ‘You mean you don’t think they affect her reputation?’
> An odder look even than usual came at this into the face of Miss Bordereau’s niece – a confession, it seemed, of helplessness, an appeal to me to deal fairly, generously with her. (*AP*, 77)

Tina adds that Juliana will never destroy the papers because she loves them too much; moreover, she tells the narrator that she will help him in his quest for the letters.

During a visit to the Misses in the main room, Miss Juliana uncovers a small oval portrait of Aspern and holds it out to the narrator, who immediately recognises his favourite poet but asks Miss Juliana to tell him who he is. She replies,

> ‘He is an old friend of mine, a very distinguished man in his day. He gave it [to] me himself, but I’m afraid to mention his name, lest you never should have heard of him, critic and historian as you are. I know the world goes fast and one generation forgets another. He was all the fashion when I was young’. (*AP*, 89-90)

The critic knows that there are only three portraits of Jeffrey Aspern in the world, and the one he is holding is, probably, one of the best. He continues asking questions about the portrayed man, hoping that Miss Bordereau will reveal the coveted name. Miss Juliana does not do so; instead, she takes the portrait back and implicitly tells him that she is

ready to sell it. The narrator admits that he would have it but he is sure that her price would be far too high for him. Miss Juliana becomes suspicious,

> ‘You’d buy a likeness of a person you don’t know, by an artist who has no reputation?’
> ‘The artist may have no reputation, but that thing’s wonderfully well painted,’ I replied, to give myself a reason.
> ‘It’s lucky you thought of saying that, because the painter was my father.’
> ‘That makes the picture indeed precious!’ I returned with gaiety; and I may add that a part of my cheer came from this proof I had been right in my theory of Miss Bordereau’s origin. Aspern had, of course, met the young lady on his going to her father’s studio as a sitter. (*AP*, 91-92)

After this dialogue, Miss Juliana asks her niece to take her to her bedroom because she does not feel very well. Three hours later, Tina goes to the critic, telling him that her aunt is very ill and probably dying. While they are waiting for the doctor, the narrator goes to see Juliana with Tina. However, blaming himself to be the cause of her illness, he stops before entering Juliana’s room,

> I had an immense curiosity to pass it, but I thought it my duty to represent to Miss Tina that if I made the invalid angry she ought perhaps to be spared the sight of me.
> ‘The sight of you? Do you think she can *see*?’ my companion demanded, almost with indignation. I did think so but forbore to say it, and I softly followed my conductress. (*AP*, 98-99)

While in her room, Miss Tina points out a small, green trunk hidden under a sofa, in which Aspern’s letters were once stored. The literary historian, eager to know the new location of his desire, asks Tina about it. The latter replies that she has looked for them but hasn’t find them; however, looking again while her aunt is sleeping in her room would not be decent. The critic, then, confesses his original plan,

> ‘I have sailed under false colours.’ I felt now as if I must tell her that I had given her an invented name, on account of my fear that her aunt would have heard of me and would refuse to take me in. I explained this and also that I had really been a party to the letter written to them by John Cumnor months before. (*AP*, 106)

After having left Miss Tina with the doctor, the narrator is tempted by the silence and the darkness coming from the Misses’ apartment; he decides to enter Miss Juliana’s room to look for the letters himself. When he lifts the cover of the secretary, he realises that Miss Juliana is staring at him, standing at the doorway with her arms up, with her eyes uncovered for the first time. She just manages to hiss, “‘Ah, you publishing scoundrel!’” (*AP*, 112). Then, she faints, falling into Tina’s arms.

The next day, the literary historian leaves Venice being aware of the fact that Miss Juliana didn’t die the night before. Twelve days later, he comes back to Venice, and his servant informs him that “*quella vecchia*” (*AP*, 116) died. He finds Tina in the garden, picking up flowers. The two start talking and Tina reveals that Miss Juliana wanted to burn the letters, which were hidden between the mattresses, but she prevented her from doing so, and then hid them in a place known only to her. Miss Bordereau, however, offers the portrait to the narrator as a gift, telling him that he has made a huge difference for her. Eventually, Tina tells him that, if he wants to have the papers, he has to marry her,

> ‘Well, that if you were a relation it would be different.’
> I wondered. ‘If I were a relation —?’
> ‘If you weren’t a stranger. Then it would be the same for you as for me. Anything that’s mine would be yours, and you could do what you like. I shouldn’t be able to prevent you – and you’d have no responsibility’. (*AP*, 127)

At these words, the narrator decides to sell the portrait, give her the money, and leave his quest for the letters forever, “I couldn’t pay the price. I couldn’t accept the proposal. I couldn’t, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman” (*AP*, 131). Hence, the critic leaves the Venetian palazzo but, just twenty-four hours later, he realises he could make that sacrifice for the much-desired Aspern’s letters.

With this resolution, he goes again to Tina, only to know that she has burnt the papers "one by one in the kitchen" (*AP*, 137).

Eventually, the critic sends Tina more money than he had hoped to gather for the portrait, telling her that he had sold it. The portrait hangs above his desk, reminding him what he has lost.

2.2. The "Germ" of the Story

In the 1880s, James spent ten weeks in Florence before continuing his journey to Venice. In Florence, more precisely in Bellosguardo, he stayed in Villa Brichieri, which was leased to Constance Fenimore Woolson, his long-time friend, whom he met in London in 1879.

In the city, James met Violet Paget, who was known as Vernon Lee. He regarded her as "the most intelligent person"[41] in Florence and he used to go to her house to listen to her conversations about the 18th century and the Renaissance.

One day, at Vernon Lee's arrived Contessa Gamba, whose husband was Teresa Guccioli's nephew. The latter was Byron's Venetian mistress, to whom he wrote many letters in Italian. The Contessa said that she did not intend to publish Byron's letters because they "shed a bad light on [him]"[42], and she had even burned one of them. After having heard this story, Hamilton-Lee, Vernon Lee's half-brother, started recounting an anecdote concerning Byron's mistress Jane Clairmont and mother of his daughter Allegra. After the death of her daughter in 1822, Clairmont went to Florence, where she lived together with her niece until her death, which occurred in 1879. In the Italian city, she treasured some letters by Byron and Shelley, which became the object of Captain Silsbee's desire. Being a Shelley devotee, he tried to get hold the letters from Clairmont and he also managed to lodge in Clairmont's palazzo. When Miss Clairmont died, her niece was ready to part with the letters on one condition: that the Captain would marry her. According to the germ of the story, the Captain left Florence.

James started writing *The Aspern Papers* in Venice, in Ca' Alvisi, but finished it in Bellosguardo. Indeed, because of his violent headaches, he was forced to leave Venice in favour of Florence's better climate. The novella's narration follows Hamilton-Lee's

[41] R. W. B. Lewis, *The Jameses*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1991, p. 397.
[42] Ibid.

anecdote: the narrator plays the role of Captain Silsbee, Jane Clairmont is the model for Juliana Bordereau, and Lord Byron for Jeffrey Aspern. In the novella, all characters are American. Tanner underlines that James' choice of making his characters American is a way to "project an extreme version of his favourite American-in-Europe theme".[43] The nameless critic, indeed, is in Europe with a precise goal, that makes him predatory and ruthless. His patriotism leads him to speak with "an irritated contempt […] of both Europe and women"[44], which is just a means to hide his fear of being able to understand neither of them. Tanner adds:

> [t]here is the threat of a violation which might be also a desecration, a profanation. Only, finally, nothing happens. Except - just that. By which, rather Jamesianly perhaps, I mean that what happens *is* that nothing happens. The papers are burnt; the narrator has fled - Venice relinquished, Tita untouched.[45]

Brown further points out that James' choice to turn the original Lord Byron into the American Jeffrey Aspern is linked to his will to contradict a critic, who thought it impossible that America could have created an American Byron at that historical time.[46] James depicts Aspern as "one of the first to show that great literature was possible in America".[47]

As Monteiro claims, *The Aspern Papers* does not reflect the more sensational aspects of Byron's and Clairmont's relationship but revolves around Juliana's alleged possession of the letters. Such material is so coveted by literary scholars that James focuses more on the ethics of academic conduct and literary exploitation than on the moral dilemmas regarding Byron's relationships with women and rumours about his homosexuality.[48]

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[43] T. Tanner, *Venice Desired*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1992, p. 181.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid.
[46] E. Brown, "Revising Henry James: Reading the Spaces of *The Aspern Papers*", in *American Literature*, Vol.63. N. 2, 1991, p. 272.
[47] L. W. B. Lewis, *The Jameses*, p. 399.
[48] G. Monteiro, "The "Bordereau" of The Aspern Papers", in *A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, Vol. 22, N. 1, 2010, p. 33.

2.3. The Change of Setting

While the original story, involving Byron, Clairmont and Silsbee, takes place in Florence, *The Aspern Papers* is set in Venice. This changing in the setting depends on the traditional literary image of Venice: a city always associated with decay, death, and decrepitude. Furthermore,

> [i]n "The Aspern Papers" James presents Venice as a city of darkness, mystery, and mystification—where the past of the Misses Bordereau is buried and the protagonist is lost in the maze of conscience. A mid-season Venice was the perfect setting for plots.[49]

Mamoli Zorzi points out that the Venetian setting was more suitable because Byron lived in Venice from 1816 to 1819.[50]

Although it can be supposed that the Venice depicted by James is that of Byron, *The Aspern Papers* is instead set in "Sargent's Venice of ambiguous encounters in a world of half-light and shadow and visible decay".[51] Sargent's paintings, indeed, capture the high contrast between the past and the present Venice; the former is represented by its Renaissance palaces, while the latter by the modern activities carried out by its inhabitants. These representations of the lagoon city are the most suitable for James' melancholic conception of Venice.

Another important feature of Sargent's paintings is that past and present coexist in the artificial composition made by the painter himself, who tries to represent his conception of the city. This leads to the concept of liminality. According to Bauer, Venice is a place in which "the past and the present, the inner and the outer, the private and the public get mixed up, and seem to exist simultaneously".[52] In *The Aspern Papers*, Juliana, the critic, and Jeffrey Aspern "seem to come together in an ageless, timeless space, and,

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[49] S. Perosa, "*The Wings of the Dove* and the Coldness of Venice", in *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 24, N. 3, 2003, p. 284.
[50] R. Mamoli Zorzi, "The Aspern Papers: From Florence to an Intertextual city, Venice", in *Henry James's Europe: Heritage and Transfer*, ed. D. Tredy, A. Duperray, A. Harding, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2011, p. 104.
[51] B. Maine, "Picture and Text: Venetian Interiors By Henry James and John Singer Sargent", in *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 23, N. 2, 2002, p. 147.
[52] G. Bauer, "Paranoid Masculinity in a Woman's Mansion: Henry James' "The Aspern Papers"", in *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, Vol. 65, N. 1, 2017, p. 30.

for the reader, it becomes unclear whether it is Aspern who has come back to the present, or the critic who has gone back to the past".[53]

In *The Aspern Papers*, the Misses Bordereau's American past is intertwined with the contemporary Venetian setting. Miss Juliana, indeed, could be seen as Venice's personification, "a vain, formerly beautiful mistress, now aged, veiled, calculating, with a lust for money, and, never leaving her house, effectively veiled to the outside world".[54] Tina, by stating that her aunt Juliana is "a hundred and fifty" (*AP*, 61), makes her the witness of a heroic past; in the same way, Venice is a city mostly known for its glorious past, which is still present in every corner of the city: its palaces, as well as Venetian art and culture, can make the observer go back in time. In *The Aspern Papers*, however, there is no space left for this glorious past. As the Bordereau palazzo is old, dusty, abandoned, and dirty, in the same way Venice is a decaying, dying city.

James' knowledge of the city is rendered in the critic and Tina's trip in gondola; James does not mention Saint Mark's Square but simply calls it "Piazza" (*AP*, 73) and mentions the "Piazzetta" (*AP*, 73) and the Florian's, where they sit.

2.4. The Venetian Spaces: The Bordereau Palazzo and the Garden

The only way the reader has to get a description of the Bordereaus' house is throughout the eyes of the narrator; at first sight, he is surprised by the majestic palace,

> It was not particularly old, only two or three centuries; and it had an air not so much of decay as of quiet discouragement, as if it had rather missed its career. But its wide front, with a stone balcony from end to end of the *piano nobile* or most important floor, was architectural enough, with the aid of various pilasters and arches; and the stucco with which in the intervals it had long ago been endued was rosy in the April afternoon. (*AP*, 7)

However, once entered the Bordereau palace, the narrator changes his opinion and describes it as old, decaying, and not so well-kept as it should be. Indeed, while he is

[53] Ibid.
[54] J. Parker, "Venice Unveiled: Henry James on Ruskin's Veils", in *Ruskin, Venice and 19th Century Cultural Travel*, ed. K. Hanley, E. Sdegno, Venice, Cafoscarina, 2010, p. 3.

visiting the house, he notices that "[the rooms] were all dusty and even a little disfigured with long neglect" (*AP*, 31). The narrator is optimistic about their easy restoration.

According to Maine, the setting chosen by James is clearly in contrast with its inhabitants; the Misses Bordereau, in fact, do not lead a proper social life, which had its bulk in the rooms of the palace.[55] For this reason, the latter is out of proportion with the life of the Misses, but also with the concerned vision of life of the narrator, who has eyes only for the hidden letters and their possible shelter. Another important aspect is that the Venetian palazzo seems to have been forgotten even by the neighbours, "Perhaps the people are afraid of the Misses Bordereau. I daresay they have the reputation of witches" (*AP*, 7-8).

The narrator almost immediately associates the palace with the haunting presence of Jeffrey Aspern; despite the fact that the poet "had never been in it […]; […] some note of his voice seemed to abide there by a roundabout implication, a faint reverberation" (*AP*, 3). Consequently, the narrator starts to like the palace because it is as if Jeffrey Aspern's spirit,

> [...] kept me perpetual company and seemed to look out at me from the revived immortal face […] of the great poet who was my prompter. I had invoked him and he had come; he hovered before me half the time; it was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to assure me that he regarded the affair as his own no less than mine and that we should see it fraternally, fondly to a conclusion. (*AP*, 40)

The narrator seeks Aspern in the figure of his mistress, Miss Juliana; not only was she the object of his love and the subject of some of his poetry, but also the object of his affection. For instance, after the narrator and Miss Juliana have reached an agreement, he says, "[…] I felt an irresistible desire to hold in my own for a moment the hand that Jeffrey Aspern had pressed" (*AP*, 28). However, "[f]or a minute [Miss Juliana] made no answer and I saw that my proposal failed to meet with her approbation" (*AP*, 28).

The garden plays an important role in the novella. Indeed, it is the first pretext used by the critic to have the chance to enter the Bordereau palace and talk with one of the Misses. Moreover, the garden is also the place in which the narrator and Tina can talk,

[55] B. Maine, "Picture and Text: Venetian Interiors By Henry James and John Singer Sargent", p. 149.

free from their social bounds. Here, the literary historian feels more at ease rather than inside the palace; the latter, in fact, is dominated by Miss Juliana, whose severe, mysterious, controlling figure looms over everyone, Tina included.

The critic immediately gets busy to rearrange the garden, having many flowers brought in every day and thus gaining the ladies' trust, mostly Tina's. The narrator states, "I think it was the flowers that won my suit, for I afterwards found that Miss Tina […] had an insatiable appetite for them" (*AP*, 18). Indeed, Tina appears more than once in the garden picking up flowers; even the last time that the narrator sees her, she is "standing there in the first dusk with her hands full of flowers, smiling at me with her reddened eyes" (*AP*, 117).

Eventually, as Bauer observes, the garden is a heterotopian space: "[t]he in-between position of the garden, between nature and culture, inside and outside […] enables the tale's characters to deviate from their usual behaviour"[56]: Tina gains confidence in the garden, talking freely to the narrator, who becomes more feminine in this place. He is the first stating his femininity while talking about his passion for flowers, which justifies saying, "There is nothing unmanly in that: it has been the amusement of philosophers, of statesmen in retirement; even, I think, of great captains'" (*AP*, 67).

While James was writing about the Misses Bordereaus' palazzo, he had a clear image in his mind. When he had to choose the illustrations for his works, he gave the photographer precise instructions on what to photograph in his different travels,

> [i]n Venice, he should take the vaporetto along the Grand Canal to the Stazione, and proceed from there to Rio Marin, where he would hit upon the old palazzino known as Ca' (for Casa) [Cappello]; he should take pictures of the exterior, of the garden behind it, and especially (if he secured permission) of the big old Sala, the large central hall of the principal floor of the house–all this for *The Aspern Papers*.[57]

2.5. The Characters

The Aspern Papers, as previously stated, is narrated from the nameless narrator's point of view; everything that he recounts is filtered through his eyes and his words. For this

[56] G. Bauer, "Paranoid Masculinity in a Woman's Mansion: Henry James' "The Aspern Papers"", p. 27.
[57] L. W. B. Lewis, *The Jameses*, pp. 576-577.

reason, Gargano points out that the reader could not expect the story to be objective because the critic shapes the events according to his obsession with Aspern.[58] Consequently, the reader "becomes increasingly aware that a world of larger significance is implied in the narrator's glib evasions and his unconscious belittling of his relationship with Tina".[59] Additionally, the narrator emerges as a ruthless, selfish schemer, ready to use poor Miss Tina to get his hands on "Aspern's relics" (*AP*, 132). The latter are the sole reason why he stays with the Bordereaus who are, for their part, pawns in his plan. At the end of the story, however, the narrator immediately leaves Venice after Tina suggests him to get married; the thought of marrying "a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman" (*AP*, 131) leads him to curse his friend's quest for the letters. The narrator's escape only lasts twenty-four hours. He resigns himself to marry Tina, given the importance that Aspern's letters have for him. Unluckily, Tina tells him that she destroyed the letters and, after this news, the critic goes back to London, disappointed and aware of all his wrong choices and of what he has lost. Originally, the last sentence of the novella was "When I look at it my chagrin at the loss of the letters becomes almost intolerable"[60] but it was rephrased in 1908, "When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers" (*AP*, 137). This rephrasing, as Bauer points out, adds ambiguity to the critic's loss.[61] The narrator's hesitation and his need to specify that the object of his loss is the letters may conceal his real loss: never having met his beloved poet Aspern in person. Brown provides another interpretation of this rephrasing. According to the author, his hesitation may point to the narrator's real loss: his "integrity, ethics, dignity, honesty, compassion".[62] The critic decides to keep hidden the truth to "save face in front of his audience, […] to whom he has presented himself all along as controlling, uncaring, and triumphant".[63]

Turning to another character of the tale, it could be said that Tina is the one who undergoes the deepest change. At the beginning of the novella, she is presented as a victim of both the narrator and her aunt; indeed, the former is ready to woo her to get what he

[58] J. W. Gargano, ""The Aspern Papers": The Untold Story", in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 10, N. 1, 1973, p. 1.
[59] Ibid, p. 2.
[60] G. Bauer, "Paranoid Masculinity in a Woman's Mansion: Henry James' "The Aspern Papers"", p. 33.
[61] Ibid.
[62] E. Brown, "Revising Henry James: Reading the Spaces of *The Aspern Papers*", p. 269.
[63] Ibid.

wants, while the latter is ready to marry her to the critic to earn some money. At the end of the novella, however, Tina is the one having the power.

