# DIPLOMARBEIT / DIPLOMA THESIS

Titel der Diplomarbeit / Title of the Diploma Thesis

"Female Killers in Victorian and Early Twentieth Century Texts"

verfasst von / submitted by

Sandra Leeb, BA

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2021 / Vienna, 2021

| | |
|---|---|
| Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt / degree programme code as it appears on the student record sheet: | UA 190 344 313 |
| Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt / degree programme as it appears on the student record sheet: | Lehramtsstudium<br>UF Englisch<br>UF Geschichte, Sozialkunde, Politische Bildung |
| Betreut von / Supervisor: | o. Univ.-Prof. i.R. Mag. Dr. Margarete Rubik |

Ich erkläre, dass ich die Arbeit selbständig verfasst, alle wörtlichen Übernahmen aus der Sekundärliteratur deutlich als Zitate gekennzeichnet und einen Verweis eingefügt habe, wenn ich Ideen aus der Sekundärliteratur übernommen habe.

I herewith confirm that this paper was written by myself. I have clearly marked as a quote everything that was taken over verbatim from secondary literature. I have also indicated when I have taken over ideas from secondary sources.

Diese Diplomarbeit hat nachgewiesen, dass die betreffende Kandidatin befähigt ist, wissenschaftliche Themen selbstständig sowie inhaltlich und methodisch vertretbar zu bearbeiten. Da die Korrekturen der Beurteilten nicht eingetragen sind, und das Gutachten nicht beiliegt, ist daher nicht erkenntlich, mit welcher Note diese Arbeit abgeschlossen wurde. Das Spektrum reicht von sehr gut bis genügend. Es wird daher gebeten, diesen Hinweis bei der Lektüre zu beachten.

Although I rely on Penguin's edition of *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (2001) to quote from the text, I use the illustrations of the German edition *Jahrmarkt der Eitelkeit oder Ein Roman ohne Held* published by DTV in 2011. The author, William Makepeace Thackeray, created these pictures himself and doing so added crucial information for my chapters about Becky Sharp. Therefore it was of the utmost importance to include them in my thesis in the best quality possible.

## CONTENTS:

# 1) Introduction

The Victorian era and the early Twentieth Century experienced a shift in the definition of gender which eventually led to women losing their image of domestic angels. Indeed, they were portrayed in many shades of grey in the texts written during these times of change. Even female killers were no stereotypes whose only function was to arouse scandal in order to sell books in high quantities. Especially authors like Joseph Conrad and William Makepeace Thackeray were deeply interested in the psychology of their lady killers, and Dorothy L. Sayers even used her murderesses to declare her feminist belief that women are capable of doing the same things as men.

Female killers in British literature have not yet received the attention they deserve. Although gender studies are popular these days, we still have to make up for the long neglect of scholarly interest in women in literature. In writing this thesis I want to do my part.

The starting point for anybody interested in female offenders in British literature has to be Virgina B. Morris' book *Double Jeopardy* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1990), as she gives an overview of the flux concerning gender as well as showing famous cases taken from the corpus of English literature. One may also read the four volumes of Robert Lee Wolff's *Nineteenth Century Fiction: A Bibliographical Catalogue on the Collection Formed by Robert Lee Wolff* (New York: Garland, 1981-1985) or Anthea Trodd's *Domestic Crime in the Victorian Novel* (New York: St. Martin's, 1989). There are more books about female criminals but these are mainly concerned with a chosen author and less interested in general assumptions.

It is of the utmost importance to use the appropriate terms when looking at texts about women who kill. In my thesis I have often chosen the general term "killer" instead of "murderess" because "murder" is a legal term which means that the act of killing another person under defined circumstances is planned in advance, and it is also set off from other terms like manslaughter. In chapter 2 I will give a detailed definition of murder taken from *Black's Law Dictionary* that corresponds to the law of the periods chosen.

