

REDEFINING THE FEMME FATALE IN THRILLER AND CRIME FICTION
— A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF UMBRA —

Existing beyond the construct of male fantasy and misogyny, the femme fatale in literature and film has evolving agency rejecting patriarchal hegemony and the traditionally masculine space of villainy and crime. From Rebecca to Gone Girl, Lady Audley to Lady Macbeth, a revisionist reading of the femme fatale, I will argue, transcends the orthodox, somewhat reductive archetype while redefining the feminine psyche and structuralism of female criminality.

The femme fatale as a construct is not only heterogeneous and its complexity problematic but encroaches uneasily into the realm of psychological dysfunction and somehow the two ideations have been inextricably, and I will argue wrongly, imbricated.

Developing the character of Anais, *Umbra's* protagonist required an intertextual approach to archetype psychology, intersected with tenets of feminist literature and the wider diegesis of thriller and crime fiction. Forming part of this discussion, I will draw on several literary works in which the female protagonist has embodied the traditional construct of the femme fatale and also some which subvert it; works that have inspired, challenged and informed my understanding of the female psyche — arguably none more so than Du Maurier's Rebecca de Winter which I shall discuss at length.

Although certain recursive elements of the femme fatale archetype are entrenched in our collective consciousness and readily cited in literature and cinema, I will posit that by universalising her or framing her in the abstract, we lose not only her essence and her enigma, but in a wider sense we deny ourselves the opportunity to re-examine, redefine and understand her through a lens less constrained by masculine parameterization, and it was in this spirit I started shaping Anais.

As part of this contextual analysis, I will also discuss the work of psychoanalysts Carl Jung and Karen Horner and evolutionary psychologists Noam Shpancer PhD, Dr David Buss and Dr Joyce F. Beneson. As I built characterisation and plot mimetically, the research required a clinical lay understanding of sociopathy; the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) became an invaluable resource.¹

¹ American Psychiatric Society, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

REDEFINING THE FEMME FATALE

From Medea to Eve, Salome to Pandora, the femme fatale or her etymological definition, the *lethal woman*, treads a tightrope between veneration and vilification although the audience fascination with her, I would argue, remains perennial. But while she often embodies identifiable elements of the deviant, dangerous female such as narcissism, seductiveness, unbridled and indeterminant sexuality, and could include more psychopathological indicators, it's myopic to suggest that all characters who fall within the archetype exhibit homogenous behaviour. She is far more complex and variegated for a static approach and this was a key consideration as I was crafting Anais.

For example, the psychopathology of Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction*² is diametrically opposite to Nina's deviancy in Harriet Lane's *Her*³ although arguably the two women share a similar if contrasting *modus operandi*. So, what are the central determinants of the femme fatale? And what are the conflicting elements and the paradigms? As the bibliography attests, I read assiduously on the theme and was guided by authors such as Martina Cole, whose complex, subversive female characters are often paradoxical, embodying deviancy, danger and brutality with countervailing fragility and humanity. I also reflected on the more academic modalities.

The Femme Fatale is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma. For her most striking characteristic, perhaps, is the fact that she never really is what she seems to be. She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable.⁴

While configurations of the femme fatale are divergent and often contradictory,⁵ her essence, according to Dr Stevie Simkins, should be a 'troubling dichotomy' of physical charm and danger.⁶ Drawing on her epistemological roots, Adriana Craciun describes her as 'the much-maligned hyperfeminine fantasy of heterosexual patriarchy,'⁷ an appellation that served as a touchstone for my creative development.

² *Fatal Attraction* dir. by Adrian Lyne (Jaffe/Lansing Productions, 1987).

³ Harriet Lane, *Her* (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2014).

⁴ Mary Anne Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory and Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.1.

⁵ Katherine Farrimond, *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp.1-18.

⁶ Stevie Simkin, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale: From Pandora's Box to Amanda Knox* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), p.7.

⁷ Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.15.

Ayman Elhallaq delineates her two essential features as being a refusal to submit to the convention of heterosexual relationships and secondly, an amorality ‘beyond the common tradition of morality,’⁸ while Katherine Farrimond alludes to her ‘slippery nature’ and resistance to pathologization.