The younger Miss Bordereau seems to have always lived in a secluded world, together with her aunt Miss Juliana. However, Scholl suggests that Miss Juliana and Miss Tina may be mother and daughter[64]; indeed, the text is rich with hints leading to uphold this hypothesis. For instance, the narrator gets to know that the two women manage to live thanks to the money that "comes from America, from a gentleman—I think a lawyer—in New York" (*AP*, 81); this sum of money and the narrator's rent may be Tina's dowry, which will be useful in her older age. Consequently,

> [t]heir dependence on an allowance that comes directly to the younger woman, and Juliana's eagerness to provide for her niece, encourages the reader's speculation that the money they live on is actually from the New York estate of Aspern, an acknowledgement of the daughter he fathered.[65]

Another fact supporting this hypothesis is that the narrator never tries to guess the real age neither of Juliana nor Tina; it could be very likely that Aspern and Juliana's relationship resulted in Tina's birth. The narrator, on the contrary, always gives exaggerated estimates of the misses' age; he supposes that Juliana is "tremendously old—so old that death might take her at any moment" (*AP*, 21-22), believing that she is more than 100 years old, given the fact that the poet died a century ago, while Tina, as Mrs Prest suggested, may be her grand-niece, because she is "of minor antiquity" (*AP*, 4). After these guesses, the narrator does not inquire further about the Misses' ages and their familiar relationship. According to Scholl, the continuous reference to age made by James and the eternal inaccuracy of the narrator are the main clues to the fact that Tina Bordereau is, in fact, Tina Aspern.[66]

Concerning Tina's metamorphosis, it is initiated by the narrator's arrival at the palace; indeed, it may be the first time that she welcomes a guest, who apparently is an English gentleman with a peculiar passion for gardens and flowers. It is right in the garden

[64] D. G. Scholl, "Secret Paternity in James's "The Aspern Papers": Whose Letters?", in *Modern Philology*, Vol. 111, N. 1, 2013, p. 76.
[65] Ibid., p. 78.
[66] Ibid., p. 79.

that Tina's emotional development starts, rising "dramatically from an almost childlike innocence [...] to a level of complete mastery over her situation"[67]; the narrator's and Juliana's exploitations do not weaken her; on the contrary, they allow her to grow into a mindful woman. At the end of the story, indeed, the narrator comes back to marry her, only to find a completely transfigured woman:

> [there was a] rare alteration in her [...]. [...] her look of forgiveness, of absolution, made her angelic. It beautified her; she was younger she was not a ridiculous old woman. (*AP*, 136, 137)

However, when she tells the man of letters what she did to the letters, Tina goes back to being "a plain, dingy, elderly person" (*AP*, 137). Even in this case, the narrator misunderstands the whole situation. Scholl observes that Tina's serenity may derive from the fact that, having burnt every single letter one by one, she has also read them, thus acknowledging her real identity as Aspern's daughter.[68] It is clear, at this point, that Tina is the real winner of *The Aspern Papers*, while the critic loses everything: the letters and the possibility to marry Aspern's heir, thus being closer than ever to his beloved poet.

The last character of *The Aspern Papers* is Miss Juliana Bordereau, Jeffrey Aspern's lover and the most mysterious and dark figure of James' tale. The narrator is anxious to meet her; indeed, being the object of Aspern's love and admiration, it is as if he could glimpse the poet through her old eyes. The narrator feels "nearer to him at that first moment of seeing her than I ever had been before or ever have been since" (*AP*, 21). He also adds that Tina's absence during his first meeting with "so terrible a relic" (*AP*, 21) caused him to shake.

The 'padrona' of the palazzo is always described as impenetrable; indeed, the first time that the critic meets her, Juliana is wearing a "horrible green shade" (*AP*, 21), covering her eyes. He suspects that she puts it on purpose, so that she can scrutinise him without being seen. However, as the critic will later learn from Tina, Juliana's shade is made to preserve her partially blind eyes, "Do you think she can *see*?" (*AP*, 99).

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[67] B. Currier Bell, "Beyond Irony in Henry James: "The Aspern Papers"", p. 283.
[68] D. G. Scholl, "Secret Paternity in James's "The Aspern Papers": Whose Letters?", p. 87.

Juliana is not so different from the narrator; they are both selfish and ready to exploit Tina for their personal ambitions. Miss Juliana, indeed, is ready to get Tina married to the critic for money and the narrator is ready to marry her to obtain the letters. The latter will not be shared with the literary world, given the fact that the scholarly community is unaware of the critic's plan, but there is a likelihood that they will remain private, as they were for Juliana. Miss Juliana is described as a greedy, sly woman, who takes advantage of the narrator to collect as much money as possible for her nieces' future marriage. Although she despises the fact that the critic is there to get hold of her letters, she turns the situation in her favour, teasing him with the letters and then the portrait, in order not to make him leave and make him pay the rent for a longer time. The topics of money and marriage often recur in James' works, but in *The Aspern Papers*, there is the addition of blackmail. After Juliana's death, Tina starts to blackmail the critic, telling him that she can provide him with the letter, but he has to marry her. Both Juliana and the narrator frequently speak "the language of money – rent, price, expense, spending"[69] which implicitly involves Tina, given her aunt's desire to marry her to the critic for money. So, her aunt would like to sell Tina to the narrator, who is the prospective buyer. In the end, 'buying' Tina would also mean getting hold of the Aspern's letters for free; however, the narrator loses his chance and, consequently, everything.

It is important to analyse the surname that James assigns to the Misses. As Monteiro suggests, the name of James' characters is not coincidental; on the contrary, it is linked to the character's allegorical significance.[70] In *The Aspern Papers,* the surname Bordereau refers to the term 'bordereau', which is defined by the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* "a detailed note or memorandum of account".[71] The narrator, indeed, sees Juliana as the keeper of Aspern's letters, thus transforming her into an object.

2.6. Henry James and Constance Fenimore Woolson

While James was at Villa Brichieri in Bellosguardo finishing *The Aspern Papers*, in the Villa Castellani nearby there was his long-standing friend a travel companion Miss Constance Fenimore Woolson. Miss Woolson was a gifted American author and James

[69] T. Tanner, *Venice Desired*, p. 183.
[70] G. Monteiro, "The "Bordereau" of The Aspern Papers", p. 33.
[71] *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary,* "bordereau", [Online]. Available: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bordereau [2022, July].

Fenimore Cooper's grandniece. Miss Woolson hoped that her feelings for James were reciprocated; James instead refers to her in terms very similar to those used by the narrator of *The Aspern Papers*, calling her an "earnest provincial, middle-aged, deaf woman".[72] Indeed, according to James, Miss Woolson's ironic, confident attitude did not foreshadow any risk in showing her more interest than that he used to show to unknown women. James dedicated her a laudatory essay and wrote about her in his letters with truly kind words. However,

> [t]he novelist did not reckon with Miss Woolson's loneliness and her craving to be loved. If she had given up hope of marriage, she must have now begun to wonder a little about the prompt and kind attentions of the aloof bachelor [...]. James was all decorum and distance: nevertheless he showed endless patience; and he seemed delighted to be her cicerone and escort.[73]

The friendship between James and Woolson ended abruptly when the latter presumably committed suicide by jumping from her window in Casa Semitecolo in Venice, in 1894. James' "The Altar of the Dead" (1895) features a character dedicated to her memory.

As Maine points out, James' novella can be read as "an elaborate mask for James's anxiety over his relationship to Constance Fenimore Woolson"[74], deriving from the author's uneasiness over his concealed homosexuality.

Lewis suggests that *The Aspern Papers*' main ambiguity is the critic's changing of perception of Tina.[75] When he comes back to tell her that he will marry her, only to get hold of the Aspern's letters, he sees her as an "angelic […] younger [woman]; she was not a ridiculous old woman" (*AP*, 136). Yet, when Tina reveals to him that she has destroyed the letters, her transfiguration ends and she goes back to being "a plain, dingy, elderly person" (*AP*, 137). This ambivalence may reflect James' feelings towards Miss Woolson, "[b]ut Fenimore, deafness, shyness, and all, was a far more resolute being than poor Tina, and the literary connection is tenuous".[76]

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[72] L. Edel, *The Life of Henry James. Volume 1: 1843-89*, p. 606.
[73] Ibid, p. 607.
[74] B. Maine, "Picture and Text: Venetian Interiors By Henry James and John Singer Sargent", p. 139.
[75] L. W. B. Lewis, *The Jameses*, p. 399.
[76] Ibid.

2.7. The Different Value of the Aspern's Letters and Aspern's Portrait

The difference of value between the letters and the portrait is explicit in the text; Juliana is obsessed with the letters, as Tina tells the narrator, "'Oh, she loves them too much!'" (*AP*, 78). The latter is equally obsessed with them but the first thing he asks Tina is about Aspern's portrait "'Tell me this, please—has she got a portrait of him? [...]'" (*AP*, 61).

According to Veeder, the letters, being kept private and unpublished, are highly personal and they represent the relationship between Aspern and Juliana, which is able to overcome temporal and spatial limits.[77] The only way to end this immortal relationship is destroying the letters. However, as a scholar, the narrator cannot do this himself; for this reason, he hopes that angering Juliana will do the job for him. Moreover, he suggests Tina to provide her aunt with the fire, "Now she can't burn them without fire, and she can't get fire unless you give it to her" (*AP*, 80).

The portrait, on the contrary, "seems to offer the editor satisfaction at every level of desire"[78] because it is able to make him gasp, in the same way it made Juliana catching her breath. It is thus clear that the portrait has an erotic charge for the critic, who knows that being unable to "sustain with Aspern a homoerotic connection comparable to Juliana's love affair means only that fantasy must find realisation at a more archaic level"[79], that is through the portrait itself.

2.8. Sexuality in *The Aspern Papers*

According to Currier Bell, James employs Genesis to explain the shift from knowledge to sexuality, occurring in *The Aspern Papers*.[80] In Genesis, indeed, when Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit, they realise their nakedness and, consequently, start to feel carnal pleasure. In the novella, the narrator seeks knowledge about Aspern's private life, who is described as a seductive man and thus glorified for his sexuality, "Half of the women of his time [...] had flung themselves to his head" (*AP*, 5). However, the critic wrongly considers Aspern as the prototypical man because "he has only a stereotyped notion of masculinity, but his error only highlights his obsession"[81] with the poet and his latent homosexuality.

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[77] W. Veeder, "The Aspern Portrait", in *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 20, N. 1, 1999, p. 32.
[78] Ibid., p. 33.
[79] Ibid.
[80] B. Currier Bell, "Beyond Irony in Henry James: "The Aspern Papers"", p. 287.
[81] Ibid.

The narrator sees relationships as a means to obtain something from the partner; moreover, he tends to diminish or exaggerate female feelings, mainly when he talks about Juliana,

> There was a further implication that Miss Bordereau had had in her youth a perverse and reckless, albeit a generous and fascinating character, and that she had braved some wondrous chances. By what passions had she been ravaged, by what sufferings had she been blanched, what store of memories had she laid away for the monotonous future? (*AP*, 45)

It is the narrator himself, however, to confess that "he has never been intimate with a woman and, indeed, seems to regard females most often as "the enemy""[82]; for this reason, he implies a great number or images of war, using flowers as weapons to defy them. Moreover, he is almost repulsed by the physical touch with the Misses Bordereau. Yet, he is eager to shake Juliana's hand, so that he could have a sort of physical touch with his admired Aspern. His desire is immediately shattered when he is forced to shake Tina's hand.

Currier Bell highlights the necessity of sexuality to gain a personal identity[83], that, consequently, the nameless narrator does not possess. On the contrary, Juliana's sexuality was awakened and discovered during her relationship with Aspern; yet she is still obsessed with her past love story, to a degree that "without Jeffrey Aspern, she would have no identity at all".[84] Even in this circumstance, Tina is the subject of a deep change, started by the unsuspecting narrator. At the beginning of the novella, it is evident that Tina has no identity, being quite an unwitty woman who completely depends on her aunt, who keeps her in the palace as if they were an inmate and her jailer. When the narrator enters the palace, Tina shifts his attention onto him, who becomes the object of her newly born sexual desires; as Currier Bell points out, "she has achieved a kind of selfhood but it is entirely sexual, in the sense of its being defined in relation to a man"[85], as Juliana. Tina's identity and her consequent becoming an aware woman stem from her rejected

[82] B. Currier Bell, "Beyond Irony in Henry James: "The Aspern Papers"", p. 289.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid, p. 290.
[85] Ibid.

proposal of marriage to the narrator. Being *The Aspern Papers* told in the first-person, Tina's metamorphosis passes unnoticed; she understands her nature of independent, emancipated woman, in the sense that she does not need to depend on a man, as her aunt does, to be a woman with an identity of her own.

3. Deceiving the Narrator: Juliana and Tina's Plotting

According to Korg, there is the possibility that the Aspern's letters never existed, but Juliana and Tina exploited the narrator's obsession to provide them with money.[86] Indeed, the narrator can only trust Tina's words, which confirm the presence of a bundle of letters; however, she never states that the letters Juliana reads are written by her former lover: they might be old bills, an unpublished novel by Juliana or legal papers.[87] It may be possible that the relationship between Juliana and Aspern was not so perfect as the naïve narrator imagines; in fact, taking as good the hypothesis that Tina is Juliana and Aspern's daughter, Korg suggests that,

> Juliana's youthful affair with Aspern is no glorious memory, but the cause of her voluntary imprisonment, and a subject for lifelong repentance. [...] The notion that she could derive comfort from keeping, and reading the letters of a man who ruined her and then left her, no doubt for other conquests, is, of course, absurd.[88]

For this reason, after having received Cumnor's letter, Juliana knows very well that the narrator and lodger-to-be is a critic as well; consequently, she puts him to the test, asking for an exaggerated price for the rent. When the narrator accepts the price, Juliana is ready to make him pay for his obsession and for his deceiving.

Of course, Juliana has a faithful ally in her niece Tina. The latter fantasises about the narrator's gallantry towards her; however, she sticks to her aunt's plan and, when the narrator reveals to Tina that he is fond of Jeffrey Aspern's poetry, she tells him that her aunt knew him. After this, the man of letters asks for Aspern's portrait and reveals his interest for his writings. Tina, at this point, leaves and avoids him for a while. However, when they meet again, she tells him that she didn't tell anything about their previous

[86] J. Korg, "What Aspern Papers? A Hypothesis", in *College English*, Vol. 23, N. 5, 1962, p. 378.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid, p. 379.

meeting to her aunt, but some time later Juliana shows the narrator the Aspern's portrait. This is a proof that Tina reported Juliana her conversation with the man.

Following this reasoning, Tina and Juliana are determined to use the narrator's interest in Aspern to obtain money. When Tina and the narrator go on a trip in a gondola, Tina discloses some information to the critic, telling him that the coveted letters exist and she has seen them; the narrator thus starts to speculate about them, never being interrupted by Tina, who leaves him to build false hopes.

Juliana's next part of the plan is that of delaying the narrator's departure; she does so by showing him the Aspern's portrait, in order to make him aware of the fact that she is what he thinks her to be. When Juliana falls ill and then dies, it is Tina who has to carry on the plotting. Consequently, she starts lying, but, without her aunt's guidance, she is not as effective as before. The narrator is still hopeful to get the letters and is therefore blind to Tina's continuous hesitations while she is inventing lies.

At the end,

> […] Tina's illusion dies. [...] when he reappears at their last meeting ready to agree to the proposed bargain, her interest has faded, the imaginary letters have been burnt, the little intrigue is at an end.[89]

4. Henry James' Obsession with Privacy

The last decades of the 19th century saw a general rise in the interest in authors, who were considered actual celebrities, thus leading to the merge of their private and public spheres. As witnessed by James himself, sometimes the private life of an author became even more relevant than his/her work, due to the publication of biographies; these "investigative practices were symptomatic of a cultural impulse which threatened to erode all distinctions between private and public spheres".[90] James strongly believed that the publication of an author's personal texts was simply a violation of privacy and, for this reason, he decided to make impossible doing the same with him; indeed, he burnt all his private correspondence and urged his recipients to do the same. This happened in 1909,

[89] Ibid, p. 380.
[90] R. Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 79.

after a period of depression. James wrote a letter to Mrs. Annie Fields, telling her his reasons behind making a "gigantic bonfire"[91] of all his private correspondence,

> [...] as I myself grow older [I] think more of my latter end: the law of not leaving personal and private documents at the mercy of any accidents, or even of my executors![92]

James admits that he kept some of the letters, because they had a sentimental value for him.

Although his beliefs regarding the privacy, James was aware of his public figure of writer and he wanted to be recognised by his audience.

The Aspern Papers "offers a more searching exploration of the psychology of the 'will to knowledge'"[93], through the figure of the nameless scholar, who always tries to justify his interest in the letters stating that their publication would be important from a literary and an historical point of view. Moreover, the novella warns about the possibility of committing evil actions to pursue a goal. The narrator, indeed, is ruthless and ready to do everything, even marrying Tina, to get hold of the coveted letters.

In *The Aspern Papers*, James analyses the virtue of awareness. The man of letter is undoubtedly clever and brilliant, yet he is blinded by his obsession for the letters, making him "incapable of penetrating the rather obvious situation that confronts him".[94] All his actions lead to the letters, turning his back to everything that could compromise their possession. Korg points out that Juliana's exclamation before fainting, "'Ah, you publishing scoundrel!" (*AP*, 112), may be James' point of view on the authors' right of privacy and his rejection of research practices that violate this personal right.[95] However, it is James himself to admit that he would have done nearly the same if he knew that Jane Clairmont and Lord Byron's affair was so close to him. Indeed, as Millicent Bell points out, "[t]he manuscript-hunter's handicap had been that he had wanted more history instead

[91] L. Edel, *Henry James: Selected Letters*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 430.
[92] Ibid.
[93] R. Salmon, *Henry James and the Culture of Publicity*, p. 91.
[94] J. Korg, "What Aspern Papers? A Hypothesis", p. 378.
[95] Ibid., p. 380.

of less, and that he had succeeded in actually meeting Miss Clairmont whereas James had *fortunately* missed her".[96]

[96] M. Bell, ""The Aspern Papers": The Unvisitable Past", in *The Henry James Review*, Vol. 10, N. 2, 1989, p. 121.

Chapter Two

Daphne du Maurier and Venice:
"Don't Look Now"

1. Daphne du Maurier's Biography

1.1. Gerald and Muriel 'Mo' du Maurier

Daphne du Maurier was born on May 13th, 1907 in London and she was the second-born daughter of Gerald du Maurier and Muriel Beaumont. Du Maurier was born in a period in which her father's personality was changing. As an actor, Gerald's life was in theatres and he had never complained about it; however, the first indications of a change are noticeable in 1906, when, in a letter to his wife, who was on holiday with his first daughter Angela, he admits that he "loathed acting and actors"[1] and that he would have done everything to join "his little family".[2]

The year 1907 left a mark on Gerald du Maurier; his brother-in-law died, and his elder sister Sylvia was left alone with her five children, until her death occurred in 1910. From this moment on, Gerald lost his status of "Gerald the joker, Gerald the debonaire, Gerald the charmer, a man who had been spared responsibility in life and had always taken advantage of this"[3]; he realised, at the age of thirty-four, that it would have been difficult to preserve the life he had promised to Muriel. For these reasons, Gerald's mood was seesawing; sometimes he was deeply sad, other times he openly sighed and admitted his unhappiness. However, his family did not take seriously his unease, confusing it with his typical goliardery. Indeed, everyone thought that he had not to worry about anything; Gerald was an actor and an actor manager, and, for this reason, he earned a lot of money. Yet, neither money nor religion (he was not a man of faith actually) provided him with an answer to the questions of life. To overcome these negative feelings and to have a way out, he had to be always surrounded by people; his wife Muriel knew that and never failed to appease Gerald's boredom.

