

THE FEMININE ALTERNATIVE:  
MEN AND WOMEN IN  
MODERNIST EUROPEAN  
LITERATURE

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2013

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Wendy Faris for her invaluable help in this project and for chairing my thesis committee. I would also like to thank Dr. Stacy Alaimo and Dr. Desiree Henderson for being part of my thesis committee and for their assistance with my research.

April 10, 2013

Abstract

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My work examines four seminal pieces of modernist European literature: Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Gide's *The Immoralist*, and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. I show two aspects of gender representation within the characters of these novels. First, these novels follow the trend in much of canonical modernism of representing modernist traits through their male characters and pre-modernist traits through their female characters. Second, despite this gendered representation of modernism, and at times because of it, the hegemonic gender norms for both sexes are defied.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

In 1925, José Ortega y Gasset wrote “The Dehumanization of Art,” an essay in which he attempts to define and characterize the new art of his day. Among the major characteristics of modernist art that he identifies are what he terms dehumanization, or the removal of lived reality and sentimentality from art, and a lack of transcendence, or no longer seeing art as a source of salvation. In making these assertions, Ortega y Gasset draws the conclusion that modernist art is essentially masculine. He says that life and art in the 1920s are pointing to “a time of masculinity and youthfulness,” and that “for a while women and old people will have to cede the rule over life to the boys; no wonder that the world grows increasingly informal” (52). In order to test the validity of Ortega y Gasset’s contemporaneous characterization of modernism as masculine, I will analyze how male and female characters are represented in several key works of early European modernism. I will show that in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and André Gide’s *The Immoralist*, the major female characters are in opposition to the modernist qualities of the male antiheroes. The women represent pre-modernist qualities and provide an alternative to modernism, while the men personify its movement towards passivity, subjectivity, and realization of the unconscious desires and away from religion and sentimentality. I will also analyze one of the major modernist works by a female author, Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, to show how she presents her female protagonist as maintaining modernist qualities throughout most of the novel, but reestablishes her in the end as a pre-modernist woman who is objectified and ultimately denies her subconscious desires in favor of maintaining the status quo and doing what she considers right for those around her. Throughout my work, it will become evident that this framework of men as modernist and women as pre-modernist even

cuts across traditional definitions of gender roles, thus revealing some of the ways these gender roles were transforming during the modernist era.

The terms “modernist” and “pre-modernist” need a bit of explanation of their use within this work. Generally speaking, “modernist” refers to the qualities common to the modernist movement in literature and the arts in the early 20th century. This is a very broad category, of which I will only be studying a very small portion, so it must be stated that my claims here are specific to the novels I am studying. While I do believe they identify predominant trends within the literary movement, I do not claim that every feature of modernism I point out is common to all modernist works. Nor do I claim that these characteristics are exclusive to modernist works, simply that they are perhaps more prevalent and relevant during that era. I must, therefore, make the same apology as Ortega y Gasset when he stated in a footnote, “It would be tedious to warn at the foot of each page that each of the features here pointed out as essential to modern art must be understood as existing in the form of a predominant propensity, not of an absolute property” (37).

Literary modernism, along with modernist pieces in other art forms, is characterized by a rejection of the styles and standards of the past. Much of Ortega y Gasset’s claims about modernism are based on the concept that it is in direct opposition to the type of artwork that preceded it historically. He states, “The new art is a world-wide fact. For about twenty years now the most alert young people of two successive generations – in Berlin, Paris, London, New York, Rome, Madrid – have found themselves faced with the undeniable fact that they have no use for traditional art; moreover, that they detest it. . . . Far from being a whim, their way of feeling represents the inevitable and fruitful result of all previous artistic achievement” (Ortega y Gasset 12-13). Virginia Woolf’s comments in her essay “Modern Fiction” confirm Ortega y Gasset’s assertion that the modernists found their art strikingly different from and superior to the art that preceded it: “In making any survey, even the freest and loosest, of modern fiction, it is difficult not to take it for granted that the modern practice of the art is somehow an improvement upon the old.

With their simple tools and primitive materials, it might be said, Fielding did well and Jane Austen even better, but compare their opportunities with ours! Their masterpieces certainly have a strange air of simplicity” (103). Despite the consistency of the claim that modernists felt themselves superior to the predecessors, there is still some ambiguity as to who exactly those predecessors are. Which specific authors and artists were the modernists reacting to and which specific styles and conventions were they trying to break free from? Woolf sheds some light on this in her mention of Fielding and Austin. Based on those references, the era that modernism contrasts with seems to be primarily the 18th and early 19th century. In a similar vein, Ortega y Gasset states, “The vigor of the assault stands in inverse proportion to the distance. Keenest contempt is felt for nineteenth-century procedures although they contain already a noticeable dose of opposition to older styles” (Ortega y Gasset 44-45). So, it seems that the styles the modernists were rejecting were primarily, though not exclusively, those of the 19th and 18th centuries, including the Victorian era. However, it is important to note that just as any child’s perception of his parents’ old-fashioned ideals may be clouded by his natural instinct to rebel against an idealized image of the past, the modernists’ perception of the 18th- and 19th-century ideals that they were rejecting may be different from our current perception of those time periods. Our new theoretical lenses, in-depth historical knowledge, and distance in time may allow us to see the 18th and 19th centuries in a much more forgiving light than their immediate predecessors did. All this is to say that when I use the terms “pre-modernist” or “pre-modernism” in this work, I am referring to the modernists’ perception of the literary style and form of the generations that preceded them. In the context of this work, “pre-modernism” is simply that which “modernism” is trying not to be.

As it is necessary because of the limitations of time and space to focus my analysis, I have limited my choices to four European works that were published during or before 1925 because Ortega y Gasset was writing from a European perspective and because his essay was

published in 1925. I risk falling victim in these choices to the problem which Bonnie Kime Scott claims has caused modernism to be inaccurately gendered as masculine: “Typically, both the authors of original manifestos and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm a small set of its male participants, who were quoted, anthologized, taught, and consecrated as geniuses” (2). In the expanded definition of modernism used by the contributors to Scott’s anthology, *The Gender of Modernism*, the three male authors I am working with fit into “The ‘experimental, audience challenging, and language-focused’ writing that used to be regarded as modernism” (4). These scholars now consider this type of modernism to be a subcategory, variously referred to as “early male modernism” (Scott 4, quoting Lilienfeld) or “Masculinist modernism” (Scott 4, quoting Schenck). While recognizing that my own work is limited in the very way that these scholars are trying to break free from, I believe that my research will support, rather than refute, their claims. I will show that this “subcategory” of modernism, as they have termed it, is, in fact, gendered masculine, not only by scholars, but by the authors and the texts themselves. My inclusion of Woolf’s work will show that while later works of modernism, especially those written by female authors, did begin to move beyond this trend, the characterization of modernism as male is not strictly limited to texts by male authors. However, my analysis will also add complexity to this categorization of early modernism as masculine because I will show that, while male characters are representative of modernism and female characters are representative of pre-modernist ideals in these novels, these characteristics reveal a shift in traditional understandings of male and female gender roles which may reveal the beginnings of a shift in European culture toward a more fluid interpretation of gender.

My arguments will show that the early modernist era is an important one for gender studies as it marks a literary and cultural shift in the previously more rigid roles of men and women. I will also show two sides of gender representation in modernism, one that privileges men as representing the ideals of the modernist era, but also one that shows signs of blurring



gender roles and increasing flexibility for both men and women. The texts of the time often still fit into a trend that is present throughout much of culture and literature: associating women with the past and tradition while associating men with the future and advancement. André Viola states in his analysis of *Heart of Darkness* that “when Marlowe declares that ‘the women [...] should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own,’ he is registering a stage in late Victorianism, but he does not realize he is also alluding to an age-old conflict” (165). This “age-old” trend of setting up females as representatives of the past and its ideals is not present only in modernism, but the way it is enacted in these modernist texts does somewhat blur the boundaries for what men and women are considered capable of, while not freeing them from these pre-established tropes.

## Chapter 2

### Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*

Published in 1864, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is a text that marks the earliest emergence of modernist style. Donald Fanger, in his introduction to the Bantam Classic version of the text, states, "Viewed historically, this short novel stands as well at the threshold of the larger fictions which made Dostoevsky a world figure — and, through them, at the threshold of that modernist literary art which still commands our serious, often uncomfortable attention" (xv). Despite its early position at the dawn of the modernist movement, *Notes from Underground* shows many of the major elements of modernism and had great influence on modernist writers. In her book, *Refiguring Modernism*, Bonnie Kime Scott discusses Dostoevsky's influence on modernist writers (particularly Djuna Barnes, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf). Scott states that, "To them, this author suggested a greater reach into dark human emotion than one generally finds in Western literature" (68). She quotes Woolf as having said that Dostoevsky explored the "labyrinth of the soul" (179). At the dawn of the modernist era, Dostoevsky was writing in a way that explored the subconscious of his characters and made a place for the antihero that would influence modernist writing for decades to come. However, as we will see, the subconscious that he explores is that of his male protagonist, and the antihero that dominates as the subject of the narrative is a man. The only female in this novel is highly representative of pre-modernist expectations for a character. While she is highly active and hopeful, she does not journey into that dark human emotion the way that the antihero does, and she is ultimately an object of his narrative with no subjectivity of her own.

