

# ULUSLARARASI SOSYAL ARAŐTIRMALAR DERĐİŐİ THE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL RESEARCH

Uluslararası Sosyal Arařtırmalar Dergisi / The Journal of International Social Research  
Cilt: 13 Sayı: 73 Ekim 2020 & Volume: 13 Issue: 73 October 2020  
www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

## FEMME FATALE 101: THE BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FEMME FATALE ARCHETYPE

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### Abstract

The femme fatale archetype that exists since the creation of the universe is closely linked with the evil by the patriarchal discourses. However, she might have more than that in her dual nature. The present study examines the defining features of the *Femme Fatale* archetype in the light of Steve Simkin or Rebecca Stott's recent analysis of the archetype. It attempts to define the basic characteristic features of the femme fatale, as well as it differentiates the archetype from other similar female types. The study also relates the archetype with Sigmund Freud's life and death drives *Eros & Thanatos*, and Julia Kristeva's concept of the *abject*. The study concludes that the femme fatale archetype changes through different periods as some of the features of the archetype being transformed or be lost in the process, yet the archetype's defining features can be observed in a wider scope in this research.

**Keywords:** Femme Fatale, Archetype, Feminism, Lethal Woman, Abject, Eros and Thanatos, Women Studies, Life and Death Drives.

### 1. Introduction

"You are crueller, you that we love,  
Than hatred, hunger, or death;  
You have eyes and breasts like a dove,  
And you kill men's hearts with a breath."  
Algernon Charles Swinburne - *Satia Te Sanguine*

Fierce, powerful and sexually prone women have always existed and made their mark on the culture and history of humanity. They were the creators of the universe in different world myths such as Greek mythology, as David Leeming and Jake Page say in *Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine*: "the All-Giving and the All-Taking, the source of life and death and regeneration." (1994, 7) They were worshipped as the universe itself, the Earth Mother or Goddess. These female figures were thanked for their rejuvenation of nature, and procreation of humankind as well as feared for their destruction of the same nature and

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humankind. However, in the process of human history, Leeming and Page argue (1994, 51) that “[t]he potential for a male challenge to Goddess's supremacy must have existed from the moment humans understood the importance of the male role in procreation.” While patriarchy was being constituted, the fierce and sexually prone female power was made to metamorphose into something evil and dangerous. The lethal women were despised and forced to bow to the new emerging patriarchs. A French denomination, ‘the Femme Fatale’, inextricably linked to the concept of evil emerged in time and became world-wide acknowledged for those deadly women who have been thriving on the earth since its creation;

Female power, as represented by the new worldview in the figure of the femme fatale—the Sirens, Harpies, and witches of myth—was feared and had to be controlled. The cult of virginity would emerge as a means of ensuring male ownership and would become an important factor in the overthrowing of the matrilineal economic system of the Neolithic cultures (Leeming and Page, 1994, 88-89).

In the second half of the twentieth century, both Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* and Patrick Bade in *Femme Fatale: Images of Evil and Fascinating Women* argue that the femme fatale figure is the counterpart of the Byronic hero figure of the 1800s. “He bears many of the same features which were later to characterize the femme fatale. He is pale, impassive, mysterious, with a mirthless smile, and a dangerous magnetism”, claims Patrick Bade (1979, 10). The studies of both Praz and Bade were clearly late to make this association, considering that the “femme fatale archetype” (see Barić, 2017; Braun, 2012; Simkin, 2014) had existed long before the Byronic hero archetype that emerged in the early nineteenth century. The femme fatale dwelt on earth and hunt down men in different narratives since the world itself is created, before she gained her “sexy French title” (2012, 2), in Heather Braun’s words. Indian Kali and Durga, Nigerian Oya, Polynesian Pele, Sumerian Inanna, Egyptian Hathor, Greek Hera, Aphrodite, Circe and Sirens, Celtic Maeve or widely known as Queen Mab, and later Biblical Lilith, Eve and Salome are all femmes fatales of the ancient times across the world (for all see Leeming and Page, 1994). Thus, although the femme fatale archetype might be the female counterpart of the Byronic hero, she is interestingly subordinated to the male hero in Praz and Bade’s studies and simply linked to the concept of evil.

“The transmutation of Goddess into femme fatale in the new patriarchal version is clear, of course, in the story of the Garden of Eden, from the first millennium B.C.E.” suggest Leeming and Page (1994, 107). Their suggestion is significant since there is more than a link to the concept of evil in ancient times for the femme fatale. The ancient femmes fatales like Inanna, Kali or Hera were not only feared but still worshipped by people as goddesses, despite the fact that they were lethal women. Yet in monotheistic religions, dangerous women are disdainfully expelled from human company when their mixed ‘bad’ and ‘evil’ nature is recognized. Adam and Eve’s story that begins in the Garden of Eden is known by most of the people: Eve is accused of being a manipulating temptress and causing the downfall of Adam –and thus of humankind– from the Garden of Eden. She is arguably the best-known femmes fatales in monotheism. However, the story of the Garden of Eden starts, in fact, with another woman who is more appropriate to the femme fatale archetype than Eve herself, Adam’s first wife, Lilith. Lilith is said to be created from dust, just like Adam and the two lead a happy life in the Garden of Eden. One day Adam asks her to lie down beneath him for coupling, and Lilith refuses his wish reminding Adam that they were equal. However, Adam insists on being on top of her, so Lilith runs away. Three angels are sent to her in order to demand her obedience to Adam, but Lilith sends them away. Instead, she lives her own life, couples with daemons, gives birth to countless she-daemons who enjoy hunting the male on earth with their mother. In the end, femme fatale Lilith is denigrated for her refusal and gets accepted as the mother of all vile in the patriarchal society, while Adam is rewarded with a new wife who is created from his rib – not an equal this time, but a subordinate.