The femme fatale resists clear definition. The term is connected with sexuality, femininity, danger, violence and deceit, but these connotations are slippery, as many of those characters popularly associated with the term do not fit a coherent pattern.⁹

But if duplicity and a nefarious agenda are componential to her definition then surely we should be examining, on a more forensic level, the attributes she possesses that command fascination and respect even though these same attributes may ultimately repel sympathy. For example, the character of Peyton in Robert Tine’s *The Hand That Rocks The Cradle*¹⁰ fulfils the diegetic remit of the femme fatale: beautiful, seductive, yet sociopathic and wicked to the degree that obviates empathy. When natural justice prevails and Peyton is killed, the reader may rejoice that normative values have been restored and the threat neutralised. But I would argue that this approach is questionable.

Not only is Peyton a woman who has endured profound, life-altering trauma from circumstances beyond her control, she has also demonstrated what would otherwise be laudable characteristics: resilience, tenacity, loyalty, love and an inseverable bond to her lost child. The depiction of Peyton as a femme fatale opens a dialogue on the complex and problematic concept of the lethal woman and our understanding of sociopathy, particularly sociopathy deriving from trauma, and this became intrinsic to Anais’ characterization.

Comparing Peyton with a character such as Catherine Tramell, the quintessential femme fatale in *Basic Instinct*, a woman who kills for the thrill of killing, a woman who thrives on manipulation, domination and cruelty — the ultimate black widow — then the construct of the femme fatale becomes amorphous. In the BBC’s *Luther*,¹¹ Alice Morgan’s psychopathy is, one might argue, even more difficult to analyse; both Tramell and Morgan appearing to operate within the diagnostic rubric of psychopathic criminality without any

⁸ A. H. Elhallaq, “Representation of Women as Femmes Fatales: History, Development and Analysis”. *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, vol. 3, no.1 (2015), p.85.

<<https://ajouronline.com/index.php/AJHSS/article/view/2295> [Accessed 20 April 2021].

⁹ Farrimond, p.2.

¹⁰ Robert Tine, *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (London: Penguin, 1992).

¹¹ *Luther* dir. by Sam Miller (BBC One, London, 2010-2019).

trauma inciting incident. The sheer variance of the construct demonstrating the absence of a definitive aetiology and resistance to stereotypical narratives.

In shaping Anais, I intended her characterisation to be in line with Doane's analysis of the femme fatale as a woman of inherent contradictions; elusive and compelling, at times terrifying and commonly, but not always, a victim of her own pathology. My intention was for the close reader to experience the aporia of feeling enthralled by her, at times sympathetic to her, and if not intrinsically repelled by her choices then conflicted by them. While we may not ultimately like her or agree with her, I intended the reader to at least have a working comprehension of her complexity and her victimology; to understand aspects of her if not the whole. I wanted to write a woman who was irrevocably flawed but capable of redeeming features — if not redemption itself. A woman that would challenge the traditional archetype beyond its conventional parameters.

What excited me the most about crafting Anais is explained, in part, by a long-held fascination with the ostracised woman to which the femme fatale belongs. She must belong there because evolutionary psychology extrapolates, particularly the work of Joyce Benenson, Dr David Buss and Noam Shpancer, PhD,¹² that any deviation from female commonality results in disenfranchisement and alienation.¹³ In her non-conformity, the femme fatale eschews atavistic values surrounding femininity thus incurring distrust and suspicion — she is an outlier, a maverick, a woman who lives by her own rules and this in itself makes her both dangerous and fascinating.

I also wanted to expand upon the theme of antithetical archetypes within a psychoanalytical framework and in this respect the work of Karen Horney and Carl Jung became invaluable. In Horney's influential work *Self-Analysis*¹⁴ she outlines her theory of neurosis within a Neo-Freudian structure, delineating four types of neurotic behaviour: power, domination, desire for approval/prestige and perfectionism/unassailability. Horney postulates that these neuroses derive from unmet childhood needs, manifesting as maladaptive, dissocial behaviour and coping mechanisms. Horney's theories were particularly germane to Anais's background and pathography.

