

Major Creative Work:

Anatomy of the Upper Body

Exegesis:

**‘Desire and its Disastrous Results’: Re-examining
Representations of Feminine Masochism in Women’s
Writing**

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Abstract

The exegesis portion of my thesis examines representations of feminine masochism in 20th-century literature by women with respect to the ways in which feminist literary analysts have critiqued these novels in an often moral fashion. In my re-readings of three such texts, via an exploration of conflicts in contemporary feminism, I question whether the feminist critique of literature should necessarily presume or seek an affirmative feminist narrative in female-authored works. The creative texts I examine include Susanna Moore's *In the Cut*, several works by Marguerite Duras, and Anne Carson's verse narrative, *The Beauty of the Husband*. My dissertation provides an example of other, more expansive ways in which these texts might be read that extends into a contribution to the debate between the aesthetic and the moral appraisal of creative arts, and a questioning of whether morality has a place in literature at all. In this way, I not only provide alternative ways of reading these narratives, but also present a reading practice that is relevant to an understanding of my own creative work.

My discussion draws from a broad range of theoretical writings on the ethics of reading and the expression of masochism, from Roland Barthes, to Georges Bataille, Gilles Deleuze, Mikhail Bakhtin and Milan Kundera, to Maurice Blanchot, Leo Bersani and Derek Attridge as well as psychoanalytic propositions put forth by Lacan and Freud. Inevitably, my research also engages with the depth of feminist writing on sexuality and violence, including that by Teresa de Lauretis, Jane Gallop, Jessica Benjamin, Maria Marcus, Renata Salacile and Linda Ruth Williams.

My creative work takes the form of a novella, *Anatomy of the Upper Body*. It is a psychological thriller set in contemporary Melbourne that centres contemporary women's negotiations of heterosexual desire as its topic. My protagonist, Nina, is at once informed, vulnerable, and ambivalent in her expressions of heterosexuality. In the masochistic temptations she experiences, she is a character who is representative of those transgressive literary femininities that occupy an uneasy third position between the worlds of fiction and theoretical inquiry. The interrelatedness of theory and fiction in the novel itself is an attempt to interrupt and interrogate prevailing modes of literary interpretation, just as the depiction of a confoundingly contradictory female character may be seen as a challenge to notions of condoned femininity.

The overarching aim of this dissertation is to provide an investigation of the function of morality in literature, and to support readings of transgressive fiction by female writers, not as true representations of the feminine psyche or ‘what women want’, but as imagined spaces that allow the reader to explore a myriad of subject positions, those that exist outside of social reality, those that may differ from our own.

Table of Contents

I.	Reading and Writing, Desire and Danger: An Introduction	1
II.	Chapter 1: “Between the conscience and the unconscious”: Masochism and Morality in Susanna Moore’s <i>In The Cut</i>	17
III.	Chapter 2: “Another way of Loving”: Morality and Ambivalence in the Fiction of Marguerite Duras	31
IV.	Chapter 3: “Metaphors of war”: Desire, Danger and Ambivalence in Anne Carson’s Poetic Form	47
V.	“No Language For My Ambivalence”: Critical Conclusion as Creative Groundwork	61
VI.	Anatomy of the Upper Body (Creative Work)	68
VII.	Anatomy of the Upper Body: An Afterword	163
VIII.	Bibliography	173

Declaration

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Maya Linden and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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