Although there is an abundance of femme fatale figures in myths and narratives, the studies about the archetype are relatively less in number. The earlier studies mainly proposed the archetype as the evil, while more modern studies examined the archetype in literary texts. Although each study gave the existing characteristics of the archetype they never attempted to think more about the archetype and its characteristics to define it thoroughly. This study contributes to the existing studies in clearly defining the characteristics of the femme fatale, as well as in relating the archetype with the concept of abject and Eros & Thanatos.

The reasons behind this negligence of the archetype might become a starting point for another study, however one of the many reasons may be that the femme fatale archetype is difficult to define. As Mario Praz suggests, the archetype has not got a singular established figure (1951, 191). Instead, the archetype constantly changes through time and space. For instance, the Gothic femme fatale generally has



long and black hair with blood-red lips, while the Victorian femme fatale has blond hair, blue eyes and natural pink lips. The femme fatale archetype might not have an established type, but that does not mean that there is not any typical feature of the archetype. Despite the changes in times and cultures, there are some unchanging characteristics of the archetype. Next section defines those characteristics in detail; they are beauty, enchantment, sexual maturity, manipulating wit, and destruction of the male. At the same time, the section defines the deviation of the femme fatale archetype from vamp, monstrous and seductive woman in order to clarify femme fatale's characteristics. In addition to those characteristics the femme fatale archetype is also linked with Sigmund Freud's *Eros* and *Thanatos* instincts as Simkin and Stott also suggest, and closely related to Julia Kristeva's concept of abject since she is the embodiment of those.

## 2. What makes a woman, a femme fatale?

The evolution of the *femme fatale* archetype is briefly mentioned in the earlier section. However, throughout that evolution, the femme fatale archetype has continuously altered depending on the time, literary genres and movements or cultural changes. This variation in attitudes and perceptions related to femme fatale marks the difficulty of establishing a particular type of femme fatale, such as Oedipus for the tragic hero or Don Juan for the Byronic hero. Nevertheless, as both readers and critics of literature, we should proceed from an Aristotelian print and employ a taxonomical approach towards literary genres, movements or archetypes, in order to have a proper examination and categorization of them. Therefore, we need to define the general characteristics of the femme fatale archetype, in order to analyze the femme fatale character(s) in literary works. Hence, this section focuses on the question: 'what makes a woman a femme fatale?'

Mario Praz, in his *Romantic Agony*, states that the type for the femme fatale is not clearly defined:

During the first stage of Romanticism, up till about the middle of the nineteenth century, we meet with several Fatal Women in literature, but there is no established type of Fatal Woman in the way that there is an established type of Byronic Hero. For a type - which is, in actual fact, a cliché - to be created, it is essential that some particular figure should have made a profound impression on the popular mind (1951, 191).

Although there is an abundance of mythical, biblical, literary and historical femme fatale figures from past to present - Lilith, Salome, Sirens, Carmilla, Becky Sharp, or Cleopatra - all these figures have their own unique particularities which makes establishing a type a difficult enterprise. As Praz suggested, there is not a specific figure that springs in the common thought when the femme fatale archetype is mentioned. Katherine Farrimond, the author of *The Contemporary Femme Fatale*, also points out the same difficulty:

The femme fatale resists clear definition. The term is connected with sexuality, femininity, danger, violence and deceit, but these connections are slippery, as many of those characters popularly associated with the term do not fit a coherent pattern. Their femme fatale-ness often shifts and dissolves frustratingly under scrutiny (2018, 2).

In spite of the slipperiness of the term, all researchers of femme fatale, Praz and Farrimond included, attempted to define this lethal woman and capture her essence, as there is a basic set of characteristics of the archetype which remain relatively unchanged through time; being beautiful, enchanting, manipulative, seductive, and destructive, as well as being the embodiment of life and death, and an abject. Hence, the confessed aim of this research is to provide a general understanding of the archetype, rather than capturing all the varieties, discourses or characteristics that the femme fatale includes.

The first basic characteristic of the femme fatale is her exceptional beauty and her attractive to-be-look-at-ness. (Braun, 2012; Elhallaq, 2015; Farrimond, 2018; Hanson & O'rawe, 2010; Simkin, 2014; see also Bade, 1979; Barić, 2017) Her attractiveness is irresistible. About the beauty of the femme fatale, I want to draw attention to Simkin's description of a femme fatale as a "conventionally beautiful woman" in his book *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox* (2014, 8, my emphasis). 'Conventionally' is the keyword here related to the physical aspect of the femme fatale, because she fits perfectly to the timeless conventions of beauty independent from time and place. She has an undeniable beauty, accepted by everyone. Her beauty "conform[s] to normative standards of beauty and body type." (Farrimond, 2018, 10).