¹² Noam Shpancer, PhD, *Feminine Woes: 'New Science Explores Female Competition (2014), Psychology Today* (<<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/insight-therapy/201401/feminine-foes-new-science-explores-female-competition>> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

¹³ David Buss 'The Evolution of Human Intrasexual Competition: Tactics of Mate Attraction', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(4) 616-28 (1988) <doi:10.1037/0022-3514.54.4.616> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

¹⁴ Karen Horney, *Self-Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1942).

Jungian theory provided further interpolation and a cohesive structure in which to explore Anais' personality; the conflation between the persona, shadow, anima/animus and the self.¹⁵ A central theme within *Umbr*a will be Anais' conflict between the light and dark aspects of herself, the anima and the shadow; her past and future self — and their battle for supremacy.

REBECCA

Du Maurier's, *Rebecca de Winter* is perhaps one of the most seminal treatments on the femme fatale archetype. Through the unreliable narration¹⁶ of Maxim's timid yet ultimately criminal second wife and the recollections of people who knew Rebecca, none more so than Mrs Danvers, we enter a world of claustrophobic veneration, fetishization and obsession — where nothing is as it seems. Whether it is Colonel Julian or Frank Crawley, Rebecca's cousin Jack Favell or Maxim's sister Beatrice, we are introduced to Rebecca through a seductive kaleidoscope of testimony, reimagining and adoration that borders almost on mania.

We learn that not only was Rebecca exquisitely beautiful, but she was also a paragon of virtue, loved and admired by everyone; witty, accomplished and self-possessed — the perfect woman. And yet, when Maxim's gauche young bride scrapes beneath the veneer of Rebecca idolatry, she learns mutable accounts of Rebecca's cruelty, her hedonism and, most shockingly, her deviancy.

In the climactic scene where Maxim reveals his hatred for Rebecca, he traduces her so ferociously it's as though he's invoking a she-devil, a Salome who threatened to annihilate him and the patriarchal norms he embodies — Manderley, his masculinity and his primogeniture. Maxim tells the narrator he married Rebecca because she possessed the three constituents of the ideal wife, 'breeding, brains and beauty.' But he also says Rebecca was not normal, that being married to her was akin to living with the devil and that he never had a moment's happiness with her.¹⁷ She wasn't capable of love or decency, and according to Maxim, was so transgressive that 1930s morality would have been outraged had they known the *real* Rebecca. She was, by Maxim's account, the epitome of the femme fatale.

¹⁵ Carl Jung, *The Philosophical Tree; Volume 13 of Collected Works of C.G Jung* (London: Routledge, 1967), p.335.

¹⁶ Auba Llompart Pons, "Patriarchal Hauntings: Re-Reading Villainy and Gender in Daphne Du Maurier's 'Rebecca'" *Atlantis*, vol. 35, no.1 (2013), pp.69-83. *JSTOR* < <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43486040> > [Accessed 19 April 2021].

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.304.

But here I would like to introduce a revisionist reading of Rebecca already in popular discourse^{18 19 20} and one that has shaped my approach to female characterisation and inhabiting the feminine psyche with narratorial representation. It is my close reading of Rebecca from a young age that profoundly changed and evolved my perception of who Rebecca really was and in turn refined my understanding of the femme fatale.

I would argue that while Rebecca is a complex, arcane figure, she does not fulfil the wider diegesis of the lethal woman. While she was certainly capable of transgressive relationships and exhibiting irreverence, I would define Rebecca as a woman ahead of her time in many ways and in many ways a rule-breaker — a sybarite rather than a villainess. And based on the evidential value of the text, I believe it is erroneous to judge her as the cruel and destructive beauty that a superficial reading of the novel leans toward. I suggest that Rebecca was a femme fatale by accident not design²¹ and her legacy exposes the fundamental flaws of a regressive construct. As Kathleen Nigro reflects: '[...] an examination of Maxim as an Othello figure reveals Rebecca as a gothic heroine, who is dominated by her husband and the “tyrant custom” whose only real crime was in insisting on her right to individuality.’²² Furthermore, as Doane observes, the power of the femme fatale is '[...] of a peculiar sort insofar as it is usually not subject to her conscious will [...] in a sense she has power despite herself.’²³