Moreover, my thesis calls for the use of criminal statistics but I beg the reader to take caution reading them. Robert M. Morris discusses a theory by Howard Taylor, which claims that most statistics of former times are not reliable but guide numbers at best. The output from the 1850s to the 1960s could be manipulated by the executive, its delivery was locally organised, financed and run, and it would therefore be important to understand the motives and methods of the compilers. It seems like in the era from 1880 to 1966 numbers were

limited to an average of about 150 a year with the numbers kept within a band of 20 per cent. Morris claims that this would be implausible but he acknowledges that "budgetary controls at least inhibited or at least prevented open-ended approaches to murder prosecutions [...]" and that the high costs may have led to suspicious deaths not being investigated at all, although there is no proof for the latter (112-119). Furthermore, Sir Leonard Dunning, His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary in 1921, argued that chief constables may have been reluctant to record a crime if the chances of finding the criminal were too small (Emsley 440). Stephen J. Lee warns his readers especially of the statistics of the nineteenth century as there were "less regular and systematic and sophisticated forms of collection and collation." He thinks that falsification could have been brought into being by party bias or accidental error. Moreover, he warns against superficial reading of figures and that they have to be seen in relation to others (320). Last but not least, the terms used may lead to different readings of one and the same list of figures, too, as different people will interpret a word like "poor" differently.

Let us proceed to the texts which I have chosen. There are three main reasons for women to commit bloody crimes in my primary literature: status, a nervous breakdown, and greed. I differentiate between the hunger for money and status because in a country ruled by a sovereign there is a meaningful difference between being prosperous and being an accepted part of the high society.

We will see that there is no difference between male and female writers in their presentation of their criminals because writers of both genders have created female killers but refused to abuse them solely as tools to sell their books in higher quantities.

You may wonder why I was interested in the Victorian era and the first part of the twentieth century. It is true that texts about murderesses existed before the dawn of the Victorian age, for example John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont's "The Maid's Tragedy" (1619), but I have chosen these periods because they mark a change in the conception of gender. I also wanted to use books that have not been analysed from this point of view yet. The most important criterion was dissimilarity of motivation for the crime on the part of the characters. I did not want to compare two murderesses interested in their victims' money or two killers who were madly in love. But whatever their reason, female killers attacked male authority and doing so proved that it was not an inborn concept but a culturally imposed one. They forced the readers to reassess their expectations about women and eventually led them to a new world view (V. Morris, *Jeopardy* 6f).

One might assume that there was a linear development concerning the grade of spitefulness. Surprisingly, this theory turns out to be wrong. To prove this, I will present my

chosen texts in chronological order and by comparing the texts in terms of similarities and differences concerning the personalities of the characters. The corpus of bloody literature is huge[1], but it will suffice to show a representative text for each killer mentioned. To explain why I have picked my chosen texts, I will give a brief overview.

*Vanity Vair* is a popular classic, and Thackeray can be "wholly identified with the mainstream of English fiction in the nineteenth century" (Flamm 3). The Hollywood movie with Reese Witherspoon was an artistic and financial failure because it was not true to the text. All the irony that made the novel popular was taken seriously so that the bold adventuress turned out to be an angel without vice. Therefore it is obvious that the same elements that made the novel a masterpiece are still successful in our era. Indeed, Thackeray was a man ahead of his time, and *Vanity Fair* is the first English novel that achieves what Gordon Norton Ray calls the effect of massive realism as Thackeray had a vast knowledge of numerous social groups, yet shied away from describing happenings of which he had little knowledge, for example Becky's triumphs in the highest social circles (394-397). These pieces of information explain why I have chosen *Vanity Fair* instead of *Catherine* but it is also important to understand that the latter was not a serious attempt to show a murderess. It was Thackeray's answer to the popular Newgate novels represented by Bulwer Lytton that palliated murder and turned brutal killers into heroes[2]. Thackeray chose Catherine Hayes from the pages of the Newgate Calendars[3] to write a novel that would disgust the readership to an extent that they would stop reading such literature. He failed to do so and wrote about it in his letters (Williams 28f). In Becky we have a murderess whom we can take seriously, though. She is sly and clever, pretty and cold, and the perfect killer because she is not punished for her crime.