In *Notes from Underground*, Liza represents an alternative to what the underground man has become. She is active and hopeful where he is passive and hopeless. Even though passivity may be more readily associated with the feminine than that masculine, it is certainly associated

with modernism. The modernist antihero was one of passivity, being acted upon rather than acting and not changing his world or his position in it (Faris). Therefore, it is fitting that Liza would be the active character while the underground man remains passive, as a representative of the move toward modernism. Like the underground man, Liza is living in unfortunate circumstances and is looked down upon by society. In fact, her situation seems much worse than his because, as a prostitute, she is not in any way independent and seems incapable of making any type of change to her circumstances. However, she does not take the same belligerent attitude toward life and the people around her that the underground man does. She remains hopeful despite her circumstances. After the night the underground man spends with her, berating her and going on about the hopelessness of her situation, she shows him a letter she received from a medical student who she hopes will give her a way out of prostitution. The underground man thinks, "Poor thing, she kept that student's letter as a precious jewel, and she ran to show me this one precious possession, not wanting me to leave without learning that she too was loved honestly and sincerely, that she too was treated with respect" (Dostoevsky 124). The underground man does not think that Liza has any chance of being freed from her situation and pities her for the hope she does have, believing it to be naive. The underground man does nothing to change his circumstances beyond creating awkward social situations and self-destructing within them, but Liza actively tries to change her circumstances when she comes to his home. She does what he never can, which is accept someone's help and seek a better life for herself, an escape from her destitution.

Interestingly, even though she has come to him in the end for salvation from prostitution, it is actually she who offers him salvation from his lifestyle of hatred toward himself and everything around him. Even after he yells at her and belittles her for coming, she is still compassionate toward him: "Liza, insulted and humiliated by me, understood much more than I could have imagined. She understood out of all this what a woman, if she loves sincerely, will always understand before all else. She understood that I myself was unhappy" (Dostoevsky 145).

With Liza, the underground man finally has the chance to be accepted by someone and to actively make a positive change in his life. Liza offers the underground man a way out of his hopelessness. He says to her, "If I had had a family as a child, I'd be a different man... I've grown up without a family; that must be why I've tuned out like this... without feelings" (Dostoevsky 110). This is exactly what Liza has to offer, a family. If he were to marry her, she would be freed from her life as a prostitute, and he would finally have a family to show him affection and make him feel at home. During that last scene, he sees that she understands him and the feelings that he really does have. She sees his sadness and comes to him with the offer of comfort. He recognizes the salvation that she has to offer: "she had come, not at all to listen to pathetic words, but to love me, for to a woman love means all of resurrection, all of salvation from any kind of ruin, all of renewal of life: indeed, it cannot manifest itself in anything but this" (Dostoevsky 148). Yet, he ultimately rejects her. In his rejection, he condemns her to a continued life of prostitution and condemns himself to continuing through life as the modernist antihero. In the end, the underground man's passivity and resignation to who he really is cannot be broken, even by the love and hope of a woman. Bernard J. Paris says, "His inability to respond to Liza means that he is lost, that he has no hope of the 'moral renewal' for which he desperately longs" (30). This scenario of rejected salvation and destruction shows a picture of the transformation from pre-modernist art to modernism. Pre-modernist art, both realistic and romantic, acted as a kind of salvation. Ortega y Gasset describes this in his essay:

For a real understanding of what is happening let us compare the role art is playing today with the role it used to play thirty years ago and in general throughout the last century. Poetry and music then were activities of an enormous caliber. In view of the downfall of religion and the inevitable relativism of science, art was expected to take upon itself nothing less than the salvation of mankind. (49-50)

This is what Liza ultimately symbolizes of the old art, an offer of salvation. That salvation is rejected by the underground man just as old art is rejected by the modernists. The underground man seeks what the modernists sought in their art: freedom. That freedom is not always the most

logical or advantageous choice; it can defy the expectations of what is right and what is beautiful, but it is freedom nonetheless and is therefore the most desirable route for the modernist.

In addition, the underground man represents the subjectivity of modernist protagonists, while Liza is like the objectified characters of pre-modernist literature. Mikhail Bakhtin describes the subjectivity of Dostoevsky's heroes: "In the author's creative plan, Dostoevsky's principle heroes are indeed *not only objects of the author's world but subjects of their own directly significant world*" (4). This is clearly true of the underground man, who is very much the subject of his own world. His unique perspective and way of speaking is what makes the novel simultaneously so engaging and so frustrating. In the pages of *Notes from Underground*, the reader is confronted with an antihero who is so different from the usual literary character and yet so reminiscent of unpleasant people encountered in the world, or even of the worst parts of oneself. As Fanger phrases it, he is one of Dostoevsky's "bizarre and distasteful characters whose common humanity we are forced to perceive in spite of our repugnance" (xi). By making this type of man the hero or, rather, antihero of the novel, "Dostoevsky alters the rules of the literary game — and forces us to learn them as we go" (Fanger vii). The reader is pulled into the narrative, hoping to see the underground man make a change in his life or find some success, all the while knowing that, given his nature, it would be impossible. The underground man, in fact, has such a powerful subject position within the novel that he even controls and manipulates the reader. He invites the reader into the narrative with engrossing taunts such as "I may even be more 'alive' than you are. Do take a closer look!" (Dostoevsky 152-3) and he "has involved the reader from the beginning, addressing him directly, anticipating his reactions, preempting his judgments, denying him the comfortable role of spectator" (Fanger vii). As readers, we are made objects of the overwhelming subjectivity of the underground man and denied our own independent voice within the reading experience. This is a fully unique reading experience, especially to readers of Dostoevsky's time, for whom the modernist era was just dawning.

Liza, on the other hand, is a very recognizable character for Dostoevsky's readers. She is the damsel in distress, the fallen angel, and the seeker of redemption. She could easily be plucked out of the underground man's narrative and fit quite nicely into any number of pre-modernist fictions. Unfortunately for Liza, it is the underground man who tells her story. Bakhtin continues his description of Dostoevsky's heroes by saying, "The hero's consciousness is given as a separate, a *foreign* consciousness, but at the same time is not objectified, it does not become closed off, it is not made the simple object of the author's consciousness" (4). With the underground man as the author of her story, Liza is not given such kind treatment. She is made the object of his perspective, in the same way the traditional pre-modernist author often objectified his characters. She is only capable of existing within the underground man's framework for the world, and she only has the agency he allows her. For instance, take the scene between the two characters in the brothel. After they have slept together, the underground man begins describing Liza using synecdoche, referring to her first as two eyes: "Suddenly I saw beside me two open eyes, examining me with steady curiosity" (Dostoevsky 102-3). Liza's eyes are important throughout the novel as it is she who truly sees him, in his humiliation and poverty and rage. It makes sense that the underground man would describe Liza as being only two eyes here, rather than a whole woman, because it is her eyes, and what she has seen of him, that are his primary concern. He allows his concern over what she has seen in him to overshadow any compassion or love he may feel for her as a human being. The fact that she has seen him is why he is so drawn to her and enraged by her. He cannot handle the fact that her insight into who he is might give her power over him, so he continually reasserts his dominance, here by berating her, and, at the end of the novel, by sleeping with her. After they've slept together for the first time in the brothel, the underground man berates her, saying, "you don't think," "You are a slave from the very first," "You've given up everything, your whole freedom," "You'll never buy your way out," "You must be really unfortunate" (Dostoevsky 107-111). The tirade continues for nearly 20 pages, and

Liza is barely able to get a word in edgewise. The reader never really learns anything about Liza, her past or her perspective; we are only shown the underground man's perspective of her and his projection of his own sense of hopelessness onto her life and her situation. Paris says this is because "The underground man senses the similarities between himself and Liza, and this makes it easier for him both to express his cherished ideas and to 'turn [her] young soul'" (24). Paris argues that the underground man's statements about Liza are really "exactly the way he sees himself" and that he is "drawing on his own preoccupations" (24, 26). Unlike the underground man, who "has no fixed definition, there is nothing to say about him," Liza is completely defined by the underground man and all we know of her is what he tells us (Bakhtin 40). Even in her own act of self-assertion and hopefulness at the end of this scene, when she shows him the letter she has received, Liza is not allowed a voice. The reader is given the underground man's interpretation of Liza and her letter and is left with only her actions to infer that she is not as hopeless as he sees her. As discussed above, Liza does show active volition in trying to change her circumstances and the underground man's in the end of the novel. She again silently asserts herself by leaving behind the money he slipped her, money which reinstated his objectification of her after he came so close to accepting to her offer of salvation. However, this too is completely filtered through his perception of her and, in his narrative, she is ultimately as unsuccessful as he in breaking free from the hopeless situation he has painted her in. As a character in the underground man's narrative, the reader can conclude that Liza does have a consciousness foreign to the underground man, but that, like the pre-modernist heroes, she is made an object of the author and her uniqueness from him becomes "closed off."