But to fully understand her, we must understand Maxim and the rigid patriarchy he embodies. I propose that the true architect of villainy and vice in Du Maurier’s classic is not Rebecca, but Maxim himself; a Bluebeard reconfiguration, not only is he the femicidal murderer who masquerades as the victim of a lethal seductress, but he’s a man without remorse; a controlling and domineering aggressor who shows no contrition for his wife’s murder. But his toxicity doesn’t stop there; Maxim infantilises²⁴ his second

¹⁸ Kathleen Butterfly Nigro, “Rebecca as Desdemona: ‘A Maid That Paragons Description and Wild Fame.’” *College Literature*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2000), pp.144–157. *JSTOR* <www.jstor.org/stable/25112541> [Accessed 20 April 2021].

¹⁹ Rhonda J Berenstein, “I’m Not the Sort of Person Men Marry”: Monsters, Queers and Hitchcock’s *Rebecca*.” Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty, eds. *Out in Culture: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Essays on Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp.239-61.

²⁰ Rose Lovell-Smith, “Anti-Housewives and Ogres’ Housekeepers: The Roles of Bluebeard’s Female Helper.” *Folklore*, vol. 113, no. 2 (2002), pp.197–214. *JSTOR* <www.jstor.org/stable/1260676> [Accessed 18 April 2021].

²¹ Elhallaq, p.85.

²² Nigro, p.153.

²³ Doane p.2.

²⁴ Pons, pp.72-73.

wife, controlling and subjugating her to the status of a child-woman²⁵ as Sally Beauman explicates in the afterword of *Rebecca*:

Rebecca is narrated by a masochistic woman, who is desperate for the validation provided by a man's love – a woman seeking an authoritarian father surrogate, or, as Plath expressed it, a "man in black with a Meinkampf look." Her search for this man involves both self-effacement and abnegation, as it does for any woman who "adores a Fascist." She duly finds her ideal in de Winter [...]²⁶

According to his sister, Beatrice, Maxim is prone to black moods and sudden rages; a man who would rather murder his wife than risk having his reputation damaged in divorce proceedings,²⁷ and I suggest this in itself renders Rebecca's legacy even more troubling.

Maxim's domineering nature from which Rebecca ultimately rebelled is evinced throughout his relationship with his second wife. Maxim tells his young bride to avoid anything which ages her — whether it's black satin or pearls — but ultimately, he means the acquisition of knowledge and the passage from girl to womanhood.²⁸ That he rejoices in Rebecca's murder²⁹ is further testimony to the revisionist reading that Rebecca was more a victim than a femme fatale. Llompart Pons goes further, arguing that it was Rebecca's *feminising force* that precipitated Maxim's crisis of masculine identity³⁰ and Alison Light attributes Rebecca's significance as 'a seductive but ultimately tabooed expression of femininity.'³¹ Only by understanding patriarchal jurisdiction and hegemonic masculinity can we begin to grasp, on an epistemological level, who and what the femme fatale is, or in Rebecca's case, who she is not. One I would argue is sometimes bad, sometimes mad, sometimes neither and sometimes both, but predominantly a victim of male repression, and this was of key influence as I constructed Anais.

²⁵ Sally Beauman, *Rebecca* Afterword (London: Virago Modern Classics, 2002). <<https://readsonlinebook.com/rebecca/45>> [Accessed 20 April 2021], para 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, para 24.

²⁷ *Rebecca*, p.306.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.226.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.336.

³⁰ Pons, p.77.

³¹ Alison Light, "Returning to Manderley: Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class." *Feminist Review*, no. 16, (1984), pp. 7–25. *JSTOR* < www.jstor.org/stable/1394954> [Accessed 22 April 2021].

The prism of unreliable narration is a further factor that inhibits a true understanding of Rebecca; it is, after all, only Maxim and to a lesser degree, the character Ben, who view Rebecca as egregiously flawed. But while her inferred bisexuality³² and adultery would have indeed been scandalous for the time, is it enough to earn her the moniker of femme fatale? I would argue not.