*The Secret Agent*, on the other hand, shows a perfect portrait of a woman who is driven to aggression although she is innocent. The powerful way in which the act of killing is described and the realistic way in which the perception of the killer and the victim are shown make the demise of Verloc the most fascinating instance of killing in British literature. Conrad also gives us enough information to understand how Winnie became the person she is and which circumstances led to her destruction. The text, although not successful at the time

[1] There is no literature but the English one that enjoys crime that much. It is no wonder that the most famous detective in literature is an Englishman, i.e. Sherlock Holmes (Soyka 2).
[2] These novels were popular for a period of about twenty years and were "an instrument of protest against the severity of criminal law and against the structure of class privilege which that law represented" (Hollingsworth 222).
[3] The Newgate Calendars were a collection of criminal biographies which appeared from the first decades of the eighteenth century onwards (Hollingsworth 6).

of its first publishing[4], has been rediscovered and now achieves the popularity it should have enjoyed from the start. Yuet May Ching even believes that *The Secret Agent* is more significant now than ever because the ever growing fear of terrorism makes it possible to re-evaluate the text which presents the first suicide bomber in English literature (46).

Let us move on to *Unnatural Death*[5], which can be understood as a feminist text because there are only a few characters in the literature of the early Twentieth Century who are as selfish and cold-blooded as Mary Whittaker. I will show that Dorothy L. Sayers uses her as a tool to argue for her ideas of equality between the sexes, and, indeed, Sayers was the first author to do so by the means of detective fiction (Rahn 51). The effect of her feminism is so striking because her murderess is so detestable that the reader can hardly identify any virtue in her. It is difficult to imagine a female character in the first part of the Twentieth Century that is more remote from the "Angel in the House"[6] and her equivalents can only be found among the male characters of the era. Moreover, Sayers "was extremely popular while experimenting with and revising the conventions and structures of [her] genre" (Reid 55) and "the first woman to write a detective novel that deserves to be regarded as serious literature" (Rahn 51). She is also the most important writer of her genre after Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (Kenney 9). Therefore, writing a thesis about female killers in English literature without Sayers would mean to deliberately ignore one of the most influential names within the canon[7].

## 2) Information on real murderesses

To appreciate how much effort the authors put into the creation of believable characters who kill, we will have to take a look at real killers and their reasons for their crimes. Moreover, it is also important to understand what a term like "murder" meant for the people living at the times of the chosen books' creation. To provide information on the latter I have decided to use the 3rd edition of *Black's Law Dictionary* because it was published around the time when the last of my primary books was written and also takes a look back at former definitions of legal terms.

[4] Conrad's Edwardian novels sold badly when they first appeared even though they belong to his most brilliant works (Hudson 315).
[5] In the United States *Unnatural Death* was originally published as *The Dawson Pedigree* (Papinchak 811).
[6] Women of better circles were denied identities of their own and understood as being connected to their homes, i.e. they were supposed to be good wives and mothers only. Shannon Forbes describes the situation in the following way: "The Victorian self mandates that women suppress their internal desires and instead enact a role as if it were their identity" (10).
[7] Carolyn G. Hart claims that "[t]he idea of fully exploring human emotion and thought within the framework of a mystery began with Sayers" and reminds her readers that Sayers' "legacy" lives on in the works of various other authors (46), while Aaron Elkins even calls her "the most eminent mystery writer of her time" (105).