Much of the novel is dominated by the underground man's great internal struggle about who he is and what motivates him. He greatly desires to be a hero and has fantasies throughout the narrative, based on books he's read, about various heroic feats he will accomplish, though he never really does. One example of these heroic dreams is his dream of rescuing Liza. He says,

“For example, I’d see myself saving Liza, precisely through her visits to me and my talks with her... I would develop her mind and educate her. And finally I’d notice that she loved me, loved me passionately” (Dostoevsky 130). But, this traditional, pre-modernist hero is not who he is. Immediately after he has these heroic fantasies, he chides himself for his own foolishness: “I’d go on in this vein until I myself would be nauseated and would end by sticking my tongue out at my own self” (Dostoevsky 130). Thus, we see his desire to be the traditional, pre-modernist hero, but we also see his natural pulling away from that trope and recognition of it as ridiculous. He even admits, “A novel requires a hero, and here there’s a *deliberate* collection of all the traits for an antihero” (Dostoevsky 152). Paris describes this internal conflict:

Part of him wants to avenge himself, part of him wants to be left alone, and part of him wants to save Liza and to be saved by her love. Caught in a crossfire of conflicting desires and inner dictates, he is in torment whatever he does... His hopelessness derives in part from his awareness of his inner conflicts, which he sees no way of resolving.  
(29-30)

The underground man’s internal conflicts mirror the transition taking place in the world around his novel, a world transitioning from the pre-modernist to the modernist era. Straus states, “If Dostoevsky responded intellectually to a sense of crisis... what he dramatized in fiction was the way men’s and women’s identities were thrown into question through this crisis” (1). Within this struggle for identity, it is Liza who ultimately does represent pre-modernist ideals and the underground man simply cannot give her any power over himself, no matter how much he may desire to. Thus is it the underground man, and modernism, who win out in the novel, subordinating the pre-modernist female heroine. However, as is true of much of modernism, the benefits and losses of this modernist victory are quite ambiguous.

There is a slight transformation of traditional gender roles in that it is the female character who actively tries to change the circumstances for both characters and that it is she that makes the offer of salvation. In a sense, the tables are turned and it is she who acts the part of the knight in shining armor attempting to save him in the role of damsel in distress. Tzvetan Todorov



explains that in Dostoevsky's work, "women who live outside the constrictions of culture's mainstream, either by default or consciously, have the power to break through men's pretensions to superiority" (qtd. in Straus 44). Liza does this by being the active character who makes the offer of salvation. Straus explains that George Sand's *Mauprat* "suggested to Dostoevsky the image of a woman as a Christ figure who redeems a 'fallen' man while simultaneously confronting him with her feminist advocacy of sexual equality" (7). While Liza certainly does not reach the level of advocate for sexual equality, her offer of salvation does give her a power within the structure of the novel that upsets the traditional, pre-modernist notion of gender roles. That offer of salvation is directly linked to her sexuality. In their first encounter at the brothel, Liza essentially saves the underground man from the humiliating circumstances with Zverkov and his other schoolmates by sleeping with him, thus providing for him the opportunity to reassert his masculine power. However, the ultimate control of the story still remains in the hands of the male character as he is the subject and she is objectified. Though she has the power to offer salvation, he has more power in denying it, not only for himself but also for her. The fact that he has sex with her and attempts to pay her for it in the end links his reestablishment of sexual power with his denial of her offer of salvation. Barbara Johnson identifies this narrative technique of Dostoevsky's as "simultaneously espousing and subverting" sexual power structures (qtd. in Straus 44). This technique is in part a reflection of Dostoevsky's own struggle with the transformation of gender roles within European and, more specifically, Russian culture at the time. Straus explains:

His 'negative,' hysterical, rebellious, or suicidal women characters make us conscious of the radically transformed social relations the author struggles but fails to repress in his fiction... Dostoevsky's fiction dramatizes what Charles Taylor calls the transforming powers of modern identities even while the novelist opposes them. (2)

Thus, despite its author's preferences, this novel shows the beginnings of a transition in power structure and gender roles. It is clear that even here, in the earliest stages of masculine

modernism, the move toward a modernism for women is already taking shape and the power that the modernist era would eventually grant women is beginning to materialize. Yet, that move toward transition of gender roles is quickly squashed within the context of this novel in the reestablishment of the male as the center of power and subjectivity.

### Chapter 3

#### Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

Unlike Dostoevsky, who was part of the emerging trend of modernism at the very dawn or perhaps before the dawn of the modernist era, Joseph Conrad is considered one of modernism's greats and his *Heart of Darkness*, published 35 years after *Notes from Underground*, is considered a classic of the genre. Conrad's work was very influential during the modernist era and has been canonized in the teaching of modernism. Lionel Trilling says, "This very great work has never lacked for the admiration it deserves, and it has been given a kind of canonical place in the legend of modern literature by Eliot's having it so clearly in mind when he wrote *The Waste Land* and his having taken from it the epigraph to 'The Hollow Men'" (1587). Similarly, Andrew Michael Roberts states, "Conrad is widely regarded as a major literary modernist and as a prophet and critic of the condition of social modernity" (*Conrad and Masculinity* 119). While Conrad is certainly part of what has been termed "early male modernism," his influence stretched beyond male writers into the realm of female modernism. Mark A. Wollaeger states that Virginia Woolf "held Conrad in the highest regard, paying her respects to 'the spell of Conrad's prose,' his 'moments of vision,' 'the astonishing solidity' of his fictional world, and the 'lasting importance' that made him a 'giant' among living writers" (45). In its explorations of primitivism and subconscious desires, together with its innovative narrative form and self-consciousness, *Heart of Darkness* is a prime example of modernism in the masculine tradition.

The men of *Heart of Darkness* are the models of modernism, particularly Marlow and Kurtz. The method of narration, by placing the story within a frame of storytelling, is a quality common to modernism, and one shared by three of the four novels in this paper. One introduction to the novel states that, "In many ways, *Heart of Darkness* is not so much about Africa or Kurtz or ivory as it is about Marlow and about storytelling. As in much modern literature, the truth is not

in the tale but in the teller” (Davis et al. 1366). The frame of the story, in which Marlow recounts his African adventure to the group of seamen waiting to sail on board the *Nellie*, is reinstated throughout the novel, consistently reminding the reader that they are reading a story, never quite allowing them to become fully lost in Marlow’s Africa, and reminding them that this narrator is human, and therefore faulty. Andrew Michael Roberts states, “The most distinctively modernist feature of Conrad’s technique is the way in which his works foreground the acts of narrating and listening or reading” (*Conrad and Masculinity* 7). Roberts specifically links this narrative form to masculinity by pointing out that it shows a form of exchange between men, as the speaker and all the listeners are men. This narrative form participates in the patriarchal structure of putting men in the role of subjects who do the exchanging and women as objects to be exchanged (*Conrad and Masculinity* 8). Modernist style is characterized by a focus on form, and this frame story requires the reader to take note of the form as a masculine exchange and of Marlow as male narrator throughout the reading.

While Marlow represents modernism’s focus on form, it is Kurtz who is the true representative of modernism’s attempt to delve into the subconscious and realize its desires. Kurtz represents what Marlow, or any person, could become if he were to fully yield to those subconscious desires. As Marlow observes the human heads on posts outside Kurtz’s camp, he surmises, “They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts” (Conrad 57). As he continues to become acquainted with Kurtz and realizes the details of Kurtz’s methods, Marlow comes to an even clearer realization of the depths Kurtz has gone to: “But his soul was mad. Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself and, by Heavens I tell you, it had gone mad. I had — for my sins, I suppose — to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself” (Conrad 66). The result of this realization of subconscious desires in *Heart of Darkness*, as in other modernist works, is ambiguous. At the end of his life, Kurtz seems to see the evil of it when he cries out, “The horror! the horror!” (Conrad 69). However, Kurtz is

characterized as a great and wise man by the Russian, by Marlow at times, and, seemingly, by the African tribesmen he has been living with during this journey of discovery. Marlow sides with Kurtz over the shallowness of the other Europeans he encounters, even knowing the horrors of what Kurtz has become. Lionel Trilling says of Kurtz's death cry that, "to Marlow the fact that Kurtz could utter this cry at the point of death, while Marlow himself, when death threatens him, can know it only as a weary grayness, marks the difference between the ordinary man and a hero of the spirit" (1587-8). So, regardless of moral judgments on his actions, modernism sees Kurtz as a hero of the spirit for delving into himself and discovering all that his subconscious desires.

Trilling concludes by saying:

Is this not the essence of modern belief about the nature of the artist, the man who goes down into that hell which is the historical beginning of the human soul, a beginning not outgrown but established in humanity as we know it now, preferring the reality of this hell to the blank lies of the civilization that has overlaid it? (1588)

Thus it is Kurtz who embodies the modernist artist and Marlow who represents the modernist form, while the women are set up in direct opposition to these two men as representatives of the faith, idealism, and tradition of the past.