Throughout the text Danvers' obsession with Rebecca is explicit. Mesmerised by her, Danvers fetishizes and objectifies her late mistress to a pathological extent, a further clue that Rebecca may well have been a passive agent. From Rebecca's hairbrush to her underwear, Danvers' ownership of Rebecca's memory and the allusion to Rebecca's lesbianism creates fertile terrain for Rebecca's transmogrification into the cult of the femme fatale. But here again, I would argue that Rebecca was a victim not only of male subjugation but also of intrasexual obsession; that she was, in fact, the predated not the predator. Feminist scholars such as Kathleen Nigro postulate that Rebecca's ultimate crime was her sexuality,³³ and that Maxim, repulsed by her *otherness*, was unable to repress or neutralise it, making her murder inevitable.

Further consideration of why Rebecca is an interesting inversion of the archetype is that while she did indeed exhibit some superficial characteristics of the femme fatale — irreverence, promiscuity and subversion — she still conspired with Maxim to protect her from societal condemnation. In agreeing to become his wife, Maxim tells the narrator that Rebecca made a bargain with him; she would run Manderley, uphold the façade of a successful, aristocratic marriage in return for living as she chose, to which Maxim reluctantly agreed.³⁴ It appears then that Rebecca was less inclined to live authentically without the social respectability her marital status afforded her. Alison Light observes that Rebecca's problem was 'how to find sexual pleasure without going beyond the pale — how to be like, and yet not like, those "other women."³⁵ In this respect, Rebecca was as much a proponent of stable patriarchy as her successor and falls outside the scope of the traditional femme fatale as a woman determined to live life by her own rules whatever the cost. Again, this influenced my treatment of Anais and how far she is prepared to go when contravening societal norms.

³² Berenstein, pp.239-61.

³³ Ibid., pp.145-150.

³⁴ *Rebecca*, pp.305-31.

³⁵ Alison Light, *Daphne du Maurier's Romance with the Past* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.177.

BENEATH THE CONSTRUCT

The current paradigm which dichotomises subversive women, rather unhelpfully, into either the mad or bad binary mobilises narrow ideation where women are pathologized as either irrational or evil.³⁶ I would argue that Rebecca de Winter defies compartmentalisation, and it was Du Maurier's purposely *recherché* characterisation of her — mirroring Du Maurier's own psychosexual identity struggle — which influenced my own work. It became fundamentally important to me to avoid stereotypical, stock characters and narrow constructs and I looked to *Rebecca* for guidance here.

In this vein, I read intertextually, including Sally Beauman's *Rebecca's Tale*,³⁷ which confirmed my view that Rebecca was neither femme fatale nor black widow, rather a woman determined to live beyond the social constraints of her time who falls foul of her tyrannical husband. Distilling the logic further, is it not conceivable that Rebecca was above all a victim of domestic violence where patriarchy serves as the ultimate corruptive force?

Rebecca has dared to be an unchaste wife; she has broken the "rules of conduct" Maxim lives by. Her ultimate sin is to threaten the system of primogeniture. That sin, undermining the entire patriarchal edifice that is Manderley, cannot be forgiven – and Rebecca dies for it.³⁸

In *Rebecca's Tale*, Beauman's Rebecca is the survivor of a traumatic past, entailing destitution, abandonment and rape. This aligns with Hedgecock's view of the femme fatale evolving from self-preservation rather than cold-blooded design: 'Her socioeconomic dilemmas drive her to commit bigamy or murder as an escape from poverty, and her resilience to such economic hardships undermines any specific definition of her.'³⁹ Distinguished feminist Helen Cixous goes further, defining the femme fatale as 'a subversive, feminine figure challenging patriarchy; [...] she's not deadly. She's beautiful.'⁴⁰ Could this also explain why a revisionist reading of Rebecca is not only lucid, but intensely relevant to today's audience, and as a writer concerned with the female space, one that holds enduring appeal? I suggest it does and furthermore,

³⁶ Maysaa Jaber, *Sirens in Command: The Criminal Femme Fatale in American Hardboiled Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave MacMillan UK), pp.37-79.