## 2a) The definition of murder

Before we proceed with our study on female killers, let us take a look at the definition of "murder" given in *Black's Law Dictionary* published in 1933:

> The crime committed where a person of sound mind and discretion (that is, of sufficient age to form and execute a criminal design and not legally "insane") kills any human creature in being (excluding quick but unborn children) and in the peace of the state or nation (including all persons except the military forces of the public enemy in time of war or battle) without any warrant, justification, or excuse in law, with malice aforethought, express or implied, that is, with a deliberate purpose or a design or determination distinctly formed in the mind before the commission of the act, provided that death results from the injury inflicted within one year and a day after its infliction. (H.C. Black 1216)

"Murder" therefore is not only a horrid action but also a closely defined legal term. Especially in spoken language we tend to use it for actions which are by definition connected to other concepts, e.g. manslaughter. Moreover, when emotionally disturbed by the loss of a loved one, we often call people "murderers" even when they did not kill intentionally, for instance after an accident. We therefore have to look at two other legal definitions which will be important for my thesis. The already mentioned term "manslaughter" describes the act of an "unlawful killing of another without malice, either express or implied; which may be either voluntarily, upon a sudden heat, or involuntarily, but in the commission of some unlawful act." The key for differentiating between the two kinds of killing therefore is the existence or lack of malice "which is the very essence of murder" and "that there can be no accessaries before the fact, there having been no time for premediation" (H.C. Black 1155). There are different degrees of murder and manslaughter but for the present thesis it will suffice to differentiate between these two in general. It will also be important to remember the legal understanding of "lunacy", which "was a term used to describe the state of one who, by sickness, grief, or other accident, has wholly lost his memory and understanding [..., and which was] distinguished from idiocy, an idiot being one who from his birth has had no memory or understanding, while lunacy implies the possession and subsequent loss of mental powers" (H.C. Black 973).

## 2b) Female killers in myth and history

The definition of murder quoted above was published in 1933, but there have always been stories about female killers. In antiquity there were myths about sirens and harpies as well as

tales about notorious murderesses like Skylla (Bolte, Dimmler 184). Queen Clytemnestra, for example, killed her husband because he sacrificed her daughter, and had to die at the hands of her own son. There is also Medea, who revenged her husband's betrayal by killing their children but who escaped punishment with divine help (V. Morris, *Jeopardy* 9). In fact, female killers can also be found in the bible. The killing of Holofernes by Judith dates back to the era of King Nebukadnezar, and since she acted as saviour for the citizens of Bethulia, she is regarded as a heroine (Bolte, Dimmler 92). There is also Princess Salomé, who might have acted for political reasons when she demanded the death of John, whose diatribes were dangerous for her family. Whatever their reasons may have been, all of these women were driven to their deeds by uncommon circumstances (V. Morris, *Jeopardy* 9). There were also female soldiers long after the Amazons had become no more than mystical figures, e.g. the kings of Dahomey were protected by female elite fighters and Napoleon was not afraid to lead women into war either (Bolte, Dimmler 130).

Let us look at some examples from times not as remote, for example at Gesche Gottfried in the nineteenth century, who was called "Engel von Bremen" because people pitied her for losing so many family members. Little did they know at the time that Gesche poisoned fifteen people, among them her parents, her husband, her three children, and even her twin. It is not surprising that people wondered why they could not find any evilness in her features (Hiess, and Kunzer 94-96). Another famous murderess was the Irishwoman Kate Webster, who killed but one person but is still known for her gruesome attempt to hide the murder by gutting and cooking the body (Hiess, and Kunzer 167-170). There were also murderesses who took pleasure in torturing their victims, like the sadistic Erzsébet Báthory, called "Blutgräfin"(Hiess, and Kunzer 132), but we will ignore these because they are not shown in my chosen texts.

**2c) Conceptions and facts concerning female killers**

A number of men and women still do not accept the fact that they are capable of equally horrid deeds. Even today people want to believe in old-fashioned stereotypes of a world in which brutality is only found in men. When women kill, they are understood as being atypical females who have become like males because they are the opposite of the childbearing angel who guarantees the reproduction of the state (Bolte, and Dimmler 298f). Indeed, some women