The European women in *Heart of Darkness* have a strong belief in the ideals of imperialism, though they do not understand the horrific results of imperialism for the African people. They also have a very strong faith in the men of the novel whom they see as champions of those imperial ideals. Marlow's journey to Africa is framed by visits with these faithful women. His aunt, who secures his position with the company in Africa, sees him as "an emissary of light," heading into Africa to wean "those ignorant millions from their horrid ways" (Conrad 12). Similarly, Kurtz's intended, whom Marlow meets with after his return, is astoundingly faithful to Kurtz. She tells Marlow confidently that "it was impossible to know him and not to admire him" (Conrad 74). She believes that she knew Kurtz best in the world and that she was the most important thing to him, though she certainly would not recognize the Kurtz whom Marlow

encountered in Africa, the man who had abandoned the imperial ideals and given in to his own savagery. Both of these women have very strong faith in ideals and men that they do not truly understand. In his analysis of the novel, Jeremy Hawthorn states,

It is European men who are sent to Africa to further the aims of imperialism; but we see European women — ignorant of what their menfolk are really doing for imperialism — offering powerful ideological support to them. What *Heart of Darkness* suggests to the engaged reader is that the division of ideal and action, or theory and practice, is effected in part by means of the division of genders. (410)

Or, as Marlow puts it, “It’s queer how out of touch with the truth women are! They live in a world of their own and there had never been anything like it and never can be. It is too beautiful altogether, and if they were to set it up it would go to pieces before the first sunset” (Conrad 12). The men, in contrast, journey into Africa and experience the reality of imperialism. Along the way, they also journey towards discovery of themselves and their true natures. In this heart of darkness, Kurtz becomes a savage and Marlow finds himself obsessing over Kurtz as if Kurtz were a cruel god. The men take the “subject-position of knowledge (that of the knower)” in the novel while the women are made “its object (that which is known)” (Roberts, “Masculinity, Modernity, and Homosexual Desire” 456). Roberts explains that:

This discourse does not simply attribute knowledge to men and ignorance to women but variably associates women with particular forms of ignorance and knowledge in such a way as to make them available as symbols of a mysterious truth and make them objects of a secret knowledge while largely depriving them of the role of knowing subject. (*Conrad and Masculinity* 121)

The women are held up as symbols of the faith and idealism of past ages while they are blocked from the knowledge of the true nature of the empire and the subconscious. It is important here to note that Conrad himself was not necessarily condoning these patriarchal systems represented in his novel: “In inviting the reader to empathize with women characters... the fiction offers some critical purchase on these structures of exploitation, without ever fully analysing or stepping outside them” (Roberts, *Conrad and Masculinity*, 121-22).

While the women in the novel are certainly not enlightened by experience or particular knowledge of international affairs, they have a crucial quality that the men are lacking. They have a “mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering” (Conrad 73). The faith, idealism, and self-sacrifice of the women in the novel link them specifically to the heroines of Polish romanticism, as Susan Jones points out when she discusses Conrad’s idea of “the Polish patriotic ideal of womanhood, ‘the standard bearer of faith to which we were all born’” (*Conrad and Women* 54). This fidelity and belief stand in opposition to the men’s journey into the reality of Africa and of their subconscious. Faith in anything external cannot stand up, it seems, to a true understanding of the reality of oneself and the world, at least not to the modernist way of thinking. Marlow’s final betrayal of Kurtz by lying about his last words shows that the men are incapable of this fidelity and belief while the women are abounding in it. These men look at the fragile world of women and know that, “Some confounded fact we men have been living contentedly with ever since the day of creation would start up and knock the whole thing over” (Conrad 13). While their contentment with the facts is questionable, the men are certainly too overwhelmed with facts about imperialism to believe in it anymore, and they are too overwhelmed with facts about their true nature to believe in themselves either. Marlow chooses not to “knock over” the faithful world of the intended by telling her the truth about Kurtz’s death, but it is a world he can never enter because he knows too much about that truth.

One of the most powerful female images in *Heart of Darkness* is Kurtz’s painting of “a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch” (Conrad 25). This woman has been the subject of much criticism and analysis. Lissa Schneider, in her essay, “Iconography and the Feminine Ideal,” discusses the use of female figures in European art to represent of the ideals of Western society. This characterization fits in well with my framework of women representing the pre-modernist ideals of European life. The woman in Kurtz’s painting is wearing a blindfold. Schneider explains that in Western art, “the blindfolded woman represents ignorance, moral or

spiritual blindness” (480). This image of female ignorance is repeated in the ignorance of the European women in the novel. They are ignorant of the horrors of imperialism and the violence it inflicts on native people. They are also ignorant of the horrors that lie within the unconscious desires of the men they devote themselves to. While their faith in these ideals and these men may have been seen as morally and spiritually upright to the standards of the time, Conrad and others who understood the true nature of imperialism knew that this was nothing but truly blind faith. The woman in the painting is also holding a torch. Schneider explains that, “a torch in the hands of a woman symbolizes wisdom, knowledge, empire, liberty, and Christian virtue” (480). These virtues, as held by the Western and particularly British imperialistic beliefs of the time, can be upheld only by someone who is blind to the true nature of imperialism. The blinded woman, in her ignorance, is therefore the perfect person to carry the torch of imperialistic values because she cannot understand the true nature of that which she upholds. The men of the novel, in journeying into the heart of darkness, both the depths of Africa and the depths of their own subconsciousnesses, are stripped of any blindfolds and see the horror of the empire and of their own hearts. It is important to note, however, Susan Jones’s explanation of Conrad’s tendency to include in his work, “Something of this aestheticisation of women as paintings or artefacts [which] survives in Conrad’s habitual mode of presentation in the late romances, where Conrad emphasizes the gap between what a woman ‘is’ and how she is represented” (*Conrad and Women* 49). Thus, while Conrad did represent the female as art and as representative of European ideals, he was aware that a painting was not a woman and could not truly represent what a woman ‘is.’ He seems to have included this female image in a self-aware way, as much to criticize this trope of female representation as to take part in it.

Finally, the African woman represents another kind of alternative to the men’s journey into the heart of darkness and to modernist art. Ortega y Gasset states in his analysis of modernist art, from which the inspiration for this paper comes, that



the new sensibility exhibits a somewhat suspicious enthusiasm for art that is most remote in time and space, for prehistoric or savage primitivism. In point of fact, what attracts the modern artist in those primordial works is not so much their artistic quality as their candor; that is the absence of tradition. (45)

With all due respect to Ortega y Gasset and the modernist artists, the only person who could see primitive or “savage” cultures as lacking in tradition is someone who has never been part of or even bothered to closely study those cultures. Even Ortega y Gasset himself acknowledges that it is the culture that is “most remote in time and space” that the artist believes has no tradition. What they are really seeing is not a lack of tradition, but a completely different tradition. These cultures were not void of customs, even artistic customs; they simply had customs so very different from those of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe that they were unrecognizable to men like Ortega y Gasset and the modernist artists, who were attracted to primitive art without truly understanding it.

This same ignorance of foreign culture and tradition, coupled with a mysterious attraction to it, is what directs the attitudes of the men of *Heart of Darkness* in how they view and deal with the African woman. Marlow is fascinated by her and immediately associates her, in his tale, with the landscape, the people, and all of Africa. When he first sees her on shore, Marlow describes her as follows:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul.  
(Conrad 60)

As Marianna Torgovnick points out, “She is, the text insists, the symbol of Africa. Once she enters the narrative, she is made to embody the landscape” (403). Torgovnick goes on to show that by making the woman symbolize Africa, Conrad substitutes the female for the primitive and associates both with death, which is typical of Western thinking at the time. These substitutions make clear “a knot of associations hidden *beneath* the text’s superficial attention to them both — a yearning for and yet fear of boundary transgression, violence, and death” (Torgovnick 404). It is

this yearning that is at the heart of Marlow's journey into Africa, of Kurtz's experience within Africa, and of the modernist project of discovering the subconscious.

Kurtz's relationship with this woman is much less clear. The text shows that she and Kurtz have a relationship in which she feels free to come to him and have long conversations. And, like his European intended, she is extremely devoted to Kurtz. As Kurtz is leaving on the riverboat with Marlow, she does not falter when the whistle is pulled, scaring away all of the other Africans. Instead, she stands on the shore with her hands raised to Kurtz and faces the gunfire of the men of the boat, while Kurtz sails away and leaves her to her fate.

The modernist artists thought that primitive art was a way to escape the traditions that pre-modernist European art had imposed on them. Similarly, Africa and this African woman might represent an escape from the boundaries imposed by European life and their own conscious minds for the men in *Heart of Darkness*. As a symbol of Africa, she represents that which is greatly desired yet unknown in the physical world and in their own minds. To love her is to break the taboos imposed on them by culture and to break through their conscious minds and realize their subconscious desires. However, they lack a true understanding of her, just as they lack a true understanding of Africa and of their own minds. As they begin to discover the truths of the woman, the continent, and themselves, they are faced not with a joyous freedom in the fulfillment of all their desires, but simply with "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 69).