One is reminded of Circe "the nymph with glossy braids, the awesome one" (Homer, 1996, 276) who is magnificent in view or, to leap over centuries, of Rebecca Sharp from Thackeray's most known *Vanity Fair* who has the type of beauty that is immediately admired by almost every single man and woman in every



circle that she becomes part of. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* is yet another famous beauty described in the eponymous short story:

She was slender, and wonderfully graceful. [...] there was nothing in her appearance to indicate an invalid. Her complexion was rich and brilliant; her features were small and beautifully formed; her eyes large, dark, and lustrous; her hair was quite wonderful, I never saw hair so magnificently thick and long when it was down about her shoulders [...] It was exquisitely fine and soft, and in colour a rich very dark brown, with something of gold. [...] she lay back in her chair talking in her sweet low voice (Jones, 2011, 15-6).

The femme fatale's beauty is not related to her body shape or the color of her hair since her attractiveness fits the various conventions of her time. As an example, for Gothic femmes fatale dark hair is perceived as beautiful, while Victorian ones are praised for their golden locks; however, the beauty lies in the brightness, smoothness and softness of the hair, not in the color.

The second characteristic of the femme fatale is her being charming to the degree of enchantment. This feature is also related to the first one. Her beauty, her voice, her words, or anything about her can be mesmerizing. Her charming attitude is like a spell for others, pulling especially men towards her. In Mario Praz's words, "the man pines with passion and falls at her feet like a fakir" (1951,195). The male victims might not even know what is irresistibly charming in this fatal temptress, yet they feel the instinctive urge to please the lady. This feature is inherited from the mythical Greco-Roman origins of the femme fatale archetype. The first examples of the femme fatale archetype always have supernatural powers; such as witches, sirens, goddesses, female daemon lamias and so on. Elhallaq's article, "Representation of Women as Femmes Fatales: History, Development and Analysis" adds another dimension to the magical nature of the earlier femme fatale examples:

Some of the femmes fatales in this period may be placed under a curse or an ancestral doom that has been transmitted through generations. She may also be a pagan goddess or a witch or a vampire of unholy powers. She may transform into a serpent or a swine or a cat or another animal which presents the satanic nature of these fatal women (2015, 88).

Beginning with ancient Greco-Roman myths and epics, towards the 18<sup>th</sup> century with Romantic or Gothic texts, this characteristic of being charming appears as crucial for the 'supernatural' femme fatale. She is enchanting in the proper meaning of the word. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century and onwards, the femme fatale loses her supernatural powers and becomes human; nevertheless, when we pay attention to her descriptions, we still encounter epithets such as bewitching, charming, spellbinding, enchanting, and magical. When the fatalness of the female protagonist is acknowledged by the male hero she is directly labelled as an enchantress, a siren, witch, or she-devil.

The sirens of ancient Greek mythology are the perfect examples to understand the charming characteristic of the femme fatale. The sirens, with the upper body of an alluring woman, and the lower body of a bird below the waist, sing an enchanting song on a rocky island causing seamen to change the ship's course towards them or even jump overboard to reach those beautiful temptresses. (see Bell, 1991; Can, 2011; Sears, 2014). According to *Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary* the sirens "even today provide a word defined as a temptingly beautiful woman or one who sings seductively." (Bell, 1991, 400) Most of the modern femmes fatale in literature, as Bell suggests, are described as sirens; and the most known description belongs to *Vanity Fair's* "little sly scheming Rebecca" Sharp (Thackeray, 2013, 161):

In describing this siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! [...] They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twangling their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims (Thackeray, 2013, 747-8).

Even though the men know that a liaison with a femme fatale will be destructive in the end, they are driven towards her, like a moth to a flame.

Another feature of the femme fatale refers to her mature sexual powers. Each femme fatale "possesses an overt, often predatory sexuality that intoxicates and threatens the male." (Simkin, 2014, 5) Her sexual power, most of the time, daunts men, although they cannot help but be seduced by her sexual barbarity. A femme fatale, unlike any other woman, is not driven away from her own body and her sexual



organ is labelled as “the dark continent” by the phallogocentric male view (see Freud, 2003; also Cixous 1976; Irigaray, 1997b). On the contrary, she turns towards her body. She is aware of her sexuality, as well as the passions and the needs of her own body. She is not afraid of her own desires, or of fulfilling those desires. The femme fatale is always ready to use her seductive sexuality to the full extent in order to achieve her goal, or for her “ambition to improve her circumstances” (Farrimond, 2018; 5) –however, her circumstance needs betterment; material, social, or sexual.

Although the majority of the victims who succumb to the euphoric sexuality of the femme fatale are male, Farrimond underlines the possible bisexual activity of the femme fatale by stating that “the femme fatale appears to choose the partner *who will get her what she wants*, making men and women alike potential victims” (my emphasis) of her sexual power; “she makes herself sexually available to everyone who can further her ambitions, but will never commit to anyone.” (Farrimond, 2018, 96) The femme fatale may or may not identify herself as bisexual; actually, her sexual orientation is not relevant because, as Farrimond later clarifies, sexual behavior and sexual orientation are not the same. Farrimond here only refers to the femme fatale’s possible bisexual *behavior*, not her sexual identity because one cannot understand someone’s preferences through observing their behavior. (Farrimond 98) The femme fatale, then, just embraces her sexuality free from every single restriction of the social norms, and never hesitates to seduce any useful human being. All in all, “sexual cannibalism is her monopoly.” (Praz, 1951, 205–6).