As pointed out by Forster, "Muriel du Maurier was by no means the cipher this exaggerated respect for Gerald's needs might suggest, nor was her own family

[1] M. Forster, *Daphne du Maurier*, London, Arrow Books, 2007, p. 3.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 4.

insignificant beside the du Mauriers"[4]; on the contrary, her grandfather founded a firm of chartered surveyors, and her father was a renowned solicitor. Young Muriel Beaumont and her siblings showed great determination in seeking a job to help their family, given the difficulties their father was handling; against all expectations, she managed to enter the theatre as an actress. She decided to interrupt her career in 1911, when she had her third daughter. For ten years, she gave Gerald stability, a family, and love. However, when he started to become dissatisfied, he found relief in travelling away from home; Muriel was well-aware of his numerous liaisons with younger actresses, but she ignored it, as long as her public image was not ruined, and no woman but her had a place in Gerald's heart. Despite everything, Gerald was utterly devoted to Muriel and almost dependant on her.

1.2. Daphne du Maurier's Early Childhood and Adolescence

Gerald used to spend a lot of time with his daughters Angela (1904), Daphne, and Jeanne (1911), with whom he talked a lot, using code words. The latter were immensely popular among the members of the English upper classes, because they allowed them to create an elite excluding external people; these code words consisted in nicknames and peculiar adjectives. Moreover, their father introduced them to mockery, which, could not result in rudeness by any means.

At Cannon Hall, where the family moved, Daphne du Maurier showed a great interest in the life of other people, especially of servants, whom she inquired a lot. At the same time, she was very shy with guests and her parents' friends; indeed, "with [the servant] Dor, with her Beaumont grandparents, Daphne did not need to perform. She did not feel she was being examined and scrutinized, her remarks analysed and pronounced upon so disconcertingly".[5]

Daphne was well-aware of her father's longing to have a son, even if he never blamed his beloved daughters for being of the "'wrong' sex".[6] For this reason, she often wished to be a boy, to the point she created her male alter ego, Eric Avon, who did everything she would have done if she had been of the opposite sex. Although her passion for masculine activities, Daphne du Maurier's physical appearance was very feminine,

[4] Ibid., p. 6.
[5] Ibid., p. 11.
[6] Ibid., p.12.

thus leading her to hate her sex. At one point, however, she convinced herself that she was a boy, but her first menstruation made her realise that was "'the end of being boyish'".[7] The only person who knew her trouble with her sex was her governess, Miss Maud Waddell, who she soon nicknamed 'Tod' and became her first relationship outside her family. Tod was her faithful confidant, with whom she exchanged many letters.

During a journey with her family in 1921, Daphne fell for her cousin Geoffrey, a thirty-six-year-old man; when he held her hand, she felt a new physical thrill, which could be regarded her sexual awakening. Her father was not happy with this infatuation, because he knew that Geoffrey had been violent with his previous girlfriends and that he was incredibly attractive to women. This affair was unsuccessful.

When Tod left for another job, Miss Vigo became her teacher and the young du Maurier started writing her first short story entitled "The Seekers".

In 1925 she was sent to Camposena, outside Paris, to finish school abroad. Here, du Maurier felt displaced for the first time; it did not matter that her father was a renowned actor, because all her schoolmates' parents occupied a prominent position in society. Moreover, she realised that her French was not as good as she thought. To gain a little respect and to obtain some luxuries–which she was certain to despised but were more of necessities in her life– she curried favour firstly with Miss Wicksteed and then with Mlle Fernande Yvonne, who was far more influential than her colleague. With this thirty-year-old woman, Daphne created a peculiar relationship, and she started speculating about her sexual tendencies,

> Venetian, I should think ('Venetian' being [her] code for 'lesbian'). She's most seductive when coming back from the opera. I get on the back seat with her and she puts her arm round me and makes me put my head on her shoulder, then sort of presses me! […] it all sounds too sordid and low, but I don't know, it gives one a sort of extraordinary thrill! I only hope I haven't got Venetian tendencies.[8]

However, her tendencies were homosexual for real. Being so attracted by a woman, her feeling of being a boy strengthened itself, because being attracted to a woman was only a

[7] Ibid., p. 14.
[8] Ibid., p. 28.

boy's prerogative. Du Maurier, as well as her father, despised homosexuality and, consequently, she did not want to be related to that world.

Daphne du Maurier spent a summer holiday with Mlle Yvonne, whom she friendly nicknamed 'Ferdy'. With her she read many books and had the opportunity to read Katherine Mansfield and Maupassant, who became her passion. In a letter to Tod, she gives the credit to Mansfield for having inspired her to write her own stories. Her infatuation for Mlle Yvonne continued, even when, at the age of nineteen, Daphne had a suitor in whom she was interested. Indeed, she could not avoid being attracted also to men.

1.3. The Beginning of her Writing Career

During her stay in Brittany with Ferdy, du Maurier wrote three short stories, in which the male figure was described as a seducer, while the female ones as weak and submissive; they were set in an unknown Paris and the tone was cynical. This was a mirror to the situation she had in her family, where Gerald was the cheater and Muriel the betrayed.

Cornwall, especially Fowey, gave her a strong impulse to make of writing her work. When her parents told her that if she earned enough money from her stories to support herself, she could live alone in Fowey, in the house called Ferryside, Daphne du Maurier saw this both as an opportunity and a challenge. In 1928 she had eleven stories ready to be published, which shared a dark, discouraging view of the world; the style was remarkably similar to a cinematic one, with short sentences following one another like rapid film frames. Aunt Billie, Gerald's sister, sent the stories to a literary agent, A. P. Watt. The latter, with a letter, told the young author that if she added six stories more, he could find a publisher for sure. However, du Maurier was not inspired, and her aunt told the publisher that eleven stories were the best she could do at the moment. The stories were sent to many publishers, unsuccessfully. Uncle Willie, the editor of *The Bystander*, published "And Now to God the Father". Du Maurier, however, was aware of the fact that "this was the most blatant piece of nepotism"[9] and that *The Bystander* was not a literary magazine, but "both her name and her relationship with the editor had given her this start".[10]

[9] Ibid., p. 60.
[10] Ibid., p.66.

In Ferryside, du Maurier started writing her first novel, based on the story of the ship "Jane Slade". The famous publisher Heinemann loved *The Loving Spirit* and was ready to publish it with minor cuts. Daphne du Maurier was thrilled by this and her success made her start writing another novel.

Her second novel, entitled *I'll Never Be Young Again* was radically different, dealing with sexual issues, a brave choice for a woman in the 1930s; more precisely, the novel was an analysis of sexual passion through a male narrator. Du Maurier did not hide that fact that she was worried about the judgements that would follow the publication for her novel.

In 1931, she started writing her third novel *The Progress of Julius*, which was completely different from her previous novels. Thirty-five Major Frederik Arthur Montague Browning was so thrilled by du Maurier's *The Loving Spirit* that he wanted to meet its author. The following year, Browning and du Maurier got married in a private ceremony hosting only her parents and her cousin Geoffrey. Her marriage helped create a better relationship with her mother, with whom du Maurier had had a hostile attitude. However, she realised that she needed sympathy and her mother, being a wife herself, was able to give it to her. *The Progress of Julius* came out in 1933 and, although it received positive comments on the *Observer* and *The Times*, it was also criticized and sold less than her previous novels. In the same year, du Maurier gave birth to her first daughter, Tessa.

In 1934 Gerald du Maurier died. Daphne du Maurier did not go to his funeral, but she preferred freeing some pigeons in the Heath, thinking that this was much more in line with her father's spirit. She started writing *Gerald: A Portrait*, which she concluded in only four months and was published in November of the same year. In her work, Daphne du Maurier did not lack any critical views on her father, who emerges as "wonderfully real and colourful, with all his charm intact, his eccentricities amusingly portrayed, and with the dark side of his nature sensitively drawn".[11] However, many contemporaries of Gerald described the book "as a betrayal of a father by a daughter"[12], seeing the description of Gerald's weaknesses as tasteless. The book was highly successful.

[11] Ibid., p. 115.
[12] Ibid.

In 1936 du Maurier finished writing her fourth novel, entitled *Jamaican Inn*, her first Gothic tale; as Forster highlights,

> This was no saga novel, slow, always edging towards fantasy, like *The Loving* Spirit, but a tightly plotted thriller containing some ingenuous and unexpected twists. The writing showed a new tautness, and that sense of pace for which she had always striven was finally there.[13]

Daphne du Maurier started writing *Rebecca* in 1937 but found it difficult to conclude; indeed, after the birth of her second daughter Flavia, she had troubles in sleeping and had no inspiration. When she sent *Rebecca* to her editor Victor Gollancz, he defined it a bestseller and, when it was then published in 1938, the novel had an enormous success.

In 1940 her third son Christian was born.

Du Maurier started writing *Frenchman's Creek* in 1941, which was published in the same year. She wrote eleven more novels from 1943 to 1972; the most famous are *Hungry Hill* (1943)*, The King's General* (1946), and *My Cousin Rachel* (1951). The latter was inspired by Ellen Doubleday, the wife of du Maurier's American publisher, Nelson Doubleday.

Du Maurier's husband was knighted in 1946 and, consequently, she became Lady Browning. Major Browning died in 1965. The couple had a serene life, despite the fact that du Maurier's extra-conjugal affairs, both homosexual and heterosexual, were widely known.

Daphne du Maurier was named Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1969, and her name thus became Dame Daphne du Maurier, Lady Browning, DBE; however, according to du Maurier herself, this title did not suit her because "the mere idea of herself as a Dame was 'ludicrous… I don't feel a scrap like one'".[14] Actually, she never used this title but it was the proof that the literary world had, finally, recognised her hard work.

[13] Ibid., p. 120.
[14] Ibid., p. 369.

In 1973 du Maurier published the collection *Not After Midnight*, containing five stories: "Don't Look Now", "Not After Midnight", "A Borderline Case", "The Way of the Cross" and "The Breakthrough".

After having published six biographies, two plays, four books of articles and memoirs, seventeen novels, and nine collections of stories, Daphne du Maurier died in her sleep of "stubborn self-starvation"[15] in her home in Cornwall in 1989.

1.4. Du Maurier in the Literary World

Du Mauriers' works span from the family saga, romantic fiction, to biography, short stories, and the Gothic novel. For this reason, her career was long and varied but critics tend to relegate her to a certain genre or to a brief period of her life. For instance, Bryden defined her as a "superficial romantic novelist, who […] revelled in nostalgia and was capable of producing only 'a glossy brand of entertaining nonsense'".[16] This vision of du Maurier was later shared by Spencer, who appreciated the author's entertaining skills. In addition, when du Maurier was included in the Royal Mail's 'great twentieth-century women' series of stamps, Bell defined "du Maurier [as] an obscure choice, […] an agreeable writer […] but not a great or serious author".[17]

However, the republishing of all her works by Virago in 2000 indicates that there is a renewed interest in this long-neglected author. Some critics see her as a minor version of Agatha Christie, with a more psychological style. Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik in their book *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination* (1997) enhance the Gothic legacy of her writing; the book, indeed, is based on the belief that her best novels and short stories offer interesting examples of how Gothic writing is influenced by personal anxieties. According to the authors, du Maurier is neither the Romantic writer she was accused to be nor isolated from her contemporaries as she has been judged; her writing is influenced by her complicated family life, especially by her father Gerald, with whom she had an unhealthy, possessive relationship, as well as by the war context and the already existing tradition of the novel and the short story. Therefore, du Maurier's

[15] N. Auerbach, "Daphne du Maurier", in *British Writers: Supplement III*, G. Stade, C. Howard, eds., New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996, p. 142.
[16] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 1.
[17] Ibid.

stories are in the continuity of the Gothic tradition and variants within this tradition, often lacking in satisfying closures and happy endings.

Margaret Forster wrote *Daphne du Maurier* (1993), a biography of the author and the woman. The book also contains extracts of du Maurier's private letters, hinting to her 'disembodied spirit' and her anxieties; however, the main interest that this biography awakened was in du Maurier's sexuality. For this reason, du Maurier's writing could be overshadowed by her private life, which emerged through the publication of her private letters.

Eventually, the critics Nina Auerbach, author of *Daphne du Maurier: Haunted Heiress* (2000), and Helen Taylor, author of *The Daphne du Maurier Companion* (2007), also worked in rehabilitating du Maurier's literary production, going as far as to claim that she is a unique writer, so unorthodox that no critical tradition can digest her.

As Nina Auerbach argues in *British Writers: Supplement III*, Daphne du Maurier was wrongly labelled as a "writer of escapist romances" [18] but she is "an author of extraordinary range and frequent brilliance".[19] Indeed, her writings about her father and grandfather allowed her to become a brilliant biographer and an acute portraitist of men, who are the narrators of most of her works. "Don't Look Now", for instance, is narrated through a male perspective. Auerbach concludes by adding,

> Du Maurier has been sentimentalized by readers who refuse to see her anger, her insight into male madness, her sardonic analyses of social power and powerlessness, and her affiliation with a tradition of female horror fiction that began in the late eighteenth century and continues today.[20]

2. "Don't Look Now"

2.1. Introduction

"Don't Look Now" is a tale of the supernatural and it is often referred to as a novella, because of its length. It was published in 1971 in the collection *Not After Midnight*, recalling the world of night with its dreams and nightmares as opposed to the diurnal world; the reference to Freudian categories is clear: the nocturnal world can be visioned

[18] N. Auerbach, "Daphne du Maurier", in *British Writers: Supplement III*, p. 149.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

as representing our unconscious id (the realm in which our desires linger), while the rational world of day resembles the realm of the superego, with his restrictions and regulation.

"Don't Look Now" is “a tale which employs powerful horror tactics of compulsion and suspense”.[21] It involves a British couple, spending an intimate holiday in Venice trying to ease the grief for their youngest daughter’s recent death. John and Laura encounter two sisters: the blind one claims that she can see the dead child sitting happily with her parents, launching a series of events that ends with John’s murder.

The short story was made into a verry successful film by Nicholas Roeg (1973). However, Horner and Zlosnik suggest that few people know that du Maurier is the author of the original novella.[22] It has to be pointed out that the author greatly approved "Don't Look Now" transposition into film.[23]

Du Maurier’s short story was inspired by her memories of some trips she made to Venice as well as by the feeling of mourning she experienced during those trips. In 1952, she went to Venice after her death of her friend; in 1960 she revisited the city with her child and in 1965 she went there with her sister, six months after her brother-in-law’s death. However, her last visit was not intended as a diversion from grief. In 1968, in a letter to a friend, she mentioned that she wanted to write a tale about these trips to Venice.

2.2. Summary

"Don't Look Now" opens with a dialogue between John and Laura, a young couple who decided to go on a trip to Venice in order to try to return to ‘normality’ after the loss of their 5-year-old daughter Christine due to a meningitis. The two are in dining in Torcello when John notices two strange-looking twins; from here, John and Laura start creating wild scenarios to describe the sisters and their possible businesses in Torcello,

> ‘They’re not old girls at all,’ she said. ‘They’re male twins in drag.’
>
> Her voice broke ominously, the prelude to uncontrolled laughter, and john quickly poured some more chianti into her glass.

[21] G. Wisker, “Don’t Look Now! The Compulsions and Revelations of Daphne du Maurier’s Horror Writing”, in *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 8, N. 1, 1999, p. 26.
[22] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, p. 173.
[23] M. Forster, *Daphne du Maurier*, p. 440.

> ‘Pretend to choke,’ he said, ‘then they won’t notice. You know what it is—they’re criminals doing the sights of Europe, changing sex at each stop. [...]
> ‘Jewel thieves or murderers?’ asked Laura.
> ‘Oh, murderers, definitely. But why, I ask myself, have they picked on me?’[24]

After this dialogue, John is much relieved seeing Laura’s smile and is convinced that, if they keep on joking and fantasising as they used to do back in time, Laura can overcome her grief and go back to be the woman he knew before the tragedy.

When John notices that one of the twins is going to the bathroom, Laura decides to follow her to discover more about her identity. While Laura is in the toilette, John realises that the sister who stayed at the table is staring at him again but

> [i]t was not the casual, idle glance of someone at a nearby table, waiting for her companion to return, but something deeper, more intent, the prominent, light blue eyes oddly penetrating, giving him a sudden feeling of discomfort. (*DL*, 10)

Consequently, John decides to return the favour, fixing his eyes on her. However, he is forced to look away because the twin does not hesitate a single second. He calls for the bill and, when he turns to see the twin, he notices that her eyes are now closed.

After ten minutes, Laura comes back from the toilette, but her attitude has changed: she is not as playful as before. John immediately realises that something must have disturbed her, given the look on her face. The expression of confusion in Laura’s face turns into confidence while saying,

> It’s quite wonderful [...] the most wonderful thing that could possibly be. You see, she isn’t dead, she’s still with us. That’s why they kept staring at us, those two sisters. They could see Christine. (*DL*, 11)

Laura adds that the sisters, whose names she has forgotten, are retired physicians from Edinburg and the blind sister is a psychic in her mid-sixties. The latter also described their

[24] D. du Maurier, *Don’t Look Now and Other Stories*, London, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 7; henceforth, all quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited in text as *DL*.

daughter dressed in one of her favourite dresses, “the little blue-and-white dress with the puff sleeves that she wore at her birthday party” (*DL*, 13). After having heard these words, John is led to think that his wife is losing her mind but Laura’s happiness is so important to him that he does not argue with her.

After recovering from the shock, the couple decides to visit the cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta. Laura is distracted by the architecture, but John sees the twins and the blind one staring at him. He is unable to move; he thinks that there is no escape, no future feeling “an impending sense of doom, of tragedy [...] upon him” (*DL*, 14). As the sisters leave the cathedral, John is angry and takes Laura away for a walk.

John and Laura relax and go back to their room, where they make love and get ready for dinner. Later, they decide to take a walk to stimulate the appetite but get lost in the tangled back streets of the city. In a dark, narrow street, John and Laura hear a strangled shriek; while the latter leaves, the former sees a child with a pixie hood covering her head, running away from someone. Laura does not see the child and John does not share this incident with her, saying that the cry was from a drunk. Near San Zaccaria, they find a restaurant where John sees the twin sisters;

> [he] was seized with the irrational thought that this was no coincidence. [...] why, in the name of hell, should they have picked on this particular spot, in the whole Venice, unless... unless Laura herself, at Torcello, had suggested a further encounter. [...] It was Laura, before the walk, who had mentioned San Zaccaria.... (*DL*, 20)

John tries to distract Laura; however, after having read the menu, she notices the twin sisters and John is reassured by her gasp of genuine surprise that she did not plan their meeting. Laura goes to them and John resolves to “get sloshed” (*DL*, 22). When Laura returns, John is nauseous because of the alcohol and the whole situation; she does not say a word until she tells him that the sisters told her that Christine is anxious and wants them to leave Venice. This enrages John and the two start quarrelling,

> ‘Well?’, she said. ‘Why don’t you say something?’

> ‘Because,’ he answered, ‘you are perfectly right, I don’t believe it. Quite frankly, I judge your old sisters as being a couple of freaks, if nothing else. They’re obviously unbalanced, and I’m sorry if this hurts you, but the fact is that they’ve found a sucker in you.’
>
> [...]
>
> ‘Oh dear,’ sighed Laura, ‘don’t take it like that. [...] And the extraordinary thing is that the blind sister says you’re psychic and don’t know it.’ (*DL*, 24-25)

The couple leave the restaurant and go back to the hotel where there is a telegram wating for them: their son Johnnie is ill and may undergo surgery for suspected appendicitis. Laura believes Johnnie is in danger and decides to leave immediately by plane; John will join her the next day by car and then by train. John seems less concerned and tells Laura to leave the next day. However, her grief at losing Christine exacerbates her response, “‘I’ve lost one child, I’m not going to lose another’” (*DL,* 28). John is as worried as his wife but he does not show it, trying to stay calm and be rational. The hall porter manages to find a seat for Laura in a plane flying to London. She leaves and John promises to call her when he is in Milan.