³⁷ Sally Beauman, *Rebecca's Tale* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2001).

³⁸ Beauman, *Rebecca*, Afterword < <https://readsonlinebook.com/rebecca/45> > [Accessed 20 April 2021].

³⁹ J. Hedgecock, *The Femme Fatale in Victorian Literature: The Danger and the Sexual Threat* (New York: Cambria Press (2014), p.21.

⁴⁰ Simkin, p.23.

it piqued my interest in writing a character who, similarly to Rebecca, challenges our purview of subversive women.

Variance and revision aside, Rebecca is ultimately a victim. Even in death, Rebecca is wronged; when her successor colludes with Maxim to ensure the fallacy of her suicide is protected, justice is abnegated once more. I would argue that in many respects Rebecca's successor inhabits the archetype of the lethal woman more faithfully than Rebecca herself and would agree with Beauman's sentiments, [...] ultimately it is with Rebecca, with the angry voice of female dissent, that du Maurier's instinctive sympathy lies.⁴¹

REFRAMING THE ARCHETYPE

The concept of injustice and the immolation of subversive woman which first captured my imagination in *Rebecca* intersected with my work significantly. Framing Anais in a less prescriptive, more humanistic lens and one that defies taxonomizing became elemental to her development.

When we first meet Anais, she is neither definitively wicked nor insane, but it's implied she could potentially be both or neither; what is clear, however, is that she is deviant. Anais does not inhabit the space of Rebecca's inadvertent femme fatale, nor does she fall within the nihilistic scope of Catherine Tramall's, nor that of Nicola Six,⁴² nor Amy Dunne's,⁴³ but somewhere, I would argue, less open to stylization. Béatrice Dalle's portrayal of Betty in *Betty Blue: 37° 2 Le Matin*⁴⁴ is an adroit example of how intricate I wanted Anais' characterisation to be, and one that would open up conflicting interpretations by the reader; a phenomenological break away from the orthodox to a more hybrid model of the femme fatale — her frailty being coterminous with her deviance. Similarly, the character of Cassie in Emerald Fennell's *A Promising Young Woman*⁴⁵ reconfirmed my decision to offer, if not exculpatory factors for Anais' actions, then culpability framed within a wider lens.

The opening chapter of *Umbra* introduces Anais as a young woman, newly arrived in London. At this stage, we know very little about her background other than the fact she was given away by her birth mother whom she is obsessed with tracking down. By chapter three her psychopathology is emergent though not axiomatic. Having stalked her mother and sister

⁴¹ Beauman, *Rebecca*, Afterword

⁴² Martin Amis, *London Fields* (London: Vintage, 1989).

⁴³ Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (London: Hachette UK, 2012).

⁴⁴ *Betty Blue: 37° 2 Le Matin* dir. by Jean-Jacques Beineix (France: Cargo Films, 1986).

⁴⁵ *A Promising Young Woman* dir. by Emerald Fennell (New York: Focus Features, 2021).

for several days, Anais turns her attention to locating a figure from her past, the identity of whom is withheld from the reader. A chance encounter with a stranger on the tube, further suggests an aberrant and potentially dangerous personality type. Not only does Anais fetishize the stranger's appearance but it is suggested to the reader that Anais wants to *become* her. But other than stealing the woman's purse it's not clear to what lengths Anais will go. For example, are these the outré musings of a delinquent teenager or a more sinister representation? I intended to encode speculation and ambiguity into the narrative machinery.

Once again, I drew inspiration from *Rebecca*. Mirroring, fetishization and identity duality feature recursively through the text; the second wife longs to emulate Rebecca, to attain her beauty and knowledge; the passage to adulthood that Maxim denies her.⁴⁶ So consumed is she by the idea of Rebecca and inhabiting her psyche that her own identity becomes obscured merging with that of Rebecca's.⁴⁷

A further example that influenced me is the bedroom scene between Danvers and the second wife. Danvers keeps Rebecca's bedroom a shrine to what she believes is her immortal, omnipotent presence in the house; she soliloquises about Rebecca's body — her height, her hair and even her underwear — to the point where a transgressive relationship between them, actual or desired, is inferential. I find this scene perhaps the most compelling and memorable of the novel; the imbricating themes of obsession and homoeroticism having thematic significance in my own work.