In *Heart of Darkness*, the European women represent a kind of salvation of the ideal for Marlow and Kurtz. If Marlow and Kurtz were able to give in to the ignorant idealism of the women, they would not experience the horror that haunts them in the novel. However, both Marlow and Kurtz go too far along the path of discovery into the heart of darkness to ever reenter the life of blind idealism. The African woman represents a real primitivism that Kurtz could have escaped to, but his identity was too divided between Europe and Africa, between civilization and savagery, to ever be truly hers. In the end, Kurtz has abandoned his European intended to a world

of lies and darkness, mourning for a man she didn't know, and he has abandoned his African intended, presumably to her death. These women, who are abandoned by their men and left to mourn or die are again similar to those found in the Polish romantic tradition, as shown by Susan Jones, "In their work, maids in towers were not exclusively rescued, but often condemned to a life of anguish and stasis" (*Conrad and Women* 54). Thus, Conrad presents these women as pre-modernist figures from the Polish tradition, both "tortured, solitary hermitess(es)" embodied by the European intended and the "embodiment of noble self-sacrifice and loyalty" (Jones, *Conrad and Women* 54, 43). Jeremy Hawthorn says, "Kurtz manages to destroy both women... in different ways, he abandons both" (411). Again, as in *Notes from Underground*, the salvation offered by the women to the men of the novel is denied by the men in favor of their own journey of discovery, and the women are destroyed by this denial.

Given the statements that Marlow makes about women and the light in which they are painted in his narrative, it may be hard to see a way in which one could claim that the text moves gender roles in a positive direction. As a character, Marlow certainly does nothing to raise the status of his female contemporaries. However, Susan Jones writes that "Conrad's presentation of the Intended offers a critique of patriarchal structures that marginalize the European women of the story... Conrad exposes the patriarchal strategy that has traditionally excluded women from knowledge of male affairs" ("Modernism and the Marketplace" 171-2). Whether Conrad included Marlow's comments as a reinforcement of patriarchy or as a critique, stepping back from them and looking at the overall representation of male and female characters, an argument can be made for a transformation in gender roles in this text. In their expression of modernist tendencies, the men sometimes defy traditional ideas of masculinity. They are wandering, lost, unfaithful, weak, and dying. Andrew Michael Roberts states that Conrad's skepticism about identity, born from his personal experiences as a cultural outsider, "leads to a highly problematic sense of masculinity as fractured, insecure and repeatedly failing in its attempts to master the world, in particular the

world of modernity” (*Conrad and Masculinity* 3). Though the qualities of modernism are represented in the masculine characters, it does seem that Marlow fails to achieve the modernist ideal of self-realization in the moment when he lies to the intended and that although Kurtz may have realized that ideal, it comes to him as a moment of horror. Thus, the men fail to fully achieve that which they represent within the novel: modernism. The women, in their representation as pre-modernist, particularly as the embodiment of Polish pre-modernism, are active, faithful, idealistic, and the offerers of salvation. However, as Jones points out, Conrad did “engage more critically with the signification of the Polish tradition,” which allows for the nuances outlined here in Conrad’s gender representation (*Conrad and Women* 67). It is Marlow’s aunt who gets him a job with the company in Africa, showing how women affect economic life. The two knitting women at the office of the company in the sepulcher city are images of the fates. Fate is a concept that modernism was moving away from, making it fitting that the idea is embodied in the image of women, yet their presence in the novel, at the outset of Marlow’s journey, imply that they could be interpreted as controlling the story itself. The European women are faithful to their men and to the ideals of their country, qualities that would have been lauded as gentlemanly in prior ages but that were being abandoned by modernist men in their search for a more relativistically conceived kind of truth. These women offer their men a way out, a salvation from themselves. Though Marlow likely would never have admitted it, his tale attributes more strength and control to the women than to the men, but those forms of strength and control are part of the old regime, a way of life that is slipping away as the modernist world travels deeper into its own heart of darkness.

## Chapter 4

### André Gide's *The Immoralist*

André Gide's work, both as an author and political activist, had a great influence in France and other European countries during the modernist era. Tom Conner describes the peak of Gide's career, in the 1920s, as "having established himself as an accomplished writer, astute *moraliste*, and the foremost spokesperson of his generation for personal freedom and self-realization" (1). Gide's influence was great, but certainly not free from controversy. He was variously stigmatized by the right and the left for his views. His work and thought was infamous enough that upon his death the communist daily *L'Humanité* wrote that "A corpse has just died," and the Vatican "was still sufficiently incensed with Gide to place the totality of his oeuvre on its Index of Forbidden Books" (Conner 2, 4). *The Immoralist* was Gide's first novel and was published in 1902. This novel incited the same kind of controversy that so much of Gide's career did. Ben Stoltzfus explains some of the varied responses it received:

Paul Claudel denounced the book by saying that Gide was personally responsible for leading French youth astray both morally and sexually... Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that Gide was one of the four coordinates of twentieth-century thought, the other three being Marx, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. (20)

From the modernist standpoint, *The Immoralist* has within it "the beginning of existential emancipation... the novel within the novel, its self-consciousness, and the shifting narrative voices" that reveal its status as a piece of modernist work (Stoltzfus 20). Despite, or perhaps in line with, the fact that "Gide has always championed the rights of women, children, and homosexuals," this novel, like the other modernist works discussed here, represents modernism through the male characters of Michel and Menalcas, while the female character, Marceline, represents the qualities and ideals of pre-modernism (Conner 2). Within this stilted representation, however, we will see that Gide subverts the hegemonic French ideas of masculinity to set up a new schema for both the masculine and the feminine in the modernist world.

In *The Immoralist*, the main character, Michel, experiences a journey of self-discovery that begins with a terrible illness. After marrying Marceline to appease his father's dying wish, Michel travels with her through North Africa, but is struck with a terrible bout of tuberculosis. Marceline faithfully cares for Michel in his illness, and he does eventually recover. Initially, Michel claims that "I knew that her fervent care, her love alone, saved me" (Gide 16). However, as he grows stronger, he begins to realize his own, individual strength and soon asserts that, "I had to combat everything: my deliverance depended on myself alone" (Gide 21). Michel's illness marks a turning point for him and the beginning of his modernist journey toward the discovery and fulfillment of his own subconscious desires. As he is journeying toward self dependence and leaving behind his beliefs about faithfulness and the "strength of love" (Gide 16), he also becomes more aware of his fascination with the young Arab boys of the community, especially the rebellious ones. As he and Marceline finally journey back to France, Michel continues to explore his own desires as he poaches on his own land with the neighborhood boys in Normandy and builds an intimate friendship with the vibrant Menalcas in Paris. Menalcas acts as a Kurtz-like figure for Michel on his journey of self-discovery. Menalcas is the embodiment of Michel's developing modernist ideals and the example of what Michel could be if he were to fully discover himself and let go of the values ingrained in him by his past. As Michel continues to gain strength and explore his own desires, the pendulum swings in the other direction for Marceline, who faces her own bout with tuberculosis, miscarries a child, and eventually dies. In the end, Michel is once again living in North Africa and indulging his love for young boys, though he has called his old friends together to ask them to "Rescue me from this place; I can't do it on my own" (Gide 98). He seems to have found that his life of sensual pleasure and freedom is not all that he wanted. He claims he is "suffering from this freedom that has no purpose" (Gide 98). The entire novel is structured within a frame in which Michel is telling his story to male friends who have come to him in Africa to help him in this distressed state. As in *Heart of Darkness*, this frame sets up an

economy of exchange between men to the exclusion of women. Michel is willing to share the truth about himself and ask for help from these men in a way that he never did with Marceline. This framing of the tale is modernist in form, though it may subvert some modernist ideals in that it begs the question of whether the modernist pursuit of the self and subconscious desires is really worthwhile, or at least whether it is socially productive. However, as Gide claims in the preface, the purpose of the novel is not to pass judgment, but simply to tell the story of one man who did take this journey into himself to discover his own desires.

Throughout *The Immoralist*, Marceline displays a self-sacrifice and denial of her own desires that is characteristic of pre-modernist ideals. During Michel's illness, Marceline selflessly cares for him and makes his improvement her primary concern. In doing this, she is sacrificing her own needs and desires. When Michel is put in the same situation, he struggles greatly with his own desires. It is not just a matter of sacrificing his desires for Marceline. Often, helping Marceline is what Michel consciously wants to do, but his subconscious desires which have surfaced through his journey of self-discovery after avoiding death take over his conscious desires, and he seems powerless to overcome them. On the night that Marceline miscarries their child, as Michel is leaving her to spend the night with Menalcas, he says, "as soon as I was in the street, my uneasiness increased in strength; I repressed it, fought against it, annoyed with myself for being unable to free myself of it altogether" (Gide 65). Part of Michel wants to be with Marceline and take care of her, but another part of him wants to follow his desires to Menalcas. Michel and Marceline represent two very different ways of looking at life and the world. Michel's battle is to realize his own desires and give in to them, while Marceline's strength is in denying her desires in favor of caring for her husband. Spurred on by the work of Freud, the modernists were very interested in the discovery of subconscious desires even when those desires were irrational or not in their best interest (Faris). In the split between Marceline's and Michel's management of their

desires, we can see the split in the attitudes toward desire that existed in the pre-moderist period and those emerging in modernism.