In the steam-ferry, John feels sad about leaving Venice,

> When, if ever, he wondered, would they come again? Next year... in three years... Glimpsed first on honeymoon, nearly ten years ago, and then a second visit, *en passant*, before a cruise, and now this last abortive ten days that had ended so abruptly. (*DL*, 31)

While lost in his thoughts, John spots another ferry, coming opposite his direction and heading to Venice. Among the people in it, he sees Laura, very in distress, accompanied by the twin sisters. He is confused and angry and cannot understand why Laura is not on the plane but with the sister on a boat. So, he returns to the hotel and asks the porter about her wife, but nobody has seen Laura. The plane landed on time with all seats occupied. John constructs scenarios in which Laura lied to him: maybe she never intended to take the plan but to meet the sisters; or, possibly, he is going paranoic. Maybe the sister tricked Laura and kidnapped her.

John resolves to go to the police station to report his wife disappearance. While there, he meets a British couple who tell him about a murderer at loose in Venice.

John reassured in a sense by the policemen words, returns to the hotel and receives a call from the headmaster's house from England; Johnnie is fine, and the phone is then passed to Laura, "'Darling? Darling, are you there?' He could not answer. He felt the hand holding the receiver go clammy cold with sweat. 'I'm here,' he whispered." (*DL*, 43)

In the meanwhile, the police have found the sisters and have called them to the police station, where they are waiting for John. Once there, John apologises to everyone. The sighted twin sister refuses to file a complaint against him, even if she is annoyed that John accused them of his wife's disappearance. John escorts the sisters back to the hotel and he is told once again that he is a psychic. The blind sister explains to him that he has seen them in the future, "'You saw us,' she said, 'and your wife too. But not today. You saw us in the future.' [...] My sister felt you had psychic understanding'" (*DL*, 49, 51). After having given his London address to the sisters and having apologised once more, John looks at the blind sister who, with her eyes wide open, holds his hand fast saying, "'The child, [...] the child... I can see the child...'" (*DL*, 52).

John leaves the sisters and realises that he has lost himself again. He spots the same frightened little girl of the previous night and he clearly sees a man in pursuit. He is very worried, so he follows her into a house to help her and bolts the door against the man. The little girl is, actually, a dwarf woman and the man chasing her is a policeman. The dwarf throws a knife at John's throat, who bleeds to death. John's vision of Laura and of the two sisters is the future, when his wife returns to Venice to pick his corpse up,

> The creature fumbled in her sleeve, drawing a knife, and as she threw it at him with hideous strength, piercing his throat, he stumbled and fell, the sticky mess covering his protecting hands. And then he saw the vaporetto with Laura and the two sisters steaming down the Grand Canal, not tomorrow, but the day after that, and he knew why they were together and for what purpose they had come. [...] 'Oh God,' he thought, 'what a bloody silly way to die....'. (*DL*, 55)

2.3. The Female Gothic

Ellen Moers was the first one who coined the term Female Gothic (1976), which she defines as,

> the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic. [...] In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare. Not, that is, to reach down into the depths of the soul and purge it with pity and terror [...], but to get to the body itself, its glands, muscles, epidermis, and circulatory system, quickly arousing and quickly allaying the physiological reactions to fear.[25]

The first woman writer, who set the guidelines to future Female Gothic works, was Anne Radcliffe in the 1790s. Her work entitled *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) features a female protagonist, who is victim and heroine at the same time, living in a decaying castle and persecuted by a male villain. However, as Anne Williams argues in her *Art of Darkness*, the latter features are typical of Male Gothic, which encodes "the most oppressive antifeminism [...], organized around a "female" "other" both victimized and demonized".[26] Female critics errors stem from their use of Freud's psychoanalysis as a means of social diagnosis rather than interpretation; they use Freudian concepts to name the effects of the patriarchal society over the heroine, as a result of the critics' realist point of view. Another error is having failed to recognise Female Gothic codes, such as marriage, which is extremely far from being read as a happy ending, given the fact that it implied "the loss of [a woman's] civil identity and of her property, present and future".[27] Therefore, Williams suggests that,

> The Female Gothic heroine is passive and helpless; [...] the Gothic narrative's real reason for being is to provide its record of suffering-the pain of a lonely, vulnerable, isolated young woman. And most damning of all, the concluding marriage can be no "happy ending," especially since the heroine's husband has usually shown

[25] E. Moers, *Literary Women*, New York, Doubleday & Company, 1976, p. 90.
[26] A. Williams, *Art of Darkness*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 136.
[27] Ibid., p. 138.

himself enigmatic if not downright duplicitous (and sometimes even cruel) in the course of the story.[28]

From the Gothic genre derives horror fiction, which, as pointed out by Wisker, would not seem a suitable genre for women writers. Indeed, women in horror are often depicted as femme fatales, hags, victims, or mere passive elements of the story; moreover, they are associated to the figure of the voracious woman, which is related to the myth of the "vagina dentata", and whose sexual appetite cannot be limited.[29] The first remarkable figure of female horror fiction is Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein* (1818); her novel

> seems to be distinctly a *woman*'s mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth.[30]

2.4. Daphne du Maurier's Gothic Horror

Horner and Zlosnik divide Du Maurier's writing career into three phases.[31] The first phase revolves around the search for the authentic self, through sense of place and family history; it also involves anxieties related to possible incestuous desires and the incompatible relationship between the authentic self—probably homosexual— and the surface self. The second phase is characterized by concerns over female authorship, which is both empowering and threatening to disrupt female identity. In the last phase, du Maurier employed a male narrator.

Du Maurier's Gothic horror is mainly based on realism: the reader is immediately immersed in a homely, safe, familiar space which, however, turns out to be a nightmare. In addition, as in "Don't Look Now", the deadliest violence stems from human beings, not monsters as in the classic Gothic stories, which were characterised by the presence of supernatural beings, such as vampires and werewolves.

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[28] Ibid., p. 139.
[29] G. Wisker, "Don't Look Now! The Compulsions and Revelations of Daphne du Maurier's Horror Writing", in *Journal of Gender Studies*, p. 20.
[30] E. Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 93.
[31] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, p. 24.

As Wisker points out, "Don't Look Now" is permeated by death from its beginning; indeed,

> [t]he horror was actually established at an unbearable level with the daughter's death from meningitis before the tale opened. The old ladies, the son's illness, then the wife's disappearance set up a series of false trails as we wait for the tension to break in a final horror.[32]

2.5. The Problem of Identity

One important aspect of her Gothic is the fact that du Maurier's novels and short stories show how Gothic writing is deeply influenced by "personal and broader cultural values and anxieties".[33] As Horner and Zlosnik argue, according to recent studies on autobiography, all works of literature are to some extent autobiographical; therefore, they participate to the construction of the author' identity.[34] Du Maurier's use of the Gothic conventions gives her the possibility to explore her anxieties of identity. As previously stated in the author's biography, du Maurier was deeply affected by her father's desire to have a son, so as to create her alter ego, Eric Avon, who did everything she would have done if she were born a boy. When she got married in 1932, it seemed that the boy had been confined in his box forever; however, this apparent compliance with women of her class was a way to hide her growing anxiety regarding her identity as a woman writer, seeing herself as a disembodied spirit. About du Maurier's split identity, Forster writes,

> In her own mind, she has seen herself as something other – not a lesbian but a 'half-breed', someone internally male and externally female, and she was proud of how she had reconciled these two halves. 'And then the boy realised he had to grow up,' she told Ellen, 'and not be a boy any longer, so he turned into a girl […], and the boy was locked in a box forever. […] She opened up to the box sometimes and let the phantom, who was neither girl nor boy but disembodied spirit, dance in the evening when that was no one to see…'.[35]

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[32] G. Wisker, "Don't Look Now! The Compulsions and Revelations of Daphne du Maurier's Horror Writing", in *Journal of Gender Studies*, p. 28.
[33] Ibid., p. 2.
[34] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[35] M. Forster, *Daphne du Maurier*, p. 222.

Years later, after having read Jung,[36] du Maurier viewed her disembodied spirit as a result of a "repressed 'No. 2' masculine side".[37] She regarded her writing identity as masculine, writing five out of eight novels with a first-person, male narrator. "Don't Look Now" too is recounted from its main character's point of view. As Horner and Zlosnik suggest,

> it was this anxiety concerning the 'other' contained within the 'self' which gave Jung's work particular resonance for her. Du Maurier's life-long interest in the figure of the transgressive double (explored most famously in *Rebecca)* is a manifestation of an anxiety which drew her continually back to the Gothic mode of writing.[38]

Having openly faced this issue, du Maurier was more serene with her split subjectivity and maybe she realised that her identity was constituted by a multiplicity of selves.

2.6. Sexuality and Identity

Du Maurier's use of the terms 'disembodied spirit' to describe herself was a consequence of the debate over female sexuality that was developing within late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Being an adolescent and a young woman during this period of time brought confusion and, above all, anxiety concerning female identity and sexuality, which were undergoing deep changes rapidly. Indeed, until the twentieth century, a relationship between two women was seen as platonic, based on emotional and spiritual love; in fact, relationships with older, successful, female figures were encouraged. However, these relationships were labelled as dangerous from the 1920s, after the publication of Kraft-Ebbing's, Havelock Harris', and Freud's works about sexuality, which "produced a new language and resulted in a new discourse of female sexuality".[39] On the one hand, these studies provided women with a new, specific terminology to describe their desire for other women; on the other hand, they demonised female relationships.

Havelock Ellis' studies were a refinement of Kraft-Ebbing's. The latter pointed out four categories of lesbians, ranging from the lesbian who looked like a woman to the one

[36] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, p.6.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., p. 15.

looking like a man. Moreover, an early 'symptom' of lesbianism was the predilection for supposed male activities. As pointed out by Horner and Zlosnik, Kraft-Ebbing's work prompted the idea of a male trapped in a female body.[40] Ellis describes the 'female invert' as "sexually rapacious and socially dangerous"[41] and she was represented in popular fiction as a vampire. This categorisation of lesbians created discomfort among some women, who, having internalised such labels, saw themselves as 'ill'; on the contrary, other women saw this new identity as transgressive and, consequently, attractive.

In du Maurier's time, Freud studies were circulating; although he rejected the concept of a man trapped in a female body, he argued that lesbian love was "no more than a stage of arrested development".[42]

Given all these studies, lesbianism was a part of the discourse of sexuality as well as the concept of bisexuality.

From a historical perspective, this rigid, conservative categorization of women started after the Great War, which saw the loss of feminist movements and led to the vision of the career woman as perverse; indeed, women were meant to be housewives and mothers. Additionally, feminism was seen as a social menace, ready to disrupt the natural order of society.

Given this background, du Maurier's sexual identity can be read in different ways: she was a heterosexual woman who had occasional romantic friendships with women; she was a heterosexual whose past bisexual relationships were reconsidered to better suit her orthodox identity; she was a bisexual who chose to conform to a bigoted society; eventually, du Maurier may be regarded as a repressed lesbian. Horner and Zlosnik highlight du Maurier's sense of both sexual and social displacement, as her use of the terms 'disembodied spirit' and 'half-breed' point out.[43] Moreover, the need to assign her a precise sexual identity is the result of the twentieth century's "need to categorize gendered behaviour through a sexed body than it does about du Maurier's protean sense of 'self'".[44]

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., pp. 15-16.
[42] Ibid, p. 16.
[43] Ibid., p. 20.
[44] Ibid.

3. Analysis

3.1. Setting

Being a Gothic story, "Don't Look Now" is set in Venice; the choice of an Italian city is, indeed, a symbol for "the exotic, the sinister and the transgressive".[45] The city is presented as a poorly lit labyrinth, with deserted squares where tourists can easily lose their way. This recalls the traditional intricated corridors of the Gothic castles, in which damsels in distress get lost. Moreover, there is also a dimension of psychological disorientation. John does lose his way once but, luckily, he manages to find his way out. While wandering through the dark alleyways, John provides the reader with a description of the lagoon city, which changes radically from day to night,

> […] in the daytime, with the sun's reflection, on the water and the windows of the houses open, bedding upon the balconies, a canary singing in a cage, there had been an impression of warmth, of secluded shelter. Now, ill-lit, almost in darkness, the windows of the houses shuttered, the water dank, the scene appeared altogether different, neglected, poor, and the long narrow boats moored to the slippery steps of cellar entrances looked like coffins. (*DL*, 19)

John's description clearly hints to Venice's deadly power; indeed, this Venetian space is eventually fatal and John is murdered. "Don't Look Now" is rich in misinterpretations: as John fails to direct himself in the labyrinthine topography of the city, he also fails to read the right elements that could avoid catastrophe; he circles around the obsessional idea to save the little girl with the pixie hood, who turns out to be a murderer. It is as if Venice engulfed men in its womb; like the minotaur, it seems that the city demands a victim and obtains one.

After the argument he had with his wife, John describes the city as a future Atlantis,

> The experts are right [...] Venice is sinking. The whole city is slowly dying. One day, the tourists will travel here by boat to peer down into the waters, and they will

[45] Ibid., p. 174.

> see pillars and columns and marble far, far beneath them, slime and mud uncovering for brief moments a lost underworld of stone. (*DL*, 19)

The tone which informs the description of the setting reflects John's mood: Venice is always seen through John's point of view; his delight in Venice is not driven by the city itself but by his fluctuating feeling towards Laura and the Edinburgh twins. The vision of Venice as a watery, dark, silent place, associated with such images as secrecy and sensuality, masks and masquerading, duplicity and desire, made it a perfect setting for the Gothic novel.

Venice is a city of ambiguity, contrast, both glittering by the sunlight and rather sinister; it is envisioned as a bleak prison of haunting insecurity, of disturbance, and disorientation. Daphne Du Maurier's language is consequently shadowed by threat and ambivalence as she constantly constructs and deconstructs the magic, the romance of Venice. Given her meditation on death and murder, Venice can be best described as "the most beautiful of tombs"[46]. Above all, du Maurier highlights and challenges the general propension to idealise, to aestheticize the city through the act of gazing, signified in the very title. Moreover, her Venice is a place where John and Laura are supposed to find the long-missing normality, spending a romantic journey in the city that was the place of their honeymoon and, hence, rich in beautiful memories. However, Venice turns out to be a deathly trap.

Because of its carnival celebrations, Venice is also associated with masquerade, which survives in the story in the form of the grotesque, embodied in the dwarf, and it is also evoked by the fact that John and Laura imagine that the twin sisters from Edinburgh may be male transvestites. For "Don't Look Now", du Maurier may have exploited both the Venetian tradition and the post-Enlightenment fascination with masquerade. As Terry Castle suggests,

> the masquerade represented a kind of 'uncanny space' at the heart of eighteenth-century urban culture: a dream-like zone where identities become fluid and

[46] H. James, *Italian Hours*, New York, Grove Press Books, 1959, p. 32.

> cherished distinctions – between self and other, subject and object, real and unreal – temporarily blurred.[47]

Castle further states that the Enlightenment had a need to create these uncanny spaces, which are later recalled by Romanticism, whose sense of uncanny is given through Gothic stories.

3.2. Main Themes

Du Maurier's "Don't Look Now" opens in medias res, in the middle of a guessing game. The reader does not have any clue regarding the characters and is immediately brought into the story by the young couple, who is playing a guessing game about the nature of the twin sisters. Du Maurier gradually reveals the background of John and Laura's decision to go to Venice; John is the first to mention Christine's death and only later in the story the reader finds out its cause. To this initial mysterious atmosphere is added the revelation the two sisters make about Christine's happy presence between her parents.

Confusion and mystery remain consistent throughout the story and confusion reaches its peak when John loses his way among the labyrinthine alleyways of Venice and when he mistakes the dwarf murderer for a frightened 5-year-old girl on the run. Moreover, confusion and mystery are always accompanied by a sense of fear and impending danger.

Although John and Laura's relationship may appear serene and balanced, John believes that his wife is psychologically fragile and, hence, she needs to be protected from the twins' alleged visions. Actually, John's attitude turns out to be completely wrong; ironically, he is the one who needs protection.

While Laura mourns Christine and needs time to ease her grief, John never wants to talk about their daughter's death. He only hopes that spending some days in Venice erases Laura's pain, so that they can go back to their happy life before the tragedy. For this reason, he is likely to make Laura believe the twins' supernatural visions as long as

[47] T. Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny*, New York, University Press, 1995, quoted in A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, "Deaths in Venice: Du Maurier's 'Don't Look Now'", in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, G. Byron, D. Punter, eds., London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1999, p. 221.

she is not depressed. However, Laura finds relative peace thanks to the sisters who, reassuring her about Christine's happiness, provide her with what she needed.

John's weapons against Laura's uneasiness are humour and sarcasm, which are also useful to "break the tension of the atmosphere around them, heavy with the memory of their dead daughter".[48] He successfully uses humour during their guessing game and he is relieved when Laura laughs hysterically. Sarcasm is implied in his sceptical vision of his psychic powers, "'I'm psychic, am I? Fine. My psychic intuition tells me to get out of this restaurant now [...]'" (*DL*, 25), and those of the blind sisters, such as in "John, glancing furtively at the twins' table, noticed that they were tucking into plates piled high with spaghetti, in very un-psychic fashion" (*DL*, 25) and "He had a sudden rather unkind picture of the two sisters putting on headphones in their bedroom, listening for a coded message from poor Christine" (*DL*, 51).

As previously mentioned, "Don't Look Now" is deeply imbued with the supernatural, through acts of psychic visions and talking with the dead. The denial of these forces leads inevitably to death.

The twin sisters represent the supernatural in the tale. The blind sister was not born blind but she gradually lost her sight, which allowed her to see into another world; her interest for the occult was lifelong and, losing her sight, just enabled her to turn her interest into reality. John's rationality makes him despise them and, when he realises that the sisters were right, it is too late.

3.3. The Uncanny

In his essay "The Uncanny", which was published in 1919, Sigmund Freud defines the German term *Unheimlich,* which was translated into English as 'uncanny', through the analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's story "The Sandman". Freud highlights the fact that many languages do not have a correlative term to express this specific feeling of fear that the German word makes possible.

Before giving a definition of the word, Freud starts with its etymology,

[48] "Daphne du Maurier", in *Short Stories for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context & Criticism on Commonly Studied Short Stories, Vol. 14*, ed. J. Smith, Detroit, Gale Cengage Learning, 2002, p. 116.