The femme fatale “signals nothing but sex” (Stables qtd. in Farrimond, 2018, 11) to the male gaze, yet the erotic power of the femme fatale is where the duality resides; it rises both irresistible desire and dread in the male. In the nineteenth century, the century of the lethal woman boom, the male adopts a sadistic attitude at the beginning of the century, and a masochistic one at the end, according to Mario Praz. (1951, 206) Simkin also mentions the duality of the sexual allure of a femme fatale:

The image of the insatiable woman remains an alluring one in the fantasies of male heterosexuality, in spite of – or perhaps because of – the deep-seated fears it conjures at the same time (of infidelity, and of the male failure to satisfy women’s supposedly fathomless sexual appetites) (2014, 24).

The femme fatale “expresses a plethora of anxieties at once [in the male], or rather she is a sign, a figure who crosses discourse boundaries” (Stott, 1992, 30) of sexuality. She is not the accustomed passive and silent female, but the total opposite. Until the sexual intercourse, the eroticism of the femme fatale is what every man dreams of. However, during sexual intercourse, the male lover understands the fact that this woman is not passive at all, nor does she accept to lie down under a man. Once her seductive erotic power is recognized by the male, the femme fatale is treated as the evil in every single case “because her sexual Otherness stimulates fantasies of castration and devoration” (Stott, 1992, 43) in the male unconscious. In male-oriented discourses, the sexually active femme fatale is the one who spreads sexually transmitted diseases and thus death. She is the one who threatens the male ego by planting the seeds of being insufficient in satisfying her sexual appetite and becoming sexually weak after consummation. Her unrestrained sexuality causes the male fear of “losing his *self*”, and “being *absorbed* into” (Stott, 1992, 54) the femme fatale. “The struggle for autonomy also brings its problems” (2011, 174) to the male dominance, as Rosalind Coward explains in *Female Desire: Women’s Sexuality Today*. That is why the male always desires and at the same time fears any sexually alluring woman. The male’s terror of female sexuality triggers his degrading of it, or silencing it is just to cover their fear of having a less efficient penis, since “[m]en have power and authority only if women’s equality is denied.” (Coward, 2011, 174). However, faced with a powerful woman “the Man’s order is disturbed by the woman with the impertinent questions and the incisive comments” (Gallop, 1997, 489): What if the man, the accredited owner of sexual desire, pleasure and all, is overpowered by the sexually insatiable femme fatale? What if the erotic hunger of the femme fatale drains the male life source (semen) dry? Those are the questions the male victim is concerned with, which bear no relevance to the femme fatale.

Farrimond notices that the femme fatale’s feminine power most of the time is based upon sexuality; “While she may appear to offer a powerful image of feminine power, that power is ultimately hollow and based on a series of limited and limiting choices about sexual performance and feminine display.” (2018, 11). Although Farrimond thinks all the power of the femme fatale might depend on her sexual eroticism, in the end, she has a tremendous intelligence too, which, as Tasker points out, generates a certain power and strength over others (Tasker, 1998, 120).



So as the fourth feature, we can count the femme fatale's "capacity for deceit and facility to take on different *personae* in order to mask her true intentions, feelings, or identity." (Simkin, 2014, 29). Any kind of trickery is permissible in her eyes for her own best interest. She is a master of manipulation thanks to her quick wit and intelligent mind. Yet, since she uses her intelligence to deceive and scheme, she is an accepted evil. The equation of women to natural deceivers is not something new, but as old as Eve's deception of Adam. Even in the twentieth century, the criminologist Otto Pollak reinforces this, by:

noting the fact that "greater deceitfulness" was inherent in a woman (not just a criminal woman). As evidence, he cited the fact that her physiology made it possible for her to "practice deceit" when compared to a man, contrasting the male requirement to "achieve an erection in order to perform the sex act" with the female body, where "lack of orgasm does not prevent her ability to participate" in sexual activity (Pollak qtd. in Simkin, 2014, 29).

Like every woman in male understanding, the femme fatale is able to present something false as the truth. However, since she is more a devil than a woman, she does it better. She deceives, manipulates, confuses, and disguises. In short, to achieve her goals, she performs every single trick of the devil and sees nothing wrong in it.

The final and most important characteristic of the femme fatale is destroying the man "whose destiny lies in her power." (Praz, 1951, 281) Most of the time she does not content herself with one single destruction, but brings the downfall of more than one man: "she remains 'fatal' to all the men who love her" (Praz, 1951, 219). She sometimes brings their downfall and even causes their death so as to remove the obstacles between her goal and her; sometimes she lures the male victim into trouble just for fun. Just like a black-widow, she ensnares men in her web and devours them.

The femme fatale does not always have to kill those men, although she is portrayed in a cliché way as a "seductive, double-crossing, manipulative *murderer*, [who] uses sex and violence to get power, money and entertainment." (my emphasis) (Farrimond, 2018, 36). Nevertheless, the femme fatale can cause only the downfall of the male without any killing, or she can bring the demise of the male lover in a metaphorical sense; she can end the life he knows/has before her. Circe turns men into swine. Lady Macbeth leads her husband to regicide, which thereby paves the way for Macbeth's death. Carmilla sucks the young maidens' blood to their death.