Marceline literally saves Michel by caring for him throughout his illness, and she also offers him salvation from his discovery of and near-total submission to his subconscious desires. In many ways, Michel wants Marceline and the life she has to offer. He does express a love for her, but it is a conscious love that cannot overcome the other loves he is discovering for physical sensation, rebellion, and time spent with young men. She offers him an escape route from his journey of discovery, but he refuses it and, as is the case with the underground man and Liza, that refusal of her ultimately leads to her destruction. As Marceline grows more and more ill, Michel continually abandons her on his quest to fulfill his own desires. When he spends the night with Menalcas, Marceline miscarries their child. When he is dragging her around all of Europe and Northern Africa, she is growing sicker and sicker. When he is spending time with Mektir and sleeping with his mistress, Marceline is finally dying. After Michel has finally returned to her, he says, "Her hand grasped me in desperation, holding me back. Oh! Did she think I wanted to leave her?" (Gide 97). Michel did not have the faith and loyalty that Marceline had shown him in his illness, and his lack eventually leads to her death.

Robert Greer Cohn discusses Michel and Marceline's differing strengths and their implications for masculinity and femininity in his article, "Man and Woman in Gide's *The Immoralist*." He points out that Marceline is initially pictured as the stronger of the two and that Michel is seen as weakened because of his bout with tuberculosis. This is clear in the novel when Michel describes Marceline as "quite strong; that she was stronger than I we were soon to learn" (Cohn 423, quoting Gide). Marceline is not the only strong female character in the text, though she is certainly the most well-developed. Michel's mother is also a strong female force in Michel's life; as Keith Cohen points out, "the irritation that Michel feels might arise from the recognition that he has not been able to avoid the strong Huguenot upbringing he received from



his mother” (71). Her influence over Michel’s life, primarily in the form of religion, is a subdued but ever-present force in the novel. The presence of these strong women, particularly in the beginning of the narrative, upsets the expected male-female. When Michel regains his health, he is able to reassert his strength and power, and that strength is full of modernist qualities that are notably lacking in the women, who gain their strength from more traditional sources.

Michel’s mother and Marceline both find strength in their religious beliefs while Michel finds strength in his rejection of them. Though Michel claims that his mother’s “Huguenot instruction had slowly faded from (his) heart,” it creeps into Michel’s consciousness again and again as he contemplates verses from the Bible and even in his association of medical pamphlets with “the little treatises on morality with which my childhood had been plagued” (Gide 10,19). Similarly, he claims that initially Marceline’s Catholicism was “no concern” of his (Gide 21). However, when Michel learns that Marceline has been praying for him in his illness, he tells her, “you mustn’t pray for me... I don’t like being protected” (Gide 21). He does concede that she can help him, but only to appease her sadness. In reality, he tells his audience that he believed, “my deliverance depended on myself alone” (Gide 21). Stephen Kern shows that the characters in pre-modernist novels believe that the purpose of life is “directed by a providential spirit or deity who cares for his creatures and directs their lives” (41). The religious faith of both Michel’s mother and Marceline falls into this pre-modernist framework. One might argue that Marceline seems to lose her faith in the end of the novel, when she intentionally drops her rosary; however, this is a moment of weakness just before her death. Marceline’s strength throughout life lay in her faith, and that is why she is a representative of pre-modernist traditions. Michel, on the other hand, particularly after his illness, represents the views of the modernists in his rejection of religious faith and turn to self-reliance. Kern says that, “Modernists lined up to subvert religion and especially its churches and the narrative that defined its historical role” (211). Like the modernists of Gide’s time, Michel constructs his own ethical code, not based on religion or the beliefs of the

majority within society but on his own life experiences and beliefs: "I constructed an ethical code that became a science of the fullest utilization of one's self through intelligent restraint" (Gide 45). As Michel rejects religion and begins to live by his own code and rely only on himself, he becomes stronger and regains his health. Thus, we see in Marceline a dying out of the religious strength that pre-modernist artists depended on and in Michel a thriving of this new, self-defined and self-sufficient freedom from religion that defined much of the modernist way of thinking.

Marceline and Michel also differ in their methods of dealing with emotion. Marceline, like the pre-modernist literary tradition she represents, is sentimental in her emotions and behavior toward others. The most obvious example of this is her unceasing care for Michel throughout his illness. She is nothing but self-sacrificing and loving. Robert Greer Cohn describes her care for him as "maternal generosity" (423). We can also see her sentimentality in her relationships with the young Arab boys. She takes care of the sick boys and acts as a mother to them all. Michel is quite bothered by this. Cohn describes his reaction: "Later, he notes that she seems to prefer the sickly children and, like Nietzsche, he sees that as a namby-pamby sentimentality; feminine, in a word" (429). Michel, on the other hand, represents modernism which, according to Suzanne Clark, "inaugurated a reversal of values which emphasized erotic desire, not love... sentimentality was both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised" (1, 2). In his pursuit of erotic pleasure over love, Michel connects with the boys who are rebellious. He takes a liking to Mektir, in particular, after he sees Mektir stealing from him, and even watches Mektir's act of theft in a desirous, voyeuristic way. This attraction to rebellion continues back in Normandy, when Michel spends time poaching on his own land with the young Alcide. Throughout the novel, Michel also finds himself aroused by experiences of physical sensation. At the end of his story, he says, "Look, here I have some white pebbles which I soak in the shade and then hold in the hollow of my hand for a long time, until the calm I obtain from their coolness has worn off" (Gide 98). This physical sensation of the cool rocks is what Michel uses to find balance and

peace. Michel has found an emotional, even passionate, connection to rebellion and physical sensation that is almost totally lacking Marceline's sentimentality. This female sentimentality is representative of the pre-modernist tradition of sentimental literature and art, even at times toward spirituality as opposed to physicality. Michel's attitude is much more characteristic of modernist art, which tended to focus on the individual subject, view heterosexual relationships cynically, and de-sentimentalize art (Faris).

Despite these traditional gender codes upheld by Marceline, a strong argument can be made that Marceline and Michel subvert traditional gender roles in many ways. Robert M. Fagley argues this in, "Narrating (French) Masculinities: Building Male Identity in André Gide's *The Immoralist*." In this article, Fagley shows how Michel is "an expression of an alternative masculinity at a time when a much different one was recognized as the norm" (80). This norm of masculinity, as defined by Fagley, was based on a "code of honor" that "involved a strong value being placed on courage and self-sacrifice" (80). Clearly, Michel does not conform to this code of honor, but creates his own sense of morality, as has been shown. Michel himself states in the end that, "When you first met me, my ideas were solidly established, and I know that that is what constitutes a real man; they no longer are" (Gide 98), thus revealing the fact that his modernist journey has subverted his masculinity in the traditional sense. In fact, one could even argue, and Fagley does hint at this, that Marceline conforms much more to the code of masculine honor than Michel does. She is incredibly self-sacrificing and active, and she comes to the aid of her husband when he is in distress. Her courage is clear in her willingness to travel to new lands with Michel, her ability to take care of him with very little support, and in her own strength in the face of miscarriage and disease. Though there are exceptions, Michel and Marceline do often seem to have their traditional gender roles reversed. This gender role reversal fits well into my claim that male characters represent modernism and female characters represent pre-modernist ideals in the novels discussed here. The traditional male gender roles of courage and sacrifice are exactly the

attitudes that modernism was breaking free from. Thus, those qualities of self-sacrifice and courage are present in Marceline and not in Michel.

## Chapter 5

### Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*

Among the almost entirely male canon of traditional modernist studies, Virginia Woolf is an important female figure. She has long been included in the modernist canon, and her work has opened the door for the currently expanded studies of women modernist writers. Bonnie Kime Scott shows in *Refiguring Modernism* that Woolf was very well-connected to other modernist writers by both acquaintance and common literary interest and that she was often “enlisted as the token woman, acceptable because most comparable in her experiments to the men” (xxii). In my analysis of Ortega y Gasset’s characterization of modernism as masculine, *Mrs. Dalloway*, published in 1925, is an important piece because it both reinforces some trends shown in the early, male-authored novels and shows that late modernism and modernist works by female authors did diverge from those trends.

Despite Virginia Woolf’s influential role as a female modernist, she “resisted being identified with feminists” (Payne 1). In fact, she “advocates a transcendence of sexual roles, encouraging us to look beyond gender for an understanding of human life” (Payne 1). Michael Payne argues that “in *Mrs. Dalloway* — Virginia Woolf creates an artistic model for such a movement beyond gender” (1). This transcendence of gender roles is perhaps one reason why the modernist and pre-modernist qualities of Woolf’s characters are not divisible by gender as in the other novels discussed here. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, there are modernist men and modernist women and there are both men and women who represent the qualities of pre-modernist England. Both genders find themselves either fighting to hold on to tradition or to break away from it and both experience the cultural upheaval of the modernist era and the transitions taking place in Great Britain just after World War I. Within the context of the novel, the greatest dividing line between

modernist and pre-modernist characters, whether male or female, is the focus on either desire or conversion and proportion.