> *Unheimlich* is clearly the opposite of *heimlich, heimisch, vertraut*, and it seems obvious that something should be frightening precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar. But of course the converse is not true: not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening. […] Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny.[49]

After this definition, Freud also observes that the word *Heimlich* has, in fact, a double meaning. On the one hand, it refers to everything that is familiar and recognisable; on the other hand, it also indicates what is kept hidden, thus becoming sinister. As Tatar points out in her article "The Houses of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny", this ambiguity in the German word becomes clearer if the word 'house' is to be analysed. Indeed, for those who live in a house, its environment is familiar and comfortable; on the contrary, those who are not part of it cannot see what happens within its walls, which becomes a mystery.[50] Moreover, *Heimlich* is so equivocal that sometimes it matches the meaning of its antonym *Unheimlich*, where the prefix 'un-' does not change its meaning to its opposite. To explain this, Freud draws on the psychoanalytic world, taking into account those men, who believe that there is something uncanny about the female genitals. According to Freud,

> what they find uncanny […] is actually the entrance to man's old home, the place where everyone once lived. A jocular saying has it that "'love is a longing for home', and if someone dreams of a certain place or a certain landscape and, while dreaming, thinks to himself, 'I know this place, I've been here before", this place can be interpreted as representing his mother's genitals or her womb. Here, too, then, the uncanny […] is what was once familiar […]. The negative prefix *un-* is the indicator of repression.[51]

Given this example, Freud concludes that the uncanny does not refer to something strange or new, but rather to something familiar to the psyche which went through a process of

[49] S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, pp. 160-161.
[50] M. T. Tatar, "The Houses of Fiction: Toward a Definition of the Uncanny", in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 22, N. 2, 1981, p. 169.
[51] S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 186.

repression. He also makes a distinction between the uncanny of real life and that of fiction:

> [...] many things that would be uncanny if they occurred in real life are not uncanny in literature, and […] in literature there are many opportunities to achieve uncanny effects that are absent in real life.[52]

Horner and Zlosnik argue that du Maurier's "Don't Look Now" draws heavily on this sense of uncanny through the use of the classic Gothic tropes of the double, masquerade, monstrous body and veiling, to analyse the uncanny nature of identity.[53]

3.4. A Freudian Reading: Fear of Death and Fear of Castration

"Don't Look Now" can be read through a Freudian perspective, due to the uncanny figure of the dwarf.

Horner and Zlosnik suggest that John's recurrent fear of going mad and the sisters' eyesight and blindness are Freudian ways to express fear of castration and death.[54] In the novella, there are many sentences that highlight John preoccupation with going mad, such as "I'm going paranoiac" (*DL*, 36); "This [...] is really the start of paranoia. This is the way people go off their heads" (*DL*, 40), "So what was the explanation? That he was going off his head?" (*DL*, 45) and "The only explanation was that he had been mistaken, the whole episode a hallucination. In which case he needed psychoanalysis, just as Johnnie had needed a surgeon" (*DL*, 45). John's faith in science and the continuous rejection of everything that goes beyond science are behind his violent death; indeed, having ignored the signs along the way cost him his life.

An important role in John's "process of denial"[55] is played by the twin sisters, who, together with the dwarf, represent the uncanny. The latter is related both to the supernatural and the everyday unusual; the supernatural element is given by the psychic power of the blind sister, while the fact that they are identical twins is a peculiarity of the everyday. More precisely, the more masculine twin, who is a retired doctor, represents

[52] Ibid., p. 190.
[53] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, p. 186.
[54] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, "Deaths in Venice: Du Maurier's 'Don't Look Now'", in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, p. 222.
[55] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, *Daphne du Maurier: Writing, Identity and the Gothic Imagination*, p. 176.

the *heimlich*, while the blind, psychic twin represents the *unheimlich*, the uncanny. John's reaction to the sisters is that of assigning them different titles, based on his current mood; he defines them as "murderers and jewel thieves" (*DL*, 12); "two old fools" (*DL*, 14); "frauds" (*DL*, 23) and "damned interfering sisters" (*DL*, 32) throughout the story. In the end, he admits his mistakes and calls them "poor old girls" (*DL*, 52). However, this final repentance does not save him from his fatal destiny; indeed, his psychic power's rejection, which would make him the third uncanny sister, could be seen as a rejection of death itself.

Unlike Laura, John does not express his grief for the loss of Christine openly; on the contrary, he continues to repress his and his wife's experience of death, hoping to return to his life before the tragedy. John's attempt is destined to be a failure, as demonstrated by his perception of the dwarf woman as a five-year-old girl in danger. As Freud explained, the repress does not disappear, but it returns; in John's case, it comes back through the song playing in the hotel room "'I love you, Baby... I can't get you out of my mind'" (*DL*, 42), which recalls the presence of Christine. Eventually, John's determination to avoid the twin sisters at all costs leads him to them, in an uncanny way. For this reason, Horner and Zlosnik argue that "this element of *unheimlich* in du Maurier's story signals repression — in this case repressed fear of death — which John projects onto his environment".[56]

Given this reading, John is turned into a neurotic figure and "Don't Look Now" becomes a cautionary tale, whose elements of masquerade and Gothic can be better read through a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective.

From the beginning, John emerges as a pragmatic man with limitless faith in science, who always tries to explain the unexplainable through rationality. The latter justifies the fact that he despises everything that is "supra-rational knowledge"[57], thinking that his wife is going mad when she recounts to him what the twin sister told her about Christine. Moreover, John always agrees with the doctor's advice about Laura's needs, so that he even treats her like a child, "He had to play along with her, agree, soothe, do anything to bring back some sense of calm" (*DL*, 12). His denial of non-scientific powers and his faith in science is evident after Laura's account,

[56] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, "Deaths in Venice: Du Maurier's 'Don't Look Now'", in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, p. 222.
[57] Ibid., p. 223.

> And if this sudden belief was going to keep her happy he couldn't possibly begrudge it. But... but... he wished, all the same, it hadn't happened. There was something uncanny about thought-reading, about telepathy. Scientists couldn't account for it, nobody could [...]. (*DL*, 13)

John never reprimands Laura, he rather pities her because she has to deal with the immense grief brought by the loss of a child, which causes her to be emotionally drained. Consequently, the trip to Venice is to be seen as his attempt to cure his wife's 'illness'. Moran suggests that,

> [John's] means of dealing with Christine's death are never articulated by du Maurier because his approach to the problem is to view his daughter's death as an obstacle that needs to be overcome.[58]

John's confidence and his beliefs come from his identity of a "well-educated upper-middle class English male of the mid-twentieth century, [who] dislikes or dismisses anything that threatens [his] sense of self".[59] He sees women and children as depending on him and in need of his constant protection; indeed, he tries to save the alleged child from the unknown chaser and to buy Laura's happiness and lost lightheartedness with material things.

All this reveals John's attitude towards the sisters, who are guilty of threatening his masculinity; the latter is based on its opposite of a weak, needy femininity and which relegates older women to the grotesque. Consequently, John perceives the sighted woman dressed in a "masculine shirt with collar and tie, sports jacket, grey tweed skirt" (*DL*, 9) as a menace to his manhood and, together with the other sister's blindness, the twins represent John's fear of castration. The sisters, indeed, undermine his confidence and, throughout the story, they appear to be those in the right, while John is proved wrong publicly.

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[58] D. Moran, "Critical Essay on "Don't Look Now"" in *Short Stories for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context & Criticism on Commonly Studied Short Stories, Vol. 14*, p. 123.
[59] A. Horner, S. Zlosnik, "Deaths in Venice: Du Maurier's 'Don't Look Now'", in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, pp. 223-224.

Nevertheless, the reader firstly shares John's view of the twin sisters as dangerous for Laura's well-being and, in a way, justifies the couple's assumption of being superior to the sisters, who are the object of their guessing game. The reader also agrees with John when he labels the small figure on the loose a child. However, as the story progresses, it is more and more evident that John struggles against a part of himself that would recognise the supernatural; in fact, the proof is given by his alcohol consumption. John's final death is described by him as 'silly', "because it comes about as the result of an absurd yet plausible event".[60]

Therefore, "Don't Look Now" uses irrational, supernatural events to deal with a common element to all human beings, that is the desire for emotional and logical superiority.

3.5. The Dwarf

In "Don't Look Now", John sees this figure twice. The first time, John and Laura are wandering through the dark streets of Venice, almost getting lost in its labyrinth when they hear a loud cry. Laura, defining the situation sinister, walks away; on the contrary, John decides to wait and sees a little figure, running away. John is convinced that this figure is a little child of five or six, wearing a pixie-hood, a short skirt, and a short coat. He is relieved when he realises that Laura did not see the little girl because,

> [t]he sight of a child, a little girl, in what must have been near danger, her fear that the scene he had just witnessed was in some way a sequel to the alarming cry, might have had a disastrous effect on her overwrought nerves. (*DL*, 20)

The second time in which John bumps into the dwarf is when he realises his deathly mistake; actually, the little, frightened girl was the dangerous murderer who was on the loose.

In her use of this grotesque figure, du Maurier revisits the Gothic trope of the heroine whose beauty is protected by a veil. In "Don't Look Now", however, the dwarf's

[60] D. Moran, "Critical Essay on "Don't Look Now"" in *Short Stories for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context & Criticism on Commonly Studied Short Stories, Vol.14*, p. 123.

hood does not cover her beauty; on the contrary, it conceals her murderous intent and deceives John, leading to his murder.

John's future murder looms over the story from its beginning; "Don't Look Now", indeed, is rich in hints that foreshadow a tragic ending. When John and Laura notice the twin sisters for the first time, they consider the possibility of them being murderers, changing their appearance in every city. This is not far from what the dwarf does in order to deceive her victims. Moreover, when John goes to the police station to report his wife's disappearance, he learns from another British couple that there is a murder on the loose. John is, of course, totally unaware of his brutal destiny.

3.6. The Relationships among Women

One of the themes that du Maurier deals with in her "Don't Look Now" is men's and women's relationship with each other. The women of the tale respond to John's sarcasm and scepticism with an alliance, leading to actions of power and strength.

As stated previously, John is visibly tired of his wife's sadness over the loss of Christine and hopes that she will soon forget her daughter; John's behaviour, as Sanderson points out, is immature.[61] He even thought that he succeeded in his purpose, as he notices a change in her attitude and in her appearance,

> Her voice, for the first time since they had come away, took on the old bubbling quality he loved, and the worried frown between her brows had vanished. At last, he thought, at last she's beginning to get over it. (*DL*, 8)

However, John is quickly brought back to reality when Laura has the conversation with the sighted twin in the toilette. Despite Laura's visible joy in reporting to his husband the fact, John's response is that of leaving the restaurant, hoping that she will never mention the event again.

Although for John this news was illogical and unexpected, for Laura it was like the first step toward the long-missing serenity; indeed, she gains confidence and control, as John notices, "The dazed expression he had noticed at first had given way to one of

[61] S. Sanderson, "Critical Essay on "Don't Look Now"", in *Short Stories for Students: Presenting Analysis, Context & Criticism on Commonly Studied Short Stories, Vol. 14*, p. 119.

dawning confidence, almost of exaltation" (*DL*, 11). Yet, John starts thinking that his wife is going crazy and in need of extra care, being fragile and weak. Moreover, "[i]n John's mind, Laura is not the master of her own mind or actions—someone must be controlling her as if she were a puppet".[62]

John's vision of his wife is clearly distorted; Christine's death undoubtedly left Laura struggling with depression but after the sisters' revelation she is even ready to confess to John her mental state, which she hid from him,

> You know what it's been like all these weeks, at home and everywhere we've been on holiday, though I tried to hide it form you. Now it's lifted because I know, I just know, that the woman was right. (*DL*, 12)

Unlike John, the sisters are able to sympathise with Laura's pain and to partially ease it; in this way, Laura "[...] is reborn, in a sense, as a confident woman, finding more strength in the company of women than in that of men".[63] Additionally, John continues misinterpreting his psychic visions; when he sees Laura on the ferry with the sisters, he only blames them to manipulate his wife. However, the twins are supporting Laura on her way to see his husband's corpse.

The sisters also play the important role of being Christine's spokeswomen; in fact, they are the means through which Christine can communicate two pieces of news to her parents: that she is fine in the afterlife and that she is concerned about her parents' lives, because there is an impending danger looming over them. After having heard this, John loses his patience and becomes arrogant, while Laura appreciates both the messages.

Eventually, as Sanderson claims, "[t]he four women have created a club, of sorts, a place where lives are renewed, but John rejects their attempts to include him, eventually paying for this with his life".[64]

[62] Ibid., p. 120.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.

Chapter Three

Ian McEwan and Venice:
The Comfort of Strangers

1. Ian McEwan's Biography

Ian Russell McEwan was born on June 21st, 1948 in Aldershot, England. His mother Rose was a widow, whose first husband died during World War II, leaving her alone with two children. She later married David McEwan, a sergeant major of the British Army, who had joined the army due to unemployment in Glasgow. McEwan spent his childhood abroad, in Singapore and Lybia, which were outposts of the empire. In 1959, he returned to England, where he attended Woolverstone Hall in Suffolk. After having completed public school, McEwan entered the University of Sussex in Brighton, where he studied English and French Literature and earned a B.A. degree in English in 1970. While completing his third year at Sussex, McEwan started writing fiction. For this reason, he decided to earn a Master of Arts programme in creative writing at the University of East Anglia, which he successfully completed in 1971.

In 1982 he married Penny Allen, with whom he has two sons. However, his first marriage ended with a divorce in 1997; in the same year, he married his second wife Annalena McAfee and they have two children together.

1.1. Literary Career

In 1972, after having sold his first story entitled "Homemade",

> McEwan began to write earnestly, at first concentrating on stories and then chiefly on novels; however, McEwan–saying that he occasionally feels confined by fiction–frequently forays into other forms: drama for television and film, children's books, radio plays, even an oratorio.[1]

In 1975 the collection *First Love, Last Rites*, whose stories were taken from McEwan's thesis, was published and, a year later, it won the Somerset Maugham Award

[1] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, New York, Twayne Publishers, 1996, p.2.

for "its sophisticated depiction of sensuality and depravity"[2]; the first collection of stories was followed by a second one, entitled *In Between the Sheets* and by his first novel *The Cement Garden,* both published in 1978. In 1981 *The Comfort of Strangers* was published; it was McEwan's first work to be nominated for the Booker Prize. This novella, as Head points out, may be regarded as McEwan's most disturbing work.[3] McEwan was named one of the 20 Best Young British Novelists by *Granta* in 1983.

Between 1987 and 1994, McEwan published several novels: *The Child in Time* (1987), which marked "a new maturity in his examination of social issues and his endorsement of the possibilities of redemption"[4], *The Innocent* (1989), *Black Dogs* (1992) which shares a more positive vision of the world, *Rose Blanche* (1985) and *The Daydreamer* (1994). The last two are children's books. However, this lighter vision of the world disappears again in the thriller *Enduring Love* (1997) and in *Amsterdam* (1998), which deal respectively with the psychological disturbance of the early fiction and the "human shabbiness and frailty".[5] McEwan published many other novels, including *Atonement* (2001), *Saturday* (2005), whose background is the day in which anti-war protests were held in more than 600 countries against the Iraq war, *On Chesil Beach* (2007), *The Children Act* (2014) and *The Cockroach* (2019), a novella deeply inspired by Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and satirising Brexit.

Slay highlights that McEwan could be regarded as "a descendant of the Angry Young Men generation of the late 1950s, who were in large part products of the red-brick universities"[6], which are the predecessors of the contemporary plate glass universities, founded in the 1960s. These writers broke with tradition, questioning the new post-war society that emerged in England, usually using cynical, rude tones. In the same way, writers of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s portrayed the conflicts arising when people rebel against oppressive, harmful societies through neorealism and postmodernism. In his early works, McEwan often deals with the consequences of a patriarchal society, while the focus of his later work is on "the oppressive power of unchallenged governments".[7]

[2] J. Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, London, Methuen & Co., 1885, p. 168.
[3] D. Head, *Ian McEwan*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 52.
[4] D. Malcom, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2002, p. 5.
[5] Ibid., p. 6.
[6] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 3.
[7] Ibid.

Among the great variety of themes and interests, in McEwan's works relationships are portrayed with particular concern to the environment in which they are enacted. McEwan examines a great range of interpersonal relationships, such as parent and child, lover and lover, husband and wife, brother and sister, but the main focus is on "the exploration of the codes of sexual behaviour that exist between men and women".[8] McEwan notices that both men and women have high esteem for relationships in their lives; however, because of the patriarchal, contemporary society, women are often considered submissive and ready to please all men's requests. Moreover, women are also seen as acquiescent towards society itself. In his fiction, McEwan challenges these views, by introducing characters who examine their stereotypical roles and, eventually, reverse them. The female characters in McEwan's works often become the dominant figures in the different relationships that the author analyses; for instance, Julie in *The Cement Garden* is the strongest figure in the dyads brother-sister/(incestuous) lover-lover, who determines an alliance both "loving as well as life-affirming".[9] Therefore, relationships in McEwan's fiction are the only means to remain human in a brutalising world.

McEwan's analysis of the relationships between men and women determines the direction of his works; while his early fiction has the main purpose of shocking readers, by placing them in front of brutal characters and their extremely violent actions, his later fiction takes on a more feminist approach, taking sides for equality between the sexes. However, McEwan rejects his classification as a feminist writer. In an interview with John Haffenden, he declared:

> [...] after writing *The Imitation Game* — having escaped the label of being the chronicler of adolescence — I was then suddenly the male feminist, which really made me shrink. I found myself being co-opted into attending various types of convocation on 'Sexism in the Media' or 'Writers against Sexism'. It was very gratifying to see the enormous amount of attention *The Imitation Game* received, but I found I wanted to back off the subject. I didn't want to be used as a spokesman for women's affairs. I didn't want to be a man appropriating women's voices.[10]

[8] Ibid., p. 6.
[9] Ibid.
[10] J. Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 176.

It needs to be underlined that McEwan's early characters are not Gothic monsters or supernatural creatures; on the contrary, they are "the embodiments of our neighbors, our acquaintances, ourselves".[11] For his dark style, McEwan was nicknamed Ian Macabre.

Together with these concerns, McEwan also develops an interest in political matters, portraying contemporary British politics, mostly in more recent works, such as *The Ploughman's Lunch*, *The Child in Time*, and *Black Dogs*. He stresses the consequences of the political turmoil both on the single citizen and on whole countries. This shift in interest was caused by McEwan's need to distance himself from being continuously referred to as "the chronicler of comically exaggerated psychopathic states of mind or of adolescent anxiety, snot and pimples".[12] He also points out that, while writing *The Comfort of Strangers*, he was drawn back again to a more private world, in which what mattered were psychological states and not the relationships between individuals and societies. Eventually, he links this change to form itself; collaborating with other people leads him to write about broader worlds.