Indeed, homoeroticism as a theme commonly associated with the traditional sphere of the deviant woman is one I embedded through the opening chapters of *Umbra*. During Anais' first sighting of her mother and sister (chapter one) she is so transfixed by her mother's physical beauty and jealous of how closely her sister resembles her (mother) that she becomes almost paralysed with desire and envy.

[...] I can smell her now too, her perfume; that strange, exotic blend — unattainable, intoxicating. I caught it as she passed me by yesterday. I didn't expect that, nor her delicacy — the way she moves. The elegance and beauty... the absurd beauty, so complete, so exquisite I had to stop. Grappling for the pavement I sat there on the curb as life and its detritus spun around me. I felt strangely enervated, seeing her so close and so perfect — it was more than I ever expected. [...] as I stood watching them, I wanted to be inside with them, beside them, touching the silks and the velvets and smelling her. Only her.

⁴⁶ Pons, pp.72-73.

⁴⁷ *Rebecca*, pp.224-225.

I intended this to decussate with the themes of indeterminant sexuality and intrasexual rivalry/domination which became concomitant to Anais' development. I was further influenced by Braddon's treatment of the theme in *Lady Audley's Secret* and the relationship between Lucy and Phoebe.^{48 49} Similarly, I've comingled sexual obsession and covetousness through the opening chapters of *Umbra* and in this respect, I would include John Lutz's *Single White Female* and Harriet Lane's *Her* as an influence as I sketched character and plot. The work of Joyce Benenson within the realm of female derogation and intrasexual rivalry became pivotal here⁵⁰ providing the theoretical framework to explore Anais' sexuality and gender identity in a wider sense and it was particularly useful in shaping her feelings toward her sister, Bella. As part of my research, I also revisited the case of real-life femme fatale, Amanda Knox and the Meredith Kercher murder trial (2009) where sexual deviancy and jealousy was cited as the primary causal factor in Knox's indictment.

One of the key decisions I made to achieve a variegated approach to the femme fatale construct was to countervail Anais' wry, sardonic worldview and acuity with almost child-like percipience. This, I hoped, would provoke suspense and speculation that Anais is not all she seems. She may well be on the path to sociopathy, but she is still a young woman and a victim struggling to process her history. For example, during a taxi journey (chapter five) with an unknown male driver, Anais, derisive at first, decides to like him despite herself. Here we see the first real evidence that she is capable not only of self-revision but also of empathy and compassion; a deviation from the traditional construct of lethal, cold-blooded women.

I decide to like him. I don't know why; I just feel compelled to.
Sometimes I'm like that. Sometimes, when I've decided to like someone, I
feel overwhelmed that there is nothing they could ever do to upset me or
make me hurt them. I feel this way about him. I want to protect him.

This, I believe, is illustrative of Doane's construct of the femme fatale as elusive and evolving— a premise I wanted to adhere to. I was guided by the ideation of an inherently flawed, subversive and dangerous woman, but also one capable of great humanity. I was interested in her as a paradox and a chimaera; a woman as comfortable watching Lakmé at the Royal Opera House as she is eating chips and drinking cola in a grimy café. I fundamentally

⁴⁸ Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (London: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2007), p.39.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.72.

⁵⁰ Joyce F. Benenson, 'The Development of Human Female Competition: Allies and Adversaries' *Phil Trans R Soc B* 368: 20130079 (2013) <<https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2013.0079>> [Accessed 10 April 2021].

reject the premise that people, in the world of fiction or otherwise, should be constrained by a broad brush-stroke approach. I would also argue that women, certainly the women I am interested in writing about, are an amalgam of competing identities — multi-faceted, paradoxical and existing in a world beyond reductivism.