It is also important to note that the method of narration in this novel differs greatly from the other three novels discussed here. All three novels written by male authors are narrated by a primary male character and set in a frame where the reader is made aware of the narrator as storyteller. *Mrs. Dalloway*, however, is not a story told by a character, either male or female, but Virginia Woolf's unique and evolving narrative voice. Maria DiBattista describes, "Woolf's narrative persona is always semitransparent, half reflecting, half absorbing the light mirrored in her mind" (14). This voice does not specifically privilege men or women in the context of the novel, but reveals the inner mind of characters of both genders. However, outside the context of the novel, Woolf's narrative voice has been termed by critics and herself as a particularly feminine mode. DiBattista explains:

Again and again her critical writings on women and fiction urge women to direct their attention 'away from the personal centre which engaged it exclusively in the past' and to cultivate a greater impersonality that constitutes the basis of the poetic attitude. Again and again she envisions the time when women's gifts will be trained and strengthened and 'the novel will cease to be the dumping-ground for the personal emotions.' To encourage the poetic spirit is to advise the women writers 'look beyond the personal and political relationships to the wider questions which the poet tries to solve — of our destiny and the meaning of life.' (15)

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the lack of a first-person narrator allows the impersonal narrative voice to examine the meaning of life as it is contemplated and shaped by all the characters of the novel, whether men or women. Thus, the mode of narration that Woolf strove for, and encouraged other female writers to pursue, is just the mode that allowed her to transcend gender and examine life from a varied and communal perspective.

The modernist mindset is one that explores the desires of the subconscious. These desires are typified in Clarissa's memories of young Sally Seton, whom Michael Payne describes as an embodiment of "vital experience" (7). For the young Clarissa, Sally was the epitome of

indulging in one's desires. Clarissa's first impression of Sally is one of transgressing norms: "she sat on the floor with her arms around her knees — smoking a cigarette" (Woolf 27). From this moment, Clarissa is enraptured with Sally and cannot take her eyes off her. What she loves about Sally is "that quality which, since she hadn't got it herself, she always envied — a sort of abandonment, as if she could say anything, do anything" (Woolf 27). Everything Sally does in Clarissa's recollections is new, exciting, and transgressive. She shows up with no money, cuts the heads off flowers, and runs along the passageway naked. Clarissa's relationship with Sally helps her to begin to see "how sheltered the life at Bourton was" (Woolf 28). Clarissa begins to talk and think about sex and social change through her relationship with Sally. Her memories of her attraction to Sally are more blatantly romantic and sexually charged than any of her memories or encounters with the men of the novel, and she considers the kiss she shared with Sally "the most exquisite moment of her whole life" (Woolf 30). For the young Clarissa, Sally was both a role model for modernism, as someone who transgressed social norms and indulged in her own desires, and the object of Clarissa's desire in which she wished to indulge.

Moving from the past to the present, the indulgence in one's subconscious desires and rejection of proportion and conversion is represented in the character of Septimus Smith. In fact, Septimus has delved so deeply into his own subconscious that he has been driven mad in the eyes of society and his wife. Septimus, like Kurtz, represents what Clarissa and the others might become if they were to turn themselves over fully to this modernist discovery of subconscious desires. Though she never meets him, Clarissa recognizes Septimus's modernist realization of subconscious desires when she contemplates his suicide at the end of the novel. She says of his suicide, "Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded; one was alone. There was an embrace in death" (Woolf 163). This "defiance" is the defiance of social norms that the modernists so often sought, and "reaching the centre" is the

center of oneself that modernists were seeking. Maria DiBattista explains, “Reaching that center is the human categorical imperative because there is housed ‘the thing that mattered’ — the privacy of the soul, the sanctuary of the sovereign ‘I’” (24). Clarissa recognizes Septimus as having achieved this defiance of social norms and reached his center. Clarissa also recognizes that Septimus must have discovered the awful truth of life, “Then (she had felt it only this morning) there was the terror; the overwhelming incapacity, one’s parents giving it into one’s hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely; there was in the depth of her heart an awful fear” (Woolf 164). Septimus discovered the terror, like Kurtz’s horror, that once one has delved into oneself and realized his own desires, it becomes impossible to live in the world like one did before. The only way to hold onto the treasure that Septimus has is to stop living.

The antithesis of modernism is defined within the novel as proportion and conversion, represented in the characters of Sir William Bradshaw and Miss Kilman. Michael Payne explains that, “The essence of all that is antithetical to Clarissa is to be found in Sir William Bradshaw, in whose heart dwell the two destructive principles, proportion and conversion” (7-8). It is Sir William who introduces the concept of proportion into the novel as a cure for Septimus’s insanity. He orders Septimus to rest in a home to regain his sense of proportion, encouraging him to deny his subconscious and his conscious desires and to not think of himself at all. After their appointment, the narrator gives a description of the importance of proportion to Sir William as well as how he achieves it: “Proportion, divine proportion, Sir William’s goddess, was acquired by Sir William walking hospitals, catching salmon, begetting one son in Harley Street by Lady Bradshaw... worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper” (Woolf 87). Conversion is described as the sister of proportion and also dwells in Sir William. Conversion:

feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace... desires power, smites out of her way roughly the dissident, or dissatisfied; bestows her blessing on those who,



looking upward, catch submissively from her eyes the light of their own. (Woolf 88)

Sir William's power of conversion is explained through the way he has caused his wife to become completely submissive to his will, despite her own desires otherwise. Thus, these powers of proportion and conversion, though they are represented as goddesses, are used to reinstate the patriarchal systems of British culture.

Miss Kilman is described by Michael Payne as "an accomplished convert" (8). She represents conversion and shows that the instinct to cling to tradition and deny oneself is not limited to powerful male characters. Miss Kilman, like the description of the goddess of conversion, is not loving or kind, but despises those who are unlike her and blesses those who emulate her. Of Clarissa, Miss Kilman thinks, "She came from the most worthless of all classes — the rich, with a smattering of culture... Now she did not envy women like Clarissa Dalloway, she pitied them. She pitied and despised them from the bottom of her heart" (Woolf 108,109). Miss Kilman shapes her own being after Mr. Whittaker, the reverend who led her to conversion to Christianity, and believes that others, like Elizabeth Dalloway, should shape their being now after her. Miss Kilman, however, is not a stranger to her own desires. Her desires seem always at the forefront of her mind, but her refusal to give in to them causes her to constantly battle against herself to maintain the lifestyle she believes her conversion requires of her. She ravenously desires Elizabeth Dalloway, in a way that goes beyond attraction into the need to have power over someone:

She was about to split asunder, she felt. The agony was so terrific. If she could grasp her, if she could clasp her, if she could make her hers absolutely and for ever and then die; that was all she wanted. But to sit here, unable to think of anything to say; to see Elizabeth turning against her; to be felt repulsive even by her — it was too much; she couldn't no stand it. The thick fingers curled inwards. (Woolf 116)

Miss Kilman and Clarissa Dalloway share very similar desires in their love for Elizabeth and Sally, but these two women handle those desires in dramatically different ways. Clarissa,

exemplifying the modernist mindset, breaks through social boundaries to give in to her desire and experiences the greatest moment of ecstasy in her life. Miss Kilman, exemplifying conversion, fights a dreadful battle against her desire and drives Elizabeth away with her power-hungry, self-righteous attitude.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, as in the other novels discussed here, the past is often associated with the female, while the present is notably male. However, unlike those other novels, that female past is one in which desires can be fulfilled and modernism thrives; whereas the masculine present is one which represses the fulfillment of subconscious desires. Elizabeth Abel explains the female/male split between the past and present in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis, which was influenced by and helped shape the modernist movement. Abel explains that for the women of the novel, Clarissa and Rezia in particular, the past represents an “Edenic female world” (34). The past for Rezia was with her sisters in Italy and for Clarissa with Sally at Bourton, in which both women were happy and had their desires fulfilled. For both women, marriage, war, and the move to London mark the end of that time in their lives when they perceived themselves as the most happy. Abel shows that this split between a fulfilled female past and a suppressed masculine present lines up with Freud’s concept of female sexual development, in which the female must transition her sexual interest from her mother to her father and then from her father to other men. According to Freud, these two shifts are the only way to reach normal femininity, but they are “uniquely demanding and debilitating” (Abel 35). Within the novel, “Woolf... portrays the sexual and emotional calcification that Freud suggests is the toll of ‘normal’ development; but she expressly challenges his normative categories of women’s sexuality” (Abel 36). Both Clarissa and Rezia find their lives in the masculine world to be stifling and unfulfilling and recognize the lack caused by the abandonment of their female pasts, expressing the truth of Freud’s development analysis, but also questioning the benefits of this perceived “normal” femininity that women are taught by dominant culture to conform to.

This shift from feminine past to masculine present is seen on an even larger scale in the novel, as England's past is expressed through feminine imagery and modernist England through masculine imagery or an imagery of degraded female figures. Abel states that "nostalgia in this text is for a specifically female presence absent from contemporary life" (42). In Regent's park, ancient England is personified in the woman who sings,

Through all the ages — when the pavement was grass, when it was swamp,  
through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise — the  
battered woman — for she wore a skirt — with her right hand exposed, her left  
clutching at her side, stood singing of love — love that has lasted a million  
years. (Woolf 71)

This woman represents the great, feminine past in her eternal nature as well as the masculine present in her current form as a beggar. Similarly, Peter Walsh's dream of the solitary traveler "names the absence that haunts *Mrs. Dalloway*" as it dreams of a "cosmic maternal presence that might 'shower down from her magnificent hands compassion, comprehension, absolution'" (Abel 42). But, again, the masculine present has taken its toll on this feminine figure as "In the present of the novel, the comprehensive, seductive, generative powers of the goddess shrink to the elderly nurse sleeping next to Peter Walsh" (Abel 42). This shift from feminine past to masculine present can be marked by World War I for England, just as the shift is marked by marriage for women. The war has interrupted England just as men interrupt women, and has created a masculine society in which male authority is paramount and all of the young people, with the exception of Elizabeth, are men (Abel 41). Abel is careful to point out in her characterization of the masculine present that:

the loose connections Woolf suggests between World War I and a bolstered male authority have no basis in actual social change, but within the mythology created by the novel the war assumes a symbolic function dividing a perversely masculine present from a mythically feminine past. (42)

Thus, Woolf simultaneously conforms to and debunks the tendencies I have identified in the other modernist novels discussed here by still presenting the past as feminine and the present as masculine, but by destabilizing that association with pre-modernist and modernist. For Woolf, the

feminine past is one in which modernist ideals were realized with the exploration and realization of one's desires and the masculine present is one in which those desires must be put aside to conform to social norms and maintain the status quo.