As Slay argues:

> McEwan's canon has certainly merited a serious, thoughtful examination. His dark portraits of the modern world are works that should be taken to heart. He has undoubtedly, irrevocably influenced contemporary fiction.[13]

2. *The Comfort of Strangers*

2.1. Introduction

The Comfort of Strangers is Ian McEwan's second novel, which was published in 1981 and was nominated for the Booker Prize, the most prestigious literary award in England. According to Seaboyer, *The Comfort of Strangers* is ambivalent, being both "an unheimlich tale of Gothic horror that turns on sadomasochism and ritualised murder [and] an engaged meditation on the historical, cultural, and psychoanalytic narrative".[14]

The inspiration for the novel came after a trip to Venice that McEwan did with his first wife Penny Allen in 1978. Once back, the writer took some notes about this

[11] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 7.
[12] J. Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 173.
[13] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 8.
[14] J. Seaboyer, "Sadism Demands a Story: Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*", in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 45, N. 4, 1999, p. 957.

experience, sketching two characters, "who were not quite like either myself or Penny"[15], and describing the city with its psychological implications. McEwan admitted that *The Comfort of Strangers* was "terribly difficult to write and [..] very hard to understand or talk about it".[16]

The novel begins with two epigraphs. The first consists of three lines taken from one of the poems contained in Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), "how we dwelt in two worlds/the daughters and the mothers/in the kingdom of the sons".[17] These lines clearly express McEwan's feminist concerns, by highlighting the position of women both in private relationships and in society; women are seen as submissive, acquiescent figures. McEwan's main purpose is that of eradicating this belief, by revealing the dangers of patriarchal society. The second epigraph is a short text by Cesare Pavese,

> Traveling is a brutality. It forces you to trust strangers and to lose sight of all that familiar comfort of home and friends. You are constantly off balance. Nothing is yours except the essential things – air, sleep, dreams, the sea, the sky – all things tending towards the eternal or what we imagine of it. (*CS*, ii)

These lines emphasise the tourists' "unquestioning trust"[18] that they put on the local inhabitants of the foreign land. Banks points out that Colin and Mary's acquaintance with Robert and Caroline is daunting, but it is also what happens in real life; "[...] many of us are all too like Mary and Colin and, perhaps to our cost, have [...] 'always depended on the kindness of strangers'".[19]

2.2. Summary

The Comfort of Strangers opens with Colin and Mary, a young couple of lovers, who are spending a dull holiday in an unnamed city, presumably Venice. The two, "[f]or reasons they could no longer define clearly, [...] [are] not on speaking terms" (*CS*, 1); their seven-

[15] J. Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 177.
[16] Ibid.
[17] I. McEwan, *The Comfort of Strangers*, London, Vintage, 2006, p. i; henceforth, all quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited in text as *CS*.
[18] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 74.
[19] J. R. Banks, "A Gondola Named Desire", in *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 24, N. 2, 1982, p. 31.

year-long relationship has reached a stalemate, in which passion is no longer an element of it and even lovemaking is usually interrupted by sleep. Their days are quite similar to one another: they wake up, get dressed, smoke a joint on the balcony of the hotel room, pick up the tourist guide and leave to visit the city. For the usual dinner-time walk through the city, Colin and Mary "carefully [groom] themselves [...] as though somewhere among the thousands [...] there were someone who cared deeply how they [appear]" (*CS,* 3).

During one of these walks, the middle-aged couple loses its way in the intricate alleyways of the city and comes across a sinister figure, who "[steps] out of the dark into a pool of streetlight and [stands] blocking their path" (*CS,* 14). This figure turns out to be Robert, a man living somewhere in Venice who immediately offers to help Colin and Mary to find a place where to eat, catching both of them by the wrist. Robert is described as

> [...] shorter than Colin, but his arms [are] exceptionally long and muscular. His hands too [are] large, the backs covered with matted hair. He [wears] a tight-fitting black shirt, of an artificial, semi-transparent material, unbuttoned in a neat V almost to his waist. On a chain round his neck [hangs] a gold imitation razorblade which lays slightly askew on the thick pelt of chest hair. Over his shoulder he [carries] a camera. A cloying sweet scent of aftershave [fills] the narrow street. (*CS*, 14-15)

The couple, not without suspicion, resolves to follow this man, who leads them to a crowded bar, full of men and smoke. Robert, who appears to be a regular customer of what appears to be a gay bar, offers them a bottle of wine and some food, and then starts asking about their private life. Colin and Mary are at first annoyed with all Robert's questions but, thanks to the wine, they soon start enjoying "the pleasure, unique to tourists, of finding themselves in a place without tourists, of making a discovery, finding somewhere real" (*CS*, 17).

Intrigued by Robert, Mary asks him about his wife, but Robert tells her that it would be impossible to talk about her without firstly describing his family, especially his father. Consequently, Robert starts recounting his childhood, highlighting the figures of his grandfather and father; they were both diplomats and his wealthy, sadistic father was

feared and respected by all members of his family: his wife and his four daughters. Robert was the only son and, for this reason, "[he] was his favourite, [he] was his passion" (*CS*, 20). His father, however, did nothing but turn Robert against his sisters, using him as his sentinel and making him a spokesman for his rigid prohibitions. In Robert's house, indeed, there were many rigid rules that the children had to follow: for instance, the elder sisters Eva and Maria could not go anywhere without their mother and wear make-up, while Robert could not eat any sugary food. One afternoon, while their father and mother were away, Robert went with his elder sister to their parents' room, where they dressed up in their mother's clothes, thus becoming "American film stars" (*CS*, 21). Everything passed unnoticed until dinner time, when Robert felt his father's gaze fixed on him,

> 'Tell me, Robert, what have you been doing this afternoon?' I believed he knew everything, like God. He was testing me to find out if I was worthy enough to tell the truth. So, there was no point in lying. I told him everything […]. (*CS*, 22)

After Robert's confession, his father beat the two sisters with a belt and never mentioned the fact again.

Some time after this, Eva and Maria decided to take revenge on their brother, by offering him many delicious foods that his father had always denied to him. Robert was at first suspicious, but his sisters reassured him by telling him that in return he would have to be kinder to them in the future. Before eating, the sisters made him drink what they called a 'medicine' to prevent him from being ill. However, this medicine turned out to be laxative; when Robert finished eating, his sisters tied him up and locked him in his father's study, where he expelled everything he had eaten. His father blamed the chocolate that his son had eaten, beat him for three days and did not speak kindly to him for months.

Robert also tells Colin and Mary how traumatic this episode was; every night he was tormented by nightmares and, when his father was not home at night, he used to sleep in the bed with his mother, until the age of ten. This was an element of shame for him. However, during a tea with the Canadian ambassador and his family, Caroline, the ambassador's daughter, revealed to Robert that sleeping with his mother should not have embarrassed him; on the contrary, she found it "really awfully sweet" (*CS*, 27). Robert met Caroline six years later and married her.

After this long story, Robert, Colin, and Mary notice that the bar around them is empty. Robert leaves the bar, telling them that he is in there every night. The couple goes back into the streets but, without any maps or reference points, gets lost again; consequently, Colin and Mary find themselves sleeping in a doorway. Once awake, the two start looking for a way to go back to the hotel to get some rest and water. While they are sitting in a bar drinking coffee, they see Robert from a distance, approaching them. Although Colin and Mary try in all ways to avoid him, Robert sits with them and blames himself for having left them wandering through the city. To make up for it, Robert invites the couple to his house so they can rest. Colin is no sooner able to refuse the offer than Robert has already left the bar with Mary to call a taxi.

At Robert's place, Mary and Colin wake up completely naked and start wondering where their hosts are. Colin, seeing a dressing-gown hanging over the door, decides to go out of their room to look for the couple. However, this dressing-gown turns out to be a nightie and Colin refuses to "'walk around [...] in a stranger's house dressed like this'" (*CS*, 42). Consequently, Mary wears it and starts looking for Robert and Caroline, walking through what looks like

> [...] a family museum in which a minimum of living space [has] been improvised round the exhibits, all ponderously ornate, unused and lovingly cared-for items of dark mahogany, carved and polished, splay-footed, and cushioned in velvet. (*CS*, 42).

Passed the gallery, Mary comes across Caroline, Robert's disabled wife, whom she spots as "a small pale face watching her from the shadows, a disembodied face, for the night sky and the room's reflections in the glass made it impossible to see clothes or hair" (*CS*, 43-44). The two women start talking and Mary discovers that Robert is the owner of the bar where they went the previous evening; moreover, Caroline makes a strange, disturbing confession to her:

> 'I hope you don't mind. There's something I should tell you. It's only fair. You see, I came in and looked at you while you were sleeping. I sat on the trunk about half an hour. I hope you're not angry.'

Mary swallow[s] and sa[ys], uncertainly, 'No.' (*CS*, 45)

After this, the conversation takes an even more ominous direction; Caroline starts inquiring about Mary's feelings towards Colin, whom Robert defined beautiful, asking her if she is in love with him. Mary tells her that she is not obsessed with Colin's physical appearance, but she blindly trusts him, being her "closest friend" (*CS*, 46). Caroline reveals that her view of love is far from Mary's, "'If you are in love with someone, you would even be prepared to let them kill you, if necessary'" (*CS*, 46). Colin joins them on the balcony and the reader acknowledges that Mary was an actress, working for a theatrical company for only women.

After having agreed to stay for dinner, Colin goes to his room to get dressed; in the meantime, Robert comes home and prays Mary to drink a glass of champagne with him before getting dressed too. While Mary is in her room, Robert takes Colin to visit the gallery and, all of a sudden, punches him in the stomach. At first, Colin does not inform anyone about it. When dinner finishes, Caroline makes Colin promise that he and Mary will come again to visit her,

> 'Will you come again.' She touch[es] his arm. 'Will you promise to come again.'
> Colin [is] polite and vague. 'Yes of course.'
> But Caroline [is] insistent; 'No, I mean it, it's very important.' [...] 'I can't walk down stairs.'[...]
> Colin nod[s] gratefully and [is] about to stand when Caroline [takes] his arm and sa[ys] quietly, 'I can't get out.'[...]
> Colin and Caroline [stand] up, and Robert open[s] the door and turn[s]on the light above the stairs. Colin and Mary thank Robert and Caroline for their hospitality. Robert [gives] Mary instructions [on] how to reach the hotel. 'Remember …' Caroline sa[ys] to Colin, but the rest of her words [are] cut off as Robert close[s] the door. As they [descend] the first flight of stairs, they [hear] a sharp sound that, as Mary sa[ys] later, could as easily have been an object dropped as a face slapped. (*CS*, 58)

Colin and Mary spend the next four days in the hotel room, making love and chatting amiably, as if their encounter with that strange couple had reignited their passion. However, Mary suddenly realises that in Robert's flat there was a photo of Colin, taken from the bar looking at their balcony.

During a boat trip, they end up close to Robert and Caroline's house; the latter calls them and they are obliged to pay a visit. Once there, Robert takes Colin to his gay bar, holding hands and presenting him to other people as his lover, of whom Caroline is jealous. Mary, instead, stays at home with Caroline.

Caroline, while preparing a drugged tea for Mary, reveals that her disability is the result of a perverse sexual game with Robert, whose desire was to kill her while having sex. Their lovemaking is still sadomasochistic and Caroline likes it. One night, Robert told her that the time had come,

> He had his forearm round my neck, and then he began to push into the small of my back. At the same time he pulled my head backwards. I blacked out with the pain, but even before I went I remember thinking: it's going to happen. I can't go back on it now. Of course, I wanted to be destroyed. (*CS*, 87)

Caroline also confesses that she has not been outside for four years. Mary starts to get extremely tired and, for this reason, Caroline accompanies her to a room, full of pictures of Colin. Here, she confesses that she and Robert have been spying on them since their arrival. When Robert and Colin come back, Mary is totally paralysed but she is still able to see; the only word she can utter to an extremely worried Colin is "'G... G, [...] Go'" (*CS*, 93). However, Robert and Caroline's plan has already begun; they start undressing Colin, whose eyes remain fixed on Mary, unable to move or speak. Robert makes Colin fall and, without hesitation, he cuts his wrists, leaving him bleeding to death.

The novel ends with Mary recounting what happened to a police officer who tells her that what just happened is "wearingly common, belonging in a well-established category" (*CS*, 98) and that "for these people it was as if being caught was as important as the crime itself" (*CS*, 98-99).

2.3. Place and Time

In *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan decides not to name Venice voluntarily, but the typical atmosphere of the city is clearly recognisable. This decision, as Malcom suggests, "both draws attention to the [late-twentieth-century Venetian] cliché and refreshes a setting that might otherwise be automatised and dead".[20] The text does not lack the typical elements of the city, such as the sea, the labyrinthine streets, the lack of road traffic and the great number of tourists; additionally, *The Comfort of Strangers* contains the classical elements that refer to Venice, such as "the twisting alleyways and sudden squares" (*CS*, 4), "canal bridges and [...] narrow street[s]" (*CS*, 13), "labyrinthine streets" (*CS*, 33), and the orchestras playing in the bars located in the big square. Yet other characteristic elements of Venice do not find place in the novel; there are no churches, no canals, and even no gondolas. Actually, McEwan's "combination of specificity and vagueness"[21] has three functions: firstly, it embodies the trap and the deception that the novel entails; as Robert and Caroline turn out to be murderers and not polite hosts, the reader can never be sure about the novel's real setting. Secondly, not mentioning the name of Venice is a literary means to generalise the text, so that its actions are not confined and peculiar to the described city. Eventually, the last point relates to the Venetian cliché in literature; the lack of the name Venice positions *The Comfort of Strangers* in relation to a great number of works set in the lagoon city; McEwan's work can exploit everything that Venice represents in the literary tradition of the twentieth century but without becoming a part of it. Nally, in his article "Incorrigible Venice and the War Against Cliché" argues,

> [McEwan's] text weaves a paradoxical series of openings and closures, in which we are invited to infer though never quite know Venice. The city is mouthed on every sumptuous corner, on every haunting streetscape; even the play of light and shade seem to suggest a wandering tonality that is unmistakably Venetian.[22]

To create a sharp contrast with the brutality of the facts narrated in *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan employs the city's "haunting opulence"[23]; Venice is, indeed, often

[20] D. Malcom, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, pp. 75-76.
[21] Ibid., p. 75.
[22] D. Nally, "Incorrigible Venice and the War Against Clichè", in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol. 22, 2004, p. 306.
[23] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 73.

praised for its beauty; yet its dark alleyways and mysterious doorways bring in a sense of mystery and threat.

McEwan's Venice is shaped on Ruskin's and Mann's Venice; in their works, respectively *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853) and *Death in Venice* (1912), Venice is represented as a "warning of the repercussions of moral decadence".[24] In *The Comfort of Strangers*, McEwan uses Venice to deal with the patriarchal, sadomasochistic violence contaminating feminist movements, whose goal is sexual equality.[25]

Colin and Mary's stay in the unnamed Venice is characterised by a loss of orientation; throughout the novel, Colin and Mary "frequently became lost" (*CS*, 4). Colin is the one who explicitly refers several times to getting lost in the alleyways of the city: "Colin remembered that they should have brough the maps. Without them they were certain to get lost" (*CS*, 10); "It was the total absence of traffic in the city that allowed visitors the freedom to become so easily lost" (*CS*, 10); "'We should have brought the maps'" (*CS*, 28); "'We should have brough out street maps'" (*CS*, 36); the last time, when Caroline asks Colin if they are enjoying their stay he answers, "'Yes, [...] except we keep getting lost'" (*CS*, 47). Although Colin and Mary need a map to orient themselves in the intricate streets, they find that all maps seem to be unfit for such a purpose. The least expensive showed only the main streets and the most famous attractions; one was printed as a booklet and it was easy to get lost while turning the pages; the most expensive were too large to be managed while walking; finally, the best ones "divided the city into five manageable sections" (*CS*, 10). For this reason, Malcom points out that "[t]he maps of the city seem superficially designed to lead the tourist astray".[26]

Given these considerations, the city plays an important role in the novel; indeed, it can be considered as its "fifth character"[27] and "it serves as hindrance and irritant to the novel's protagonists".[28] From the opening pages of the novel, Colin and Mary are engulfed by this unnamed city,

[24] J. Seaboyer, "Ian McEwan: Contemporary Realism and the Novel of Ideas", in *The Contemporary British Novel*, ed. J. Acheson, S. E. Ross, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 24.
[25] Ibid.
[26] D. Malcom, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, p. 74.
[27] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p.73.
[28] Ibid.

> Each afternoon, when the whole city beyond the dark green shutters of their hotel windows began to stir, Colin and Mary were woken by the methodical chipping of steel tools against the iron barges which moored by the hotel café pontoon. (*CS*, 1)

As the story progresses, the city becomes more and more threatening and oppressive: Colin and Mary continue losing their way, every corner of the city becomes a menace. Having lost their way to the hotel more than once, they are "forced to rely upon the comfort of strangers".[29] Mary, while sitting at the bar with Colin after having spent the night at Robert's bar, says, "'You know this place can be terribly suffocating sometimes. [...] It's like a prison here'" (*CS*, 35-35).

Concerning the time of the action, *The Comfort of Strangers* is set in an undefined present, probably a time very near to that of the novel's publication. The reader only knows that Colin and Mary have been lovers for seven years; no other information about their past is clarified or, if it is so, it is done reluctantly. It could be said that the couple's decision to go on holiday is "an attempt to escape time and the past too"[30], given the lack of narration regarding the city's history, which is one of Venice's main features. On the contrary, Robert and Caroline's relationship has its roots in the past, which has shaped their present situation. Robert has an entire chapter dedicated to the narration of his traumatic childhood, which he recounts as an actor delivering a monologue in front of Colin and Mary. Moreover, Robert is undoubtedly obsessed with his past; his apartment is very similar to a familiar shrine, in which each object has a story that has to be narrated. Additionally, the apartment is so haunted by the past that it even has a view on the cemetery in which Robert's grandfather and father are buried. For this reason, it might be claimed that "through Robert and Caroline, the past catches up with Colin and Mary".[31] Banks suggests that Robert's disturbed childhood is a throwback to McEwan's *The Cement Garden*, which has four orphaned children as its main characters.[32]

[29] Ibid., p. 74.
[30] D. Malcom, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, p. 72.
[31] Ibid., p. 73.
[32] J. R. Banks, "A Gondola Named Desire", p. 29.

2.4. Characters and Characters' Relationships

At the beginning of *The Comfort of Strangers*, the reader does not have many clues about the identity of Colin and Mary; the couple is never properly introduced and "the first sentence of the book presses upon us an ignorant intimacy with them".[33]

As the story unfolds, the characters start to take shape. Mary is the mother of two children, whom she had with her now ex-husband and who are staying with their grandmother during Mary's holiday with Colin. Mary is an unemployed actress; she explains to Caroline that her three-year-old theatre group was composed totally of women and its split was due to different points of view regarding the acceptance of men in it. Moreover, from the novel's lines, Mary emerges as a pretty and clever woman.

Colin's portrayal is far more complicated than Mary's. He is often described in terms and actions related to infancy and compared to a child; for instance, Mary kisses his nose "in a tender, motherly way" (*CS*, 7); later in the novel, he "nurse[s] at her breast" (*CS*, 69). Robert refers to him by using "the tone of one who explains the self-obvious to a child" (*CS*, 54) and he ruffles his hair. Unlike Mary's, Colin's physical appearance is described by Mary herself, who is staring at him while lying naked in their rooms at Robert's:

> [...] his slender, hairless legs were set a little apart, the feet, abnormally small like a child's, pointing inwards. The fine bones of his spine ran into a deep groove in the small of his back, and along this line [...] grew a fine down. [...] His buttocks were small and firm, like a child's. [...] His eyes, set deep, were dark when open, and now were closed by grey, spiky lashes. [...] The nose, like the ears, was long, but in profile it did not protrude; instead it lay flat, along the face, and carved into its base, like commas, were extraordinarily small nostrils. Colin's mouth was straight and firm parted by just a hint of tooth. His hair was unnaturally fine, like a baby's, and black, and fell in curls on to his slender, womanly neck. (*CS*, 39-40)

[33] C. Ricks, (1982). "Playing With Terror", in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 4, N. 1 [Available]. https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v04/n01/christopher-ricks/playing-with-terror [2022, September].