LADY AUDLEY AND BEYOND

Turning our attention back to the more traditional reading of the femme fatale, *Lady Audley's Secret*, I would argue, is still one of the most engrossing depictions of the archetype and one that has impacted my creative decisions, particularly the theme of concealed identities. Little is known of Lucy's history up until she marries Sir Michael although much is made of her beauty and seeming purity. This elliptical biography not only increases speculation but, I would argue, challenges reader preconceptions.

Outwardly, Lucy is child-like, fey, and ultimately compliant — the antithesis of the femme fatale — and yet she is capable of astonishing depths of duplicity and cruelty, and I was interested in cultivating these paradoxical elements when writing Anais. Also, by precluding the reader knowledge of Anais' background, her passage through life and her aetiology early on, I hoped would elicit suspense and foreground the opening chapters with a sense of apprehension in a similar mode to *Lady Audley* and Robotham's Evie in *Good Girl Bad Girl*.⁵¹

Lady Audley's treatment of unstable identities further informed my work on Anais. But here, I would like to make an observation that is not only germane to her characterisation but has critical value within the wider crime and thriller genre. Anais was not born psychopathic, nor is her mental illness deterministic; her decline into eventual sociopathy will be evolving and mutable. In this respect, somatic comorbidity was an important consideration and understanding where on the clinical spectrum Anais sits. The rubric and the interrelationship between personality disorders: Antisocial Personality Disorder,⁵² Disruptive, Impulse-Control and Conduct Disorders⁵³ and further neurodevelopmental markers became a critical factor. The ongoing challenge here was to synergise integrity, in a clinical sense, with character authenticity. I have previously mentioned the character development of Alice Morgan in the BBC's *Luther* as particularly compelling, exploring the sociopathic woman within criminal iconography.

⁵¹ Michael Robotham, *Good Girl Bad Girl* (London: Hachette UK, 2020).

⁵² *Statistical and Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorders*, pp.659-684.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.461- 480.

A final theme worthy of discourse is the convergence of beauty and danger exemplifying the more orthodox reading of the archetype with works that influenced me including *Laura*,⁵⁴ *Femme Fatale*,⁵⁵ *Folle-Farine*,⁵⁶ *House of Stairs* (Christabel),⁵⁷ *A Dark Adapted Eye* (Eden),⁵⁸ *The Bridesmaid*⁵⁹ and *Lady Audley's Secret*. However, while major treatments on the archetype do orbit this theme it is not definitive; Rendell's *Judgement in Stone*⁶⁰ being a notable departure from the lethal woman using beauty and seductiveness as her main artillery. Characters such as Rendell's Eunice Parchman or Tony Cavanaugh's Anthea deviate from standard notions of beauty, so according to Simkin, cannot be femmes fatales within the conventional sense. Here, Simkin espouses that a subsidiary categorisation is preferable; 'the monstrous-feminine'⁶¹ — contradistinction to the standardised model and thus illustrating the conceptual anomalies of the construct.⁶²

When we first meet Anais, she tells us she doesn't possess her mother's refined beauty — *yet*. And further on, in chapter three, as Anais scrutinises Sarah on the tube, she acknowledges what she instinctively knows — beauty denotes power and it must be cultivated. But while I intended Anais to be aware of the power her attractiveness brings, its importance is effaced — her intellect and acuity being her principal weaponry. This, I believe makes her an interesting deviation from the more formulaic elements of the femme fatale construct.

⁵⁴ Vera Caspary, *Laura* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943).

⁵⁵ Guy de Maupassant, *Femme Fatale* (London: Penguin Little Black Classics, 2015).

⁵⁶ Quida, *Folle-Farine* (London: Penguin Classics, 2015).

⁵⁷ Ruth Rendell, *The House of Stairs* (London: Penguin Books, 1988).

⁵⁸ Barbara Vine, *A Dark Adapted Eye* (London: Penguin Books, 1986).

⁵⁹ Ruth Rendell, *The Bridesmaid* (London: Hutchinson, 1989).

⁶⁰ Ruth Rendell, *A Judgement in Stone* (London: Random House, 1977).

⁶¹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁶² Simkin, p.8.

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