Nonetheless, the victim's destruction is understandable. For the phallogocentric ideals of the man, the phallogocentric hierarchized sex of all times yields to female sexual power – while it should be the other way round – he should be doomed with a bad end. If sexual morality declines in a man, he will face a punishment inevitably.

### 2.1. *Vamp, monstrous woman, or seductress ≠ femme fatale.*

So far it was attempted to define 'what a femme fatale is'. However, in order to shed more light upon the concept, 'what a femme fatale is not' should also be discussed. From time to time, a femme fatale is confused with a *vamp* woman, as well as a *monstrous* one or a *seductress*. Let it be admitted that these figures –and maybe many others– resemble each other in their appearance, attitude or aim, thus they cause ambiguity. The figures or concepts are either used interchangeably or incorrectly in the context of a bad woman. However, when these figures are thoroughly considered, there are nuances involved which essentially separate one from another.

Both a vamp woman and a femme fatale appear beautiful and sexually alluring to the eyes of men. Nevertheless, Gülçin Akturan specifically differentiates the two in her research. Akturan believes a woman is born as a femme fatale, hence fatalness is inherent in her blood. A femme fatale's beauty comes not from the colour or the shape of her eyes, but from how she looks at people. The female sexual power is always active in a femme fatale from her first breath till her last, whereas a vamp woman's sexuality is activated in advancing years, according to Akturan. The beauty and sexuality of a vamp woman are strongly based on the aid of make-up, and sexy or perhaps expensive clothes. The sexuality of a vamp woman becomes prominent physically and it is something acquired, unlike a femme fatale whose sexuality belongs to a more instinctual behavior template. (Akturan, 2015).

Perhaps the prominent figure most confused with femme fatale is the monstrous woman because the phallogocentric discourses tend to attribute unhuman and monster-like features to a femme fatale. However, just like a vamp woman, a monstrous woman also differs from a lethal one. Simkin distinguishes the two prominent figures in his book *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox*:



The femme fatale is always categorized within the common norms of beauty. "The monstrous-feminine, by contrast [to the femme fatale], consists of those women whose horrific crimes are matched to their moral and, usually, their physical deviations from standard notions of beauty" (Simkin, 2014, 8). He continues to state the differences between the two figures by indicating the fact that a monstrous woman does not have the worrisome dichotomy of desire and fear of the femme fatale (Simkin, 2014, 8-9), but only rises fear and terror.

A femme fatale is also different from a mere seductress, although she definitely seduces – mostly – men. As it is mentioned in the previous section, a femme fatale's basic characteristic is her overt sexuality which she uses to the full extent in order to reach her ambitions. Paul Huvenne and Kees van Twist (as cited in Elhallaq, 2015, 85), differentiate between the femme fatale and "the ordinary seductress" (Elhallaq, 2015, 85) by stating that the seductress aims solely for sexual pleasure and prurient actions whereas a femme fatale uses seduction as a mean of achieving her goals and/or bringing destruction upon men.

In the light of the basic characteristics of the femme fatale archetype, as well as her difference from other bad woman figures she must be treated as a powerful woman archetype rather than a wicked one who should be punished. She might not be the horrific devil that the phallogocentric discourses impose, but a powerful enough woman who rebels against those wrong accusations and impositions upon a woman. It is true that she is deadly but not much more than a man. The femme fatale is represented to the phallogocentric common sense like a monster, just to cover the phallic fears of the male and to secure their superior position. However, when we look beyond the femme fatale's artificial representation, we see a humane woman who is aware of her power. As French feminist Hélène Cixous suggests: "All you have to do to see the Medusa is look her in the face: and she isn't deadly. She is beautiful and she laughs." (Cixous, 1976, 885).

## 2.2 The embodiment of Eros & Thanatos

The seduction of the femme fatale leads men to her bed, to the place of sexual intercourse, in other words, to the place of life and death. The bed of a femme fatale is not life and/or death giving place just because the orgasm itself is *la petite mort*, the little death, but also because a femme fatale, in fact, is the embodiment of life and death, or *Eros* and *Thanatos* as Sigmund Freud puts it.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and other Writings*, Freud developed the idea of life and death drives that exist in every psyche. "A drive might accordingly be seen as a powerful tendency inherent in every living organism to restore a prior state," (Freud, 2003, 2003, 108-9) a prior state that every single drive in the unconscious is originated from, and at the same time seeks to return back to. He explains *Eros*, the life drive, and *Thanatos*, the death drive, through the germ cell example. Freud thinks every germ cell seeks to return to the prior state that it comes from, and thus that exists before the organic life of the cell. Returning to this inorganic state simply means the death of the cell. Hence, "the goal of all life is death," (2003, 109) for Freud. Moreover, the first drive that has been activated in a living cell, and which dominates it is the destructive, death drive *Thanatos*. However, Freud further claims, if the germ cell encounters another germ cell from the opposite sex, the two "constitute the group termed sexual drives" (2003, 112) and prolong the life journey. Therefore, the sexual drive is, at the same time, the life drive *Eros*.

*Eros* as the life drive is the survival instinct of the ego, it seeks to reproduce the primitive state. Since its principal source is libido, *Eros* directs the psyche to pleasure, but not only sexually, although the main pleasure springs from the sexual copulation. It satisfies the basic needs for survival. *Eros* is associated with affection, love, sexual copulation, and suchlike positive conditions or emotions. Its counterpart, *Thanatos*, the death drive seeks to restore the primitive state. It is a (self-)destructive drive that can be directed against the ego itself as well as other egos or the external world. *Thanatos* is associated with fear, aggression, hate, death and suchlike negative conditions or emotions.