The lack of Mary's physical description is a consequence of Robert and Caroline's attraction to Colin; being Colin the object of their desire, "[i]t is [..] more than a necessity to portray [his] physical perfection".[34]

From this minute description is evident Colin's feminine, androgynous appearance; in their relationship, Mary is the one who has the more masculine sexual reactions to Colin. For instance, when Colin is wearing Caroline's embroidered nightie, Mary is deeply attracted to his effeminate look and she "reacts like a sexually aroused man"[35] saying, "'Oh yes! [...] You look so lovely. [...] You look like a god. I think I'll have to take you to bed'" (*CS*, 42). Colin has angelic, perfect features, to the point that Mary compares him to a statue. As Kogan maintains, Colin is passive; in fact, he does not react when Robert holds him by the hand and presents him to his friends as his boyfriend.[36] This passivity is the proof that Colin's deepest desire is to be a woman; actually, as he explicitly tells Mary:

> [...] he had long envied women's orgasms, and that there were times when he felt an aching emptiness, close to desire, between his scrotum and his anus; he thought this might be an approximation of womanly desire. (*CS*, 61)

Ironically, this desire is brutally fulfilled at the end of the novel, when Caroline paints Colin's lips red with her own blood, to prepare him for Robert. Eventually, McEwan points out Colin's tacit approval of being Robert's victim.

> There is something about Colin's behaviour which suggests from the beginning that he is a victim; he goes along with Robert and is easily manipulated, which suggests an unconscious contractual agreement. I think such an agreement can exist between oppressor and victim.[37]

In the dyad Robert-Caroline, given her story, Caroline is the only one who may firstly raise pity in the reader. She is a Canadian woman who was forced to stay at home

[34] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 76.
[35] I. Kogan, "A Fatal Attraction to Death: Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*", in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association*, Vol. 63, N. 4, 2015, p. 798.
[36] Ibid.
[37] J. Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 181.

because of Robert's murder attempt, which broke her back and caused her inexpressible suffering. She is a mysterious, apparently shy character, who wanders through her apartment in terrible pain. Yet, when she is asked about the origin of her illness, she just responds with a mysterious smile. However, Caroline turns out to be Robert's faithful ally in his sadomasochistic plan with Colin; she is ready to do everything to please her husband. The latter does not perceive Caroline as his wife, but

> [t]o him, [s]he is nothing more than a possession, another object to add to his shrine of obsessions. [...] Robert's chauvinism prevents him from accepting her as a person; in his eyes, she is nothing more than something with which he might satisfy his terrifying longings—and this at any cost.[38]

Robert is the most complex character. McEwan, during his interview with John Haffenden, thinks of Robert "more as a cipher [...] [and] part of the premise of the novel rather than an entirely convincing character".[39] This evil, misogynistic figure can be better described through his relationships with the different characters throughout the novel. Robert is the only character who is provided with a backstory: his father was a sadist with a confused gender identity. When Robert was a child, he used to see his father using "a little brush to make [his moustache] black, such as ladies use for their eyes, Mascara" (*CS*, 20). Kogan claims that this gender confusion was a generational issue, which started with Robert's grandfather.[40] As Robert states, "'My father and his father understood themselves clearly. They were men, and they were proud of their sex. Women understood them too. [...] There was no confusion'" (*CS*, 54). However, he later adds, "'Now men doubt themselves, they hate themselves, even more than they hate each other. Women treat men like children, because they can't take them seriously'" (*CS*, 54); with such words, Robert stresses his own confusion with gender roles. It is interesting to highlight that Colin, as previously stated, is always referred to as a child, thus confirming Robert's point of view. To dominate over women, but mostly to repair his broken male identity, Robert uses aggression towards them, stating that women love violence and being

[38] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, pp. 80-81.
[39] J. Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 180.
[40] I. Kogan, "A Fatal Attraction to Death: Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*", p. 799.

controlled by a powerful, violent man. Eventually, Robert is convinced that Colin is also attracted to his aggressive behaviour.

Robert's incident in his father's studio and its aftermath caused him long-term trauma; Robert was punished both physically and psychologically: physically, because his father beat him every night for three days and did not speak politely to him for many months; psychologically because he was downgraded from being his father's favourite child and "the next head of the family" (*CS*, 20) to having lost all his respect and esteem. For this reason, Robert tries to compensate for his father's lost love, by creating another Robert, who has control on everything.

Robert and Caroline's relationship is rooted in perversion and sadism; their perverse lovemaking is based on Robert inflicting pain and humiliation on Caroline, who is submissive yet takes pleasure in it, to the point of being ready to be murdered by her lover. Kogan suggests that Caroline, in the sexual act, may realise Robert's "unconscious fantasy of being the submissive and incestuous mother, whom he consciously adores and unconsciously loathed".[41] By becoming the object of Robert's incestuous fantasies, Caroline becomes his assistant.

Robert is even able to insinuate himself into Mary and Colin's relationship; at the beginning of the novel when the couple is sitting on the hotel balcony, there is a man with binoculars probably looking at them from a small boat, who leaves when Colin looks at him. This man could have been Robert. When he finally manages to meet the two lovers, Robert becomes very invasive of their personal spaces; he literally drags them to his bar, to the point that Mary is forced to highlight her distress by saying, as if to a child, "'Robert, let go of my hand. [...] We don't need to be *dragged* towards good food'" (*CS*, 15). Once again, a grown man is addressed in a childlike, motherly tone. This physical intrusion becomes more and more evident through the novel. Robert often puts himself between Colin and Mary, mostly physically, "eventually separating them, slowly taking possession of Colin".[42] Moreover, he exploits every chance to touch his coveted object, Colin, to the point of uncovering his sadomasochism by punching him in his stomach, "instantly expel[ling] all the air from Colin's lungs" (*CS*, 55).

[41] Ibid., p. 801.
[42] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p.79.

Robert has no fear to express his sexual attraction for Colin; Robert's attention could be seen as "a source of sexual excitement and narcissistic gratification"[43] for Colin. The latter is not as concerned as Mary regarding the presence of his pictures in Robert's apartment, given the fact that, when Mary tells him that Robert secretly took photos of him, Colin falls asleep while listening to her. As Kogan posits, the fact that Robert took pictures of him even before meeting him may have been seductive to Colin himself.[44] Robert's character can be perfectly summarised as "the chauvinistic, sadistic minotaur who preys within the labyrinthine streets, plays the archetypal false host, seductively luring the innocents into his lair and wickedly dispatching them to satiate his own desires".[45]

2.5. The Ending

As previously stated, *The Comfort of Strangers* ends with the brutal murder of Colin, in front of a drugged, paralysed Mary, who cannot save her lover but has to witness his assassination helplessly. Colin's ritualised murder is characterised by a total lack of empathy on the part of Robert and Caroline who, heedless of the suffering inflicted on the couple of tourists, continue their perverse game. After Colin's death, indeed, Robert and Caroline's sadism does not stop; on the contrary, they continue having sex in Colin's blood, as it can be imagined from Mary's words:

> [a]ll through the night that followed [Mary] dreamed of moans and whimpers, and sudden shouts, of figures locked and turning at her feet, churning through the little pond, calling out for joy. (*CS*, 97)

It is very likely that Mary's sleep is more of a drowsiness, which allowed her to be partially aware of her surroundings, making her hear what was happening. When she wakes up, she notices that Colin's blood has dried up and that the luggage near the door has vanished, together with its owners.

After the murder, the reader follows Mary into the hospital, where she provides testimony as the only witness of the crime;

[43] I. Kogan, "A Fatal Attraction to Death: Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*", p. 805.
[44] Ibid.
[45] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 79.

> Mary [is] questioned, cross-questioned, photographed; she dictate[s] statements, initial[s] documents, and stare[s] at pictures. She carr[ies] a sealed envelope from one department to another and [is] questioned again. (*CS*, 97)

Nobody pities her, because she is considered more as a source of information rather than an object of concern. Given the detailed account of the story and her lack of emotion, which the official defines "'[n]ot like a woman's statement at all'" (*CS*, 98), Mary is seen as "the kind of person they could reasonably expect to be present at such a crime, like an arsonist at someone else's blaze" (*CS*, 98).

McEwan is able to make Colin's murder more horrifying than it already is, by underlining the indifference of the world that surrounds it. Before entering the hospital, Mary stops for a moment to look around her; the world seems not to have been affected at all by the latest events, continuing its everyday chores:

> The women were setting up their stalls [...]. A battered van with corrugated tin sides was delivering flowers to the vendors and, nearer, a woman was taking crosses, statuettes and prayer books from an airline holdall and setting them out on a folding table. In the distance, in front of the hospital doors, a gardener was watering the drive, keeping down the dust. (*CS*, 97)

Lastly, while Mary is following an officer along the hospital corridor looking at his worn-out heels, she again notices that "[o]rdinariness prevailed for an instant, and she had the briefest intimation of the grief that lay in wait" (*CS*, 100).

In her article, Seaboyer praises McEwan's "textual staging"[46], which distracts the reader from the several hints foreshadowing Colin's death. When Colin and Mary are about to leave after dinner at Robert and Caroline's,

> [Mary stops to look] at a large photograph. She [takes] it in her hands. A man stood on a balcony smoking a cigarette. The print was grainy and indistinct, taken from some distance and enlarged many times. (*CS*, 58)

[46] J. Seaboyer, "Sadism Demands a Story: Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*", p. 975.

Being this scene in the middle of Caroline disturbingly praying Colin to pay them another visit as soon as possible, it passes unnoticed, because it could represent a transitional passage. However, the enlarged picture should take the reader back to the novel's first pages, when Colin is smoking a joint on the hotel balcony and a man on a boat is probably looking at him with binoculars. Moreover, both times in which Robert meets Colin and Mary in the streets, he always carries a camera with him; at first, this may seem rather unimportant, but it assumes value when Caroline brings Mary in front of "a wide baize-covered board covered with numerous photographs, overlapping like a collage, mostly black and white, a few Polaroids in colour, all of them of Colin" (*CS*, 90).

At the end of *The Comfort of Strangers*, Mary attempts to formulate a theory to come up with a reason to justify Colin's death. She tries to do so while sitting next to Colin's corpse, but she does not manage to utter a single word to him. Her original plan was:

> [to] tell him her theory, tentative at this stage, of course, which explained how the imagination, the sexual imagination, men's ancient dreams of hurting, and women's of being hurt, embodied and declared a powerful single organizing principle, which distorted all relations, all truth. (*CS*, 100)

Mary's words uncannily remind the reader of those of Robert, thus implying Mary's submission "to the overtly cruel, the overly simplistic mind-set of the dominators".[47]

2.6. Style

The Comfort of Strangers is a third-person narration, with limited omniscience; much of what happens in the novel is recounted through the eyes and thoughts of Colin and Mary. The two points of view intertwine throughout the narration; yet, they always remain separated from each other. However, the reader is aware that there is also a third point of view belonging to an external figure, who coldly comments and expands on the actions of the couple; for example, the sentence "Alone, perhaps, they each could have explored the city with pleasure" (*CS*, 4) and also the description of Caroline's physical appearance

[47] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 87.

in chapter six are to be attributed to this figure. According to Malcom, for large parts of the novel,

> [...] one is aware of the narrator largely through the absence of any identification with any character's point of view. The narration is frequently objective, limited to observable, external details. Even moments of great importance and emotional intensity are narrated from the outside.[48]

McEwan does not want the reader to identify with *The Comfort of Strangers*' characters. For this reason, he makes extensive use of the reported speech; some of the most relevant conversations are written in this manner, thus highlighting the narrator's disengagement, and distancing the reader from the fictional characters. In addition, McEwan's style alternates between neutral and quite sophisticated passages; the latter include complex lexis and long clauses with multiple subordinates, which provide the text with a "slight stylistic shift upward".[49]

Malcom claims that McEwan's writing strategies have a self-referential purpose; they all imply the presence of a narrator, who is not involved in the story personally, but acts like a journalist, taking notes and then recounting the story precisely. In this way, the reader is always aware of the text's artificial nature, which distances him/her from an identification with its characters.[50]

Because of its dark, macabre insistence on violence, perversion, sadomasochism, and obsession, *The Comfort of Strangers* can be labelled as a Gothic novel. Robert's appearance "as if summoned" (*CS,* 14), the cemetery in the background of his apartment, the unsettling atmosphere that he always carries with him, and, of course, Colin's brutal murder are all elements which can be found in a Gothic story. *The Comfort of Strangers*, additionally, has also connections with crime and psychological fiction. Despite the presence of all these Gothic elements, McEwan's focus is on the normality of the events narrated and on the relationships between men and women, which allow the story to be read in a wider way. Colin, Laura, Robert, and Caroline are quite general names and, lacking surnames, this generality is even more noticeable. According to McEwan, what

[48] D. Malcom, *Understanding Ian McEwan,* p. 69.
[49] Ibid., p. 70.
[50] Ibid.

happens in the novel cannot be confined to a city in particular; the reader can only speculate about the novel's city being Venice and he/she has also to be aware that violence may be found in every part of the world.

2.7. Intertextuality

The Comfort of Strangers is a "deeply allusive work"[51], which refers to many literary works of the twentieth century, featuring Venice as their setting. There are echoes of James' *The Aspern Papers* (1888), du Maurier's "Don't Look Now" (1971), Pinter's plays *The Homecoming* (1965) and *Betrayal* (1978), and Mann's *Death in Venice*.

McEwan recalls the daunting Venice of James and du Maurier. Echoes of *The Aspern Papers* are to be found in the death-like appearance of Miss Juliana Bordereau, while the secluded life that Miss Juliana and her niece Tina lead in the Venetian palazzo can be mirrored in Mary and Colin's unsuccessful attempt to be isolated from the outer world and, consequently, from life. Du Maurier's short story is even richer in themes that recur in *The Comfort of Strangers*, such as those of getting lost and of the senseless, bloody murder. Both John and Laura and Colin and Mary end up getting lost in the tangled streets of the city and it is here that John and Colin meet their murderer for the first time. In "Don't Look Now", another theme is that of ambiguity which is present in *The Comfort of Strangers* as well; in fact, both male protagonists are victims of an error of judgement: in the same way in which John perceives the female dwarf as a 5-year-old in distress, Colin misjudges Robert, thinking of him as a polite host, saving him from wandering through the city in circles. Eventually, in both *The Aspern Papers* and "Don't Look Now", Venice goes hand in hand with death, disorientation, and misunderstanding.

With Pinter's *The Homecoming* and *Betrayal*, *The Comfort of Strangers* shares the Venetian setting; however, *The Homecoming* is the first play in which Pinter decides to use Venice as one of the settings of his two-act play. Venice is the place chosen by a man and his wife where to go on holiday, in order to try to save their marriage. Actually, the couple does not succeed in their attempt, just as Colin and Mary's attempt miserably fails. It is also interesting to mention that McEwan's novel was adapted into a film directed by Paul Schrader and the screenplay was written by Pinter himself.

[51] Ibid., p. 76.

In James', du Maurier's, and McEwan's works, the foreign tourist falls prey to people living in Venice: *The Aspern Papers*' man of letters has his coveted letters burnt by Tina, who lives in Venice; John is murdered by a Venetian dwarf; Colin is killed by Robert, who has been living in Venice for several years.

2.7.1. Echoes of *Death in Venice* in *The Comfort of Strangers*

Despite the complex web of works implied in *The Comfort of Strangers*, the text which has much resonance in McEwan's novel is *Death in Venice*, whose original title is *Der Tod in Venedig*, by the German author Thomas Mann.

Mann's novella recounts the story of Gustav von Aschenbach, a 50-year-old, German author who decides to take a break from his hard work and spend a holiday in Venice, in the Grand Hôtel des Bains on the Lido island. Here, Aschenbach meets the 14-year-old Tadzio, a beautiful, young boy from Poland, who is also spending his holidays in the lagoon city with all his family. The author is immediately stuck by this boy's appearance,

> Aschenbach was amazed to see that the boy was absolutely beautiful. His face, pale and of a graceful reserve, surrounded by honey-colored curls, with its straight nose, lovely lips, earnest expression, sweet and godly, all recalled Greek statues of the noblest era; but despite the pure and consummate form, his features exerted such a unique personal charm that the observer felt he had never encountered such perfection in nature or in the arts.[52]

At first, Aschenbach's interest in Tadzio is merely aesthetic, artistic, and a source of inspiration. Soon, however, this innocent interest develops into an actual obsession, leading Aschenbach to admit to himself that he is in love with Tadzio, to the point that he renounces leaving Venice when his health is worsening due to the humid climate, typical of the city.

One day, Aschenbach is wandering through the city when he reads some announcements warning the inhabitants and the tourists against "certain gastric

[52] T. Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Tales*, London, Penguin Books, 1999, p. 262.

disorders"[53] typical of the weather and also advising them not to eat shellfish. However, he is told that there is nothing to worry about and that the government is already containing the contagion by spraying germicide as "[a] protective measure".[54] Once back to the hotel, Aschenbach notices that there is no sign informing the tourists about the disease, clearly trying to keep them in the dark and avoiding their early departure. Despite its unfairness,

> Aschenbach felt a dark satisfaction about what was happening in the filthy alleys of Venice, about the official cover-up and the city's nasty secret—a secret that blended with his own most private secret and that he, too, was intent on guarding.[55]

After having known from an English man that in Venice the health risk is not related to the heat and the scirocco but to a cholera pandemic, of which the population has always been aware, Aschenbach considers warning Tadzio's mother. However, he quickly changes his mind, considering that if he does, Tadzio will be lost forever. This decision thrills him and leads him to dream of a Dionysian orgy, revealing to him that his feelings for Tadzio are sexual. For this reason, he tries to appear younger in order to result appealing to Tadzio, with whom, actually, does not happen anything.

Aschenbach dies on the beach of the Lido, looking at Tadzio, and his corpse will be found after a few minutes.

From this brief summary, it is easy to find similarities between Mann's novella and McEwan's novel. Despite the fact that McEwan's novel is not based on Mann's, "a series of elliptical and increasingly *Unheimlich* doublings and echoes accrue as the protagonists lose their bearings".[56] In both works, an older man is attracted by a younger one, who is described to be as perfect as a Greek statue. However, this homosexual attraction ends with death; in Mann, it is Achenbach, the pursuer, who dies, while in McEwan it is the pursued Colin who is horribly murdered. Aschenbach and Robert are attracted to Tadzio and Colin because they are a means to achieve "some kind of transcendent state".[57]

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[53] Ibid., p. 287.
[54] Ibid., p. 288.
[55] Ibid.
[56] J. Seaboyer, "Sadism Demands a Story: Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*", p. 962.
[57] Ibid.

Another point in common is the characters' complicity in their own destruction; as Aschenbach is perfectly aware that he is following a "self-destructive path"[58], in the same way Colin and Mary know the danger that meeting Robert implies, but neither of them can avoid it.

In *Death in Venice*, Venice is a decaying city, while in *The Comfort of Strangers* these features are mirrored by the sense of threat that the protagonists feel. Despite this impending danger, cholera on the one hand and Robert and Caroline's dangerous game on the other hand, the protagonists choose not to leave the city, almost embracing their tragic destinies. Moreover, Aschenbach's bacchantic dream full of sexuality, "the Maenadic frenzy and bloody mutilation"[59], may have inspired the "orgy of violent sex"[60] which takes place in Colin's blood after his murder.

The excessive concern about physical appearances in *Death in Venice*'s and *The Comfort of Strangers*' characters is another common thread. Aschenbach, Colin, and Mary spend much time grooming themselves in an extremely narcissistic way; Aschenbach's sole purpose is that of pleasing, while the couple does it in case there is someone among the crowd of tourists who cares about their look. Furthermore, Aschenbach, while trying to appear younger to have a chance with Tadzio, has his lips rouged "in a raspberry tint"[61]; Caroline colours Colin's lips too, but with her spilt blood.