In both *Heart of Darkness* and *The Immoralist*, the main characters had a sort of modernist mentor in Kurtz and Menalcas who encouraged their discovery of their own desires but also represented a type of warning not to take things too far. For the young Clarissa Dalloway, this mentor was Sally Seton. Perhaps it was Clarissa's idealization of Sally that caused her to resist continuing the relationship into adulthood. At the time of Clarissa's party, it is clear that Clarissa has not kept in touch with Sally. It is only natural that Clarissa would not want the person she idealized as the ultimate rebel in youth to see her conform to all the world's standards for feminine propriety, but it is also possible that Clarissa knew that Sally was also destined to conform to those standards and did not want to witness that conformity in the one who inspired her own rebellion. When Sally arrives at Clarissa's party, she enters as Lady Rosseter, a name as unfamiliar to Clarissa as the woman Sally has become. Despite her outward expression of excitement at seeing Sally again, Clarissa inwardly rejects her, "She loomed through a mist. For she hadn't looked like *that*, Sally Seton, when Clarissa grasped the hot-water can. To think of her under this roof, under this roof! Not like that!... One might put down the hot-water can quite composedly. The luster had left her" (Woolf 151, 152). As she kisses Sally's cheek and takes her hand, the two former rebels turn and look together at what they have become, "and saw [Clarissa's] rooms full, heard the roar of voices, saw the candlesticks, the blowing curtains, and the roses which Richard had given her. 'I have five enormous boys,' said Sally" (Woolf 152). As Clarissa throws the perfect British party and Sally raises the perfect British family, it is clear that these two women have abandoned the feminine ecstasy of their past and conformed to the demands of their present, masculine world. They have conformed to "a civilization founded, as Freud shows, on the sacrifice of female desire" (Froula 88). Sally has become for Clarissa just

what Liza, the intended, and Marceline were for the protagonists discussed in preceding chapters, an alternative to modernism represented by a female character conforming to the demands of her society.

However, just as Clarissa's former modernist mentor fades into the mist, she is presented with a new potential for the realization of modernist ideals in Septimus Smith. Clarissa hears of Septimus's suicide through Sir William Bradshaw, who is talking about it at her party. After hearing of his suicide, Clarissa retreats into an empty room, where she experiences his death vicariously and celebrates his defiance and escape. Elizabeth Abel explains that "It is a critical commonplace that Clarissa receives from Septimus a cathartic, vicarious experience of death that releases her to experience life's pleasures more intensely" (38). She goes on to complexify this idea by relating it to her own connection between the text and Freud's ideas of female development. She states:

Less apparent is that Woolf not only transfers to Septimus the death she had originally planned for Clarissa but also uses Septimus to complete the developmental plot by transforming the choice of sexuality into the choice between life and death — an easier choice to make unequivocally. (38)

The scene where Clarissa contemplates Septimus's death is closely tied to her memories of Sally at Bourton and the association between the two is unmistakable. Septimus's suicide was ultimately the only way he could hold onto his "treasure," and Clarissa realizes the same is true for her, death is the only way of keeping that ecstasy she felt with Sally. Abel shows that, "By recalling to Clarissa the power of her past *and* the only method of eternalizing it, Septimus enables Clarissa to acknowledge and renounce its hold, to embrace the imperfect pleasures of adulthood more completely" (40). Maria DiBattista explains, "Thus Clarissa can, through Septimus's suicide reach the mystical center, the fatality buried in the heart of the novel, but because she is sane, avoid succumbing to it herself" (28). As she returns to her party, Clarissa makes the same choice Michel did when he asked his friends for help and Marlow did when he lied to the intended, the

choice that the underground man could not make as he ceased his pursuit of Liza, she chooses not to follow the path of modernism all the way to its destructive end.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The modernist period was a time of cultural crisis for Europe. V.G. Julie Rajan states, “Transgressive gender identities in the modern texts... can be interpreted as markers of the social, political, economic, and spiritual upheaval that those cultures underwent in the early twentieth century, in the period termed Modernism” (Rajan 39). While Rajan is writing specifically about the upheaval in Great Britain and India, her statement is clearly applicable to the whole of Europe during the turbulent early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that modernist art was a reflection of and reaction to the cultural crisis of the time is seen again and again in criticism of the literature of the period, and that time of crisis is also consistently linked with the roles of men and women within the society. Nina Pelikan Straus writes:

If Dostoevsky responded intellectually to a sense of crisis and with an intuition that ‘the master discourses in the West [were] increasingly perceived as no longer adequate for explaining the world,’ what he dramatized in fiction was the way men’s and women’s identities were thrown into question through this crisis.  
(1)

In reference to Conrad’s work, Andrew Michael Roberts points out that, “The late nineteenth century... brought a crisis in the discourses of masculinity, gender and sexuality in Britain” (3).

Tom Conner says of André Gide’s political activism:

Gide’s commitment evolved from the affirmation of his own sexuality to a sensitive, informed, and sometimes activist critique of a host of issues the confronted France in the first half of this century: the emancipation of women, the shortcoming of the French justice system, French ambivalence toward colonialism, the Fascist threat to Western civilization and the fellow-traveling movement, the Communist temptation, and World War II. (2)

Christine Froula states of *Mrs. Dalloway*, “the characters battle psychic perils that write small the great crisis of loss, grief, and anger facing post-war Europe” (89). Finally, Sangeeta Ray sheds light on why the issue of gender is so closely tied to the cultural crises going on across Europe at the turn of the century and leading toward the second world war: “Generally, tradition is a hard

thing to let go of, and more significant, even if men had to adapt because they were part of the ephemeral public life, women could always be counted on to affirm the continuity of tradition” (Rajan 43). This concept may be the key to understanding why women have so often represented the traditions of the past and men have represented the adaptations to the present and future in literature. Dostoevsky, Conrad, Gide, and, in some ways, Virginia Woolf count on their female characters to uphold the traditions of pre-modernism while they represent modernism through the male characters. It was the men who inhabited the public sphere and, therefore, could not help but adapt to the changing world around them. The underground man worked and attempted to socialize in urban Russia, Marlow and Kurtz journeyed to Africa, Michel read and taught in France and travelled in northern Africa, and Septimus fought in the Great War. For these men, the turbulent changes of the modernist era were unavoidable and their characters changed along with the culture. Through their interactions with the changing world around them, these men come to represent the passivity, subjectivity, and discovery of unconscious desires that characterized the modernist era.

However, as has been shown, it was not only the men who were changing in the modernist era. Despite the fact that these modernist authors generally represented modernism through male characters, the very act of doing that also created transgression in traditional gender roles. With the traditionally male role of active hero and upholder of national ideals left vacant by the modernist men of the novels, the women were able to pick up the torch. Liza, the African woman, the European intended, and Marceline all offer the modernist men of the novels an alternative to modernism. They are the characters who actively work to improve their circumstances, uphold the ideals of the nation, remain faithful to their religion and their men, and ultimately, offer salvation. Though they may represent some of the ideals of pre-modernism, this representation gives them a power within the narratives that enables them to transgress traditional gender roles and upset patriarchal expectations. In the context of *Mrs. Dalloway*, in which the



representation of modernism is not so clearly divisible along gender lines, the social upheaval is still seen through the transgression of gender roles in Clarissa Dalloway and Sally Seton. Even Miss Kilman, who is the very antithesis of modernist ideals, reveals transgression in her desire for Elizabeth and her encouragement of Elizabeth to pursue a career.

The connections between modernism and gender are complex and varying, and this study admittedly deals with only a very small view of those connections in a very limited number of texts. I have shown here how, in a certain vein of modernism, termed “early masculine modernism” by some scholars, José Ortega y Gasset’s characterization of modernism as inherently masculine holds true. However, that does not mean that female characters were not also changing during this era and even within the context of these novels. As the men took on more modernist qualities, the women stepped up to usurp some of their formerly held patriarchal roles. As the century moved forward, women also began to represent modernist qualities in literature, as we can begin to see expressed in *Mrs. Dalloway*. While it is certainly true that Ortega y Gasset’s claim does not hold true for the whole of modernism, it is important to see that the encoding of modernism as masculine did not necessarily degrade the status of women as much as it may have inadvertently elevated women by allowing them the roles of active, faithful savior in a world where men could no longer hold onto the ideals that had kept them in that position in the past.

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