Freud says throughout life "the death drives very largely remain silent, and that the clamor of life comes mostly from *Eros*." (2003, 169) Yet, in some cases "the polarity of love and hate" (Freud, 2003, 164) arouses from the life and death drives, and the two drives co-exist on the surface of the conscious;

in certain circumstances hate changes into love, and love into hate. If this transformation involves anything more than just temporal succession, that is, one thing simply taking the place of the other, then clearly we are left with no basis for making such a fundamental distinction as that between erotic drives and death drives (Freud, 2003, 164).

The two drives might appear as opposites; however, as Freud underlines, they are not that different, and sometimes they can exist together, for example as in the conscious of a femme fatale who accommodates



every kind of duality: love and hate, desire and fear, Eros and Thanatos. The femme fatale figure is the embodiment of Eros and Thanatos. This relation between the femme fatale archetype and Freud's drives *Eros & Thanatos* had been verified also in some of the previous studies or reviews, such as Simkin's or Patea's.

On the one hand, she excites feelings of desire in the heterosexual male; on the other, she excites fear, but very often her erotic charge is magnified considerably precisely because of the threatening potentiality she carries within her: in Freudian terms, she combines two distinct drives – *Eros* and the death instinct *Thanatos* (Simkin, 2014, 94).

Luce Irigaray mainly refutes Freud's ideas in her essay "Another 'Cause' – Castration," and she underlines the fact that in Freudian/phallogocentric/male thinking "the death drives can be worked out only by man, never, under any circumstances, by woman." (1997a, 435) The death drive is generally associated with man, while the life drive is mostly associated with "preserving, regenerating and rejuvenating" (Irigaray, 1997a, 435) woman. "She is wholly devoted to giving life, then, source and re-source of life" says Irigaray (1997a, 345-6). A woman is expected to prolong the life journey through sexual reproduction since it is her only sexual function in the male discourses. On the other hand, "'sexual function' also requires aggressiveness from the male, and that this authorizes an economy of death drives" and certainly the "sexual energy" (Irigaray, 1997a, 436) is necessary to accomplish the work of death. In male-dominant discourses, women are deprived of being sexually active, and taught to deny their sexual desires, and pleasures.

However, a femme fatale who is aware and proud of her sexual energy is capable of containing life, as much as she contains death within herself. She is not afraid of the aggressive, destructive *Thanatos*. Instead, she embraces death. The femme fatale archetype is the embodiment of both life and death. The vast majority of literary femme fatale figures are immortal goddesses, or living hybrid/total monsters stuck between life and death. The vampire femme fatale, one of the most common varieties of the figure especially in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, does not only become a living dead, but also this reanimated revenant sucks her victim's blood to death, in order to continue her own posthumous life. The femme fatale is the embodiment of *Eros* and *Thanatos* because;

the fearful potential that the lust of this woman [the femme fatale] is an actual, physical threat to those who succumb to her strange allure. The satisfaction of the sexual desire entails the possibility of physical and mental suffering and the climax of the erotic pleasure resembles the angst before death itself (Patea, 2015, 6).

A femme fatale is the life-giver as the source of libidinal *Eros*, as well as the death-bringer as the source of destructive *Thanatos*. She prolongs her own life journey towards upwards, through sexual intercourse as long as the male partner is useful for her social mobility. If he is no longer valuable for the sake of her own goals or if he becomes a threat for her goals, a femme fatale never hesitates to destruct or murder the male. Moreover, she has the needed sexual energy "to carry out the work. The work of death." (Irigaray, 1997b, 436)

The femme fatale as the embodiment of life and death drives acts as a living drive. Julia Kristeva's description of a drive in *Powers of Horror* fits the femme fatale herself, who turns men into objects to fulfil her desires:

The *object* of a drive is the thing in regard to which or through which the drive is able to achieve its aim. It is what is most variable about a drive and *is not originally connected with it*, but becomes assigned to it only in consequence of being particularly fitted to make satisfaction possible (Kristeva, 1982, 44).

### 2.3 Not subject, not even object, but abject

The link between the femme fatale archetype and *Eros & Thanatos* was previously mentioned. However, this study connects the archetype with Julia Kristeva's *abject*. As Hanson and O'Rawe remark: "the femme fatale is emblem not just of Otherness, but of chaos, darkness, death, all that lies beyond the safe, the known, and the normal." (2010, 4) So the femme fatale is "desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and *abject*" (Kristeva, 1982, 54, my emphasis):

What is to be done with this abject [the femme fatale]? Allow it to drift towards the libido so as to constitute an object of desire? Or towards symbolicity, to change it into a sign of love,





hatred, enthusiasm, or damnation? The question might well remain undecided, undecidable (Kristeva, 1982, 48).

Every discourse has binary oppositions, and the binary oppositions always favour one side of the opposition; such as man/woman, active/passive, and subject/object. In male-oriented societies, the superior side is attributed to the man. In the given oppositions, for example, a man is accepted as active and subject, whereas a woman is accepted as passive and object. Woman "is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her" claims de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* where she defines woman; "she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other." (de Beauvoir, 1997, 16) The femme fatale, on the other hand, does not fit perfectly either side. On the one hand, she is definitely not the subject since the subject is always male, but on the other hand, she is not the object since she is not a typical woman. Feminists, such as Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva add the abject, among the subject/object opposition as the third categorization.

Not simply the question of what is a proper woman or an improper woman, but what is not thinkable as a woman at all! This is where we come back to the notion of abjection. I think that abjection tries to signal what is left outside of those binary oppositions (Meijer and Prins, 1998, 284).

Therefore femme fatale is neither subject nor object, but abject.

For Butler, the abject "relates to all kinds of bodies whose lives are not considered to be 'lives' and whose materiality is understood not to 'matter.'" (Meijer and Prins, 1998, 281) For Kristeva the abject is the one who is walled out, a threatening, abominable one. (1982, 48) Once her real identity is revealed by others, a femme fatale is rejected by men and also by women. Thus she is the Other for everyone. She is "one of those violent, dark revolts of being." (Kristeva, 1982, 1).

Both the femme fatale and the abject are "immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady" (Kristeva, 1982, 4). The abject blurs the line between self and other, so does the femme fatale during sexual intercourse. Two bodies become one during the sexual act; it is difficult to detect where the male/subject body ends and the female/object body starts due to the fact that they are intertwined. Mostly the femme fatale's fatalness is transpired by the male lover after the sexual act – or several acts. Once the abject is recognized, "the sought-after turns into the banished, fascination into shame." (Kristeva, 1982, 8) The femme fatale too, becomes the aim of the arrows of hatred, although at first, she is a dream-like figure for the male inner world. Abject/femme fatale becomes an object of hatred sooner or later as Noëlle McAfee builds up on Kristeva's definition in her reader *Julia Kristeva*: "This is part of the pathology of abjection: turning the phantasm of what is abjected into a dreaded object, an object of hate." (2004, 53) McAfee argues that abject is always "what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself" (2004, 46) with hatred.

The hatred towards the abject/femme fatale results in banishing her from society or the group by both sexes. Male lovers exile her because she will be the constant reminder of his deception by a woman from then on. Female rivals hate sharing their environment with the femme fatale once they realize her power of having what or more importantly who she wants, because of mere jealousy. The femme fatale always becomes an outcast once her devilish side is apparent to the society. Georges Bataille in his essay "Abjection and Miserable Forms" argues the abject is excluded from the society to the extent that it is "disinherited [from] the possibility of being human." (1993, 11). Bataille claims that "the imperative act of excluding abject things" creates a resistance in the abjected: "the miserable, the conscience of affliction already veers from a purely negative direction and begins to pose itself as a threat." (1993, 10) Although she is pushed to the periphery, "the abject[/femme fatale] will continue to haunt" agrees McAfee (2004, 48). The femme fatale constantly comes back to him to get what she wants up until to the point that she announces the male victim is now useless. Even though she disappears from the life of that male victim or the thought of the femme fatale's self or of her doings continue to disturb him. That is how

Kristeva's abject differs from Freud's repressed. Freud thought that many of the subject's desires had to be denied, submerged in the unconscious, in order for subjectivity and civilization to develop. Freud addresses the continual possibility of the "return of the repressed," but, so long as it doesn't return, it is well out of sight. There is no such luck with the abject. [...] What is abjected is radically excluded but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's tenuous borders of selfhood. What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear



from consciousness. It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self (McAfee, 2004, 46–8).

Although she is pushed aside, the femme fatale is never satisfied with her situation, and she never yields to failure. If she falls, she stands on her feet and climbs the social leaders all over again. Casting that dangerous woman out of the society or group is not enough for the victims to escape from her grip. Likewise, trying to recover her by letting her live in the society is not a solution either. It is almost impossible to tame the femme fatale. A femme fatale stays loyal to her wild feline nature even if she resides in a highly aristocratic society. "It [abject] lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. It beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire, which, nevertheless, does not let itself be seduced." (Kristeva, 1982, 1) The femme fatale, in fact, does not love or respect anyone but herself. As Kristeva argues, the abject "is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory." (1982, 5) Most of the femmes fatales do not respect their family members as well. The femme fatale is ready to use, manipulate or victimize even her kin, more so a stranger. "The abject is what does not respect boundaries. It beseeches and pulverizes the subject." – whoever that subject is to her. (McAfee, 2004, 46) Closely related to this, both the abject and the femme fatale create a disturbance in the society they live in because of the fact that they both rebel against the normative impositions. The femme fatale/abject almost always opposes any submission. Julia Kristeva addresses the particular, in her *Powers of Horror*:

The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them. It kills in the name of life – a progressive despot; it lives at the behest of death – an operator in genetic experimentations; it curbs the other's suffering for its own profit – (1982, 15).

"Not at all an other with whom I [the subject/male] identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me," (Kristeva, 1982, 10) the subject thinks about the abject just like he thinks about a femme fatale who possesses the male victim by her seductive nature. Julia Kristeva believes, against the abject "a defensive position to be established – one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration." (1982, 7) The dual nature of the abject is mirrored also in the femme fatale archetype. Sole desire only belongs to man, and it can only be towards a woman. The femme fatale, on the other hand, causes fear in addition to desire: she is dual-natured. "Out of the daze that has petrified him before the untouchable, impossible, [...] along with loathing, one word to crop up – fear. [...] a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject." (Kristeva, 1982, 6) Yet, along with fear, it is obvious that the femme fatale arouses the feeling of pleasure in the male desire.

One does not know it [the abject/femme fatale], one joys in it. Violently and painfully. [...] Hence a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims – if not its submissive and willing ones (Kristeva, 1982, 9).

Kristeva quotes Freud to explain the project of abjection: "In the beginning was the deed." (cited in Kristeva, 1982, 61). Abjection of the femme fatale or recognition of the femme fatale as the abject starts after the sexual deed; abjection is "the journey to the end of the night." (Kristeva, 1982, 58) It comes with the sexual intercourse of the male victim and the femme fatale, because with the ejaculation the male lover satiates his desire, and now that "the thin sheet of desire" (1982, 83) falls, in Kristeva's words, he is left with only fear. Until that point, the fear side of the duality 'desire/fear' which the femme fatale arises in him, is repressed by the desire side. Recognition of the femme fatale as the abject emerges with "the subject's fear of his very own identity sinking irretrievably" (Kristeva, 1982, 64) into this insatiable wild woman. His true fear of the "loss not of a part (castration) but of the totality of his living being" (Kristeva, 1982, 64) to that woman of unrestrained power. Thus, says McAfee, the male victim "spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes [the abject] from" (2004, 46) himself. In fact, the victims of the femme fatale are not wrong to fear her; this black-widow figure destroys, annihilates and murders her prey. Her bed is "where the subject, fluctuating between inside and outside, pleasure and pain, word and deed, would find death, along with nirvana." (Kristeva, 1982, 63–4) and most of the time "sexual pleasure is drowned in a pool of blood" (Kristeva, 1982, 159) by the femme fatale.

The femme fatale archetype "that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul" (Stott, 1992, 41) has been present since ancient times. Giving a complete definition of the



archetype is almost impossible due to the fact that the characteristics of the femme fatale figure change through time and cultural space, and also there is not an established prototype figure for the archetype from literature or history. Nevertheless, this study attempts to describe at least the basic characteristics of the archetype which are common for every variety of the figure to shape a guideline for the literary examination of the archetype in the following chapters; being beautiful, enchanting, manipulative, seductive, and destructive as well as being the embodiment of life and death, and an abject. The present chapter differentiated the femme fatale from a mere seductress, a vamp and also a monstrous woman in order to annihilate any confusion during the literary examination. Apart from her own characteristics, the femme fatale is closely related with – as the connection has been put forward by many other pieces of research – Sigmund Freud’s life and death drives Eros and Thanatos since she is the embodiment of life and death. Most importantly – as this study differs from previous works in this point – the femme fatale is what Julia Kristeva calls the abject.

### 3. Conclusion

Although sexually prone and powerful women existed on earth since its creation, when patriarchy started replacing female power, the powerful woman figure who had been worshipped for thousands of years in the archaic period turned into a bad woman figure, to be despised. Today these beautiful, intelligent and seductive fatal women are known by their French title across the world today as the *femme fatale*. Literally meaning ‘lethal woman’, this self-confident woman is not content with what she has in life, and always seeks for betterment.

The femme fatale archetype is one of the archetypes that existed in almost every culture on earth, thus it is worth to be examined thoroughly. However, the archetype is not easy to describe since the specifics of the femme fatale archetype constantly changes with the changing and advancing time and opinions. Still, in the light of this research about the archetype, an outline can be drawn, if not the detailed picture of it. The femme fatale is a beautiful and enchanting woman who uses her manipulative wit and her sexuality to achieve her goal, in the meantime ready to destroy – mostly the male. Also, as this study argued for, the femme fatale figure is closely related to Sigmund Freud’s Eros and Thanatos instincts, and to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abject.

Since it is difficult to describe the archetype in its whole scope, the femme fatale figure is confused with other figures like a vamp or monstrous woman, or a mere seductress. However, the femme fatale derives from all other figures. She is not a vamp, because the vamp woman becomes beautiful and seductive with external aid such as make-up or exposing clothes, whereas the femme fatale’s beauty and seductive power come from her inner female power and instincts. The femme fatale is also different from a monstrous woman; the monstrous woman is described as a monster, due to her physical malformation that evokes terror in the onlooker. Although the femme fatale is also described as a monster in most of the narratives, actually she does not display any major physical deformity. Also, the emotions that the femme fatale evokes on the onlooker are awe and desire, instead of the immediate fear that the monster woman evokes. In the case of the femme fatale, fear comes much later when the lethal nature of the female is revealed. The femme fatale figure differs from a mere seductress too, in her aim. The sole purpose of a seductress is sexual gratification, whereas a femme fatale uses her sexuality as a mere tool to achieve her betterment in life, and/or to bring destruction upon her lover/victim.

The femme fatale archetype might not be easy to understand in her full scope due to its changing nature; yet, before we associate the femme fatale archetype with the utmost evil dwelling in this world, at least we need to try to understand those dangerous women. We must not forget that all the self-confident women who look beautiful and enchanting, and do whatever it takes to achieve what they want – like deception and destruction of the others – might not be simply the she-devils they are instantly considered to be. The femme fatale archetype must be examined, and femmes fatales’ narratives need to be shared.

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