Another feature shared between Mann's and McEwan's works is the autobiographical element which can be found between their lines. As previously discussed, the inspiration for *The Comfort of Strangers* came after a journey to Venice; in an interview, McEwan states that "something of the visit found its way into the book"[62], which was "terribly difficult to write"[63]. About Colin and his murder, he says,

> I felt very strongly identified with Colin, as if I was writing my own death in some strange way. I felt terribly sickened by it. Part of me did not want to go on, and another part of me was ambitious and delighted by the writing.[64]

[58] D. Malcom, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, p. 78.
[59] J. Seaboyer, "Sadism Demands a Story: Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*", p. 962.
[60] D. Malcom, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, p. 79.
[61] T. Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Tales*, p. 303.
[62] J. Haffenden, *Novelists in Interview*, p. 177.
[63] Ibid., p. 178.
[64] Ibid., p. 183.

Concerning the autobiographical aspect of Mann's *Death in Venice*, in his book *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, Reed writes,

> *Der Tod in Venedig* records the phases of a real experiment; it is not a mere mental construct, manipulating an imagined character through arbitrarily chosen adventures. To begin with, Thomas Mann's own Venetian experiences in 1911 were close to Aschenbach's, at least in embryo. [...] Tadzio and his family, [...] the cholera epidemic, the honest English clerk at the travel bureau, [...] everything was provided by reality, not invented for the later fiction.[65]

Mann's Aschenbach shares many features with his author and, for this reason, Mann conceives him as a possible future himself; in the novella, indeed, Aschenbach is more than fifty years old, while Mann was thirty-six when he wrote the story.

Despite McEwan's identification with Colin and Mann's with Aschenbach, the two authors clearly take distances from their characters; McEwan, as previously explained, also prevents readers to identify themselves with Colin, using a detached, cold, formal tone, whereas Mann establishes a clear boundary between Aschenbach and himself, by using participle nouns to replace his name (such as 'der Verwirrte', meaning 'the confused man'). Towards the end of the novella, Mann also treats Aschenbach with sarcasm, by juxtaposing his respectable figure of author to his behaviour in Venice,

> He sat there, the master, the artist who had achieved dignity, the author of "A Wretched Man," who, employing a form of exemplary purity, had renounced bohemianism and the dismal chasm, had broken with the abyss and reviled all vileness. He had risen high, transcending his knowledge and outgrowing all irony, he had adjusted to his responsibilities toward the public and its trust in him [...] whose style was a model for schoolboys.[66]

[65] T.J. Reed, *Thomas Mann: The Uses of Tradition*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2002, p. 149.
[66] T. Mann, *Death in Venice and Other Tales*, p. 304.

2.8. Patriarchy and Feminism

At the beginning of the novel, Mary appears as a fervent feminist, who praises the Italian feminist movement's proposal to castrate convicted rapists, ignoring Colin's attempt to point out that this solution only ridicules the feminist movement itself. Despite Mary's radical beliefs, she does not respond to Robert when, looking at "a crude stencil in red paint [showing] a clenched fist enclosed within the sign used by ornithologists to denote the female of the species" (*CS*, 16), tries to apologise for it by saying, "'These are women who cannot find a man. They want to destroy everything that is good between men and women. […] 'They are too ugly'" (*CS*, 16). All she does is stare at him blankly. As Slay claims, Mary alone cannot defeat "the angry and brutal flow of male chauvinism"[67] of which society is permeated, to the point that even women have been unconsciously imbued with patriarchal values[68]; as mentioned in the examples above, both Colin and Robert find feminists' ideas completely detached from reality and, thus, unachievable. The police even treat Mary with suspicion when she gives her report of Colin's murder without emotions, precisely and logically, "not like a woman [..] at all" (*CS*, 98). It is evident that Mary is surrounded by a world dominated by patriarchy and male privilege. It seems that McEwan wants to highlight that

> [...] the deleterious hierarchicalization that results from male domination cannot be thwarted by a single effort, a lone voice; rather, the defeat must ensue from the making of a new communal if not universal consciousness concerning difference and desire.[69]

Robert's chauvinistic view of women was shaped by his grandfather and especially by his father, who had a huge impact on his life. Their pride in being powerful males is echoed in Robert's theory on men's relationships with women, which should be governed by precise rules of submission and violence. As Robert proudly says to Colin:

> Whatever they might say they believe, women love aggression and strength and power in men. It's deep in their minds. […] And even though they hate themselves

[67] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 83.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

> for it, women long to be ruled by men. It's deep in their minds. They lie to themselves. They talk of freedom, and dream of captivity. […] It is the world that shapes people's minds. It is men who have shaped the world. So women's minds are shaped by men. From earliest childhood, the world they see is made by men. Now the women lie to themselves and there is confusion and unhappiness everywhere. It wasn't the case in my grandfather's day.' (*CS*, 54-55)

Robert's monologue is just a way to justify his brutal sadistic violence against Caroline. As Banks suggests, *The Comfort of Strangers* develops Robert's ideas to demonstrate the danger of his beliefs and attitudes[70]; additionally, the novel criticises those members of the society who make these assumptions naturally, considering women the subservient object of a powerful, dominating man. Actually, according to such a chauvinistic mentality, Caroline is the ideal woman; she is a submissive, obedient object ready to satisfy all Robert's sadomasochistic desires, "simultaneously horrified and elated by the brutality".[71]

2.9. Perversion and Sadomasochism

The points discussed in the previous paragraph lead to two other themes, perversion and sadomasochism, which are perfectly embodied by Robert and Caroline, who also manage to 'contaminate' Colin and Mary with their sadistic practices. After the first encounter with Robert and Caroline, Colin and Mary have mixed feelings; on the one hand, they are repulsed by the couple's sadomasochistic attitude but, on the other hand, they find themselves spending the next four days more passionately than ever. Colin and Mary rediscover their long-missing complicity, "[t]heir conversation, in essence, was no less celebratory than their lovemaking; in both they lived inside the moment. They clung to each other, in talk as in sex" (*CS*, 62). Probably aware of the fact that this 'rebirth' is to be attributed to Robert and Caroline's sadomasochistic relationship, Colin and Mary decide not to discuss it, thus rendering sex both a denial and an escape from what they came across the day before. However, it is evident that they have been radically influenced by the strangers; indeed, they refer several times to sadomasochistic practices,

[70] J.R. Banks, "A Gondola Named Desire", p. 29.
[71] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 84.

starting with imagining being handcuffed to each other and ending with "stories that produced moans and giggles of hopeless abandon, that won from the spellbound listener consent to a lifetime of subjection and humiliation" (*CS*, 62-63). The first to start is Mary, who "mutter[s] her intention of hiring a surgeon to amputate Colin's arms and legs. She would keep him in a room in her house, and use him exclusively for sex, sometimes lending him out to friends" (*CS*, 63); Colin follows,

> [inventing] for Mary a large, intricate machine, made of steel, painted bright red and powered by electricity; it had pistons and controls, straps and dials, and made a low hum when it was switched on. Colin hum[s] in Mary's ear. Once Mary was strapped in, fitted to tubes that fed and evacuated her body, the machine would fuck her, not just for hours or weeks, but for years, on and on, for the rest of her life, till she was dead and on even after that, till Colin, or his solicitor, switched it off. (*CS*, 63)

Their passion, however, soon fades, leaving only a bitter pill to swallow: Colin and Mary's passion was nothing but "a form of parasitism"[72], which had Robert and Caroline's perversities as its origin.

Robert and Caroline's relationship is deeply rooted in sadomasochism and perversion, to the point that Caroline and Mary have a disturbing dialogue about love and death:

> 'If you are in love with someone, you would even be prepared to let them kill you, if necessary.'
> […] 'Necessary?'
> Caroline had not heard. 'That's what I mean by "in love",' she said triumphantly. Mary pushed the sandwiches out of her own reach. 'And presumably you'd be prepared to kill the person you're "in love" with.'
> 'Oh yes, if I was the man I would.'

[72] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 78.

From these few lines, it is evident that Caroline is so manipulated and subdued by Robert that her life has no value or, it would be better to say, it is valuable as long as it satisfies her husband's needs. Their marriage, once happy and characterised by sexual curiosity, has sunk into a dangerous sadomasochistic spiral, in which Caroline is forced to live in constant pain and fear. While talking to Mary, she says:

> [m]y body was covered in bruises, cuts, weals. Three of my ribs were cracked. Robert knocked out one of my teeth. I had a broken finger. I didn't dare visit my parents and as soon as Robert's grandfather died we moved here. To Robert's friends I was just another beaten wife, which was exactly what I was. Nobody noticed. It gave Robert some status round the places where he drank. (*CS*, 87)

For this reason, Caroline is in constant suffering, every move she makes causes her unbearable pain. However, Robert's plan to involve Colin in their sexual games leads her to regain strength; in fact, her pale features revitalise, transforming her into an almost different woman, with the enthusiasm of a teenager. Caroline's attraction to Robert's brutal plan changes her status from a victim to "a participant, not a brutalized subject but a willing confederate".[73]

Caroline confesses her relationship with sadomasochistic practices to Mary, who listens to her curiously:

> Robert started to hurt me when we made love. Not a lot, but enough to make me cry out. I think I tried hard to stop him. One night I got really angry at him, but he went on doing it, and I had to admit, though it took a long time, that I liked it. […] It's not the pain itself, it's the fact of the pain, of being helpless before it, and being reduced to nothing by it. It's pain in a particular context, being punished and therefore being guilty. We both liked what was happening. […] I needed it. Robert began to really hurt me. He used a whip. He beat me with his fists as he made love to me. I was terrified, but the terror and the pleasure were all one. […] I was sick with humiliation, I thrilled to the point of passing out. […]. I loved being punished. (*CS,* 86)

[73] Ibid., p. 82.

From this premise, Robert and Caroline's relationship sinks into a more dangerous spiral of brutal violence, to the point that Robert's ultimate desire to satisfy his unhealthy, sexual desires is that of killing his wife. Luckily, he does not succeed in his purpose, but Caroline is left with her back broken. For this reason, "Caroline's injury is a direct consequence of her masochistic desires, an indirect consequence of her society's patriarchal demands".[74]

In this situation, Robert is the one who wins everything: he has his sadomasochistic desires satisfied and can play the role of the perfect dominating, chauvinistic man in the same way as his grandfather and father did before him. Nevertheless, Robert lacks something. Indeed, through the words of Caroline, the reader gets to know Robert's desire to become a father; however, because of a health problem, he never succeeds in fulfilling his desire. According to Caroline, this failure in becoming a father led him, and consequently her, to sadomasochistic practices.

In her article, Kogan analyses the figure of Robert, whom she classifies as a "lower-level sadomasochistic pervert with prominent aggressive and narcissistic traits"[75], who uses sex to maintain his status of dominator and to sustain his narcissism.[76] Caroline and then Colin represent Robert's ways to assert his power play, by degrading them to the role of objects and controlling them; Robert is excited by the thought that he can control, use, and then discard people whenever he wants. Caroline is just a 'helper' for him, collaborating to create his omnipotent figure.

Given his traumatic childhood, as an adult Robert becomes the exploiter that his narcissistic father was, thus becoming totally evil. This transformation of the abused child into a violent monster is one of the possible outcomes of domestic abuse and can be found several times in literature. For this reason, Kogan points out:

> [...] violent scenarios […] are the reversal of his betrayal and abuse by his father. In committing murder, Robert identifies with the aggressor, who ravishes, despoils, and murders a beautiful and innocent child, a representative of his perfect childhood self.[77]

[74] Ibid., p. 85.
[75] I. Kogan, "A Fatal Attraction to Death: Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*", p. 800.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., pp. 806-807.

It can be argued that Robert, but Caroline too, has a strong attraction to death, which manifests itself in the need of a third, unsuspecting person in his sadomasochistic games: Colin. Indeed, the couple soon realises that the two of them are not enough to satisfy their sexual, perverted desires. Though Robert's chauvinism would suggest the tip of the triangle to be a woman, many hints in the novel suggest Colin to be the chosen one; from their first encounter, Robert demonstrates a particular interest in this man, whom he even defines an "angel" (*CS*, 52). What matters to Robert is not the gender of the third person, but the fact that this person is going to be killed by his own hands, thus reaching the peak of ecstasy. Colin's murder is nothing more than the result of a "perverted fantasy, a lost and corrupted society"[78] and Colin's only fault is that of finding himself in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Comfort of Strangers is a warning against the extreme consequences to which a patriarchal society can push itself; Robert is the chauvinistic man, whose excesses can occur in such a society, whereas Caroline is the prototypical subservient, dominated woman. McEwan condemns both figures and, in his later works, continues his feminist battle, exploring the role of women in society and portraying them as the strongest person in relationships.

[78] J. Slay, *Ian McEwan*, p. 86.

Conclusion

In conclusion, from the early 20th century, Venice starts to be seen as a place in which beauty and terror coexist, thus creating an ambiguous setting, which is perfect for Gothic stories. From this moment on, Venice is not only the fascinating touristic place it has always been but also a dangerous labyrinth in which anyone can easily lose the way.

The original setting for Henry James' novella *The Aspern Papers* was not Venice; James drew inspiration from Captain Silsbee's quest for some unpublished correspondence between Lord Byron and Shelley, which were treasured by Byron's lover Miss Clairmont and her niece in Florence. The Captain's attempt to get hold of the letters was as unsuccessful as that of the nameless scholar in James' novella. The decision to set the story in Venice was strongly influenced by the literary image of the city and its associations with decade, death, and decrepitude, all literary tropes that will be further explored in the 20th century.

Henry James' knowledge of Venice allowed him to shape the Bordereau residence on a real palazzo with a garden located in Venice: the Bordereau palazzo recalls Palazzo Cappello, which is located in Rio Marin and has a private, adjoining garden. The palazzo's owners are Miss Juliana and Miss Tina Bordereau, two American women who come from America and whose past remains obscure to the narrator and, consequently, to readers. The American man of letters is constantly misled by the cryptic behaviour of Miss Juliana, whose eyes are always covered by a shade. In addition, Miss Juliana is such a sinister, greedy character that the critic seems actually the one who is being deceived. Tina is the only character ready to help the man of letters in his hunt; being the latter the first person to enter the palace in a very long time with a 'mission', Tina believes that the critic may have an interest in her. However, the critic's eyes and feelings are all towards Aspern's coveted letters, to the point that he treats Tina as a means to get hold of the letters to old Miss Juliana. However, at the end of the novella, Tina burns them, making him regret his choices for the rest of his life.

The Aspern Papers mirrors James' point of view on a topic very dear to him, that is the author's right to privacy. Actually, Henry James was obsessed with privacy, to the point that he burned all of his private letters, urging his recipients to do the same. Furthermore, James may have been so obsessed with privacy because of his concealed homosexuality; indeed, *The Aspern Papers*' relationship between the scholar and Tina

almost mirrors that of James with Miss Woolson. The latter had feelings for the author and thought, or better hoped, to be reciprocated. However, James always described her in terms very similar to those used by the critic to refer to Tina. Miss Woolson committed suicide by jumping from a balcony in Venice. The tale's narrator, actually, has ambiguous feelings for Aspern; indeed, what remains to the critic is the Aspern's portrait left to him by Miss Tina. The latter thinks that the narrator has sold it, but it hangs above his desk. The tale's last line, "When I look at it I can scarcely bear my loss—I mean of the precious papers"[1], is very unclear and seems to refer to a greater loss, such as his impossibility of meeting Aspern. For this reason, *The Aspern Papers* reveals James' anxiety over his relationship with Miss Woolson and his homosexuality.

In Daphne du Maurier's story "Don't Look Now", the reader immediately feels immersed in a homely, safe, familiar space, which soon turns out to be a nightmare. In addition, the deadliest violence stems from human beings, not monsters as in the classic Gothic stories, which were characterised by the presence of supernatural beings, such as vampires and werewolves. Du Maurier's use of the Gothic conventions gives her the possibility to explore her identity anxieties; her Gothic stories are deeply influenced by her personal concerns, which are to be linked to her private life and her desire to be a boy, to fulfil her father's desire of having a son.

In the novella, Venice is not simply envisioned as an emotional escape but as a bleak prison of haunting insecurity, disturbance, and disorientation. Daphne Du Maurier's language is consequently shadowed by threat and ambivalence as she constantly constructs and deconstructs the magic, the romance of Venice, which turns out to be a deathly trap for John.

Right from the beginning, "Don't Look Now" is permeated by death, which is also the reason which brought John and Laura to Venice: to ease the grief for the loss of their daughter Christine. The old twin sisters, Johnnie's illness, and Laura's alleged disappearance set up an ominous atmosphere that leads to the inevitable death of John at the end of the story. John's description of Venice hints at its deadly power; the city's look, indeed, radically changes from day to night, thus highlighting the sense of ambiguity and contrast that it represents.

[1] H. James, *The Aspern Papers*, London, Penguin Books, p. 137.

In "Don't Look Now", du Maurier makes extensive use of Freud's concept of the uncanny, which refers to something familiar to the psyche which went through a process of repression. This concept is to be found in the classic Gothic tropes of the double, masquerade, monstrous body, and veiling. The most grotesque, uncanny figure of the novella is the dwarf, whom John mistakes for a 5-year-old girl; while the Gothic heroine uses her veil to conceal her beauty, the dwarf woman uses it to disguise herself as a child in danger, attract her victim and, finally, kill him. John's last words highlight his inability to catch the hints coming from the twin sisters but also from Venice itself.

Lastly, Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* contains references to both James' and du Maurier's novellas. Colin and Mary are the modern versions of du Maurier's John and Laura, who also choose to spend a holiday in Venice, hoping to regain their missing serenity and passion. In both works, this hope is shattered as Colin and John are brutally murdered. Other echoes from du Maurier's novella include the tourists' disorientation in the Venetian labyrinthine alleyways, the senseless murder, and the deadly errors of judgement. As in *The Aspern Papers*, Colin and Mary find themselves in an ambiguous Venice, in which past and present intermingle and play different roles for the characters; Colin and Mary lead a secluded life in the hotel and their past is unknown to the reader. In the same way, the Misses do not go out from their decrepit palazzo and their past is undisclosed. While Colin, Mary, and the Misses Bordereau live in the present, the sadomasochistic Robert and the nameless critic are obsessed with the past; Robert's present is shaped by his traumatic childhood, and the critic's obsession is related to a distant past of which, unluckily, he can never be a part of.

As the story progresses, the city becomes more and more threatening and oppressive: Colin and Mary continue losing their way, leading them to rely on the help of strangers. Mary even describes the city as a terribly suffocating prison. *The Comfort of Strangers* features a dangerous couple, whose practices of sadomasochism and perversion contaminate Colin and Mary and culminate in the former's murder. Being Robert and Caroline aware that the only way to satisfy their sexual desires is to involve a third unsuspecting person, they make Colin their sexual object, who is discarded after their use. Robert is portrayed as a chauvinistic man, whereas Caroline is the prototypical subservient, dominated woman.

These three works masterfully convey what Venice represents in literature. It is a place imbued with a glorious past, which survives in the city's architecture and atmosphere; at the same time, it is an ambiguous space. Many works of literature juxtapose Venice's grandeur with the ideas of decay and death, employed to describe the city from the nineteenth century. Indeed, the literary trope of death in Venice became prominent at the beginning of the 1800s and persisted throughout the following century; Venice is seen as a *locus mortis*, where people either die of a fatal illness, such as Aschenbach in Mann's *Death in Venice*, or are murdered, as John in "Don't Look Now" and Colin in *The Comfort of Strangers*. In James' *The Aspern Papers*, the main character is neither killed nor falls ill but he deceives and, possibly, is deceived. The man of letters does not pay attention to the decaying Venice, which he critically comments on only a few times and then remains in the background. In the novella, particular emphasis is given to the past: Venice's heroic past is now reduced to decay and decrepitude, as mirrored by the Bordereau palazzo and Miss Juliana, who can be considered Venice's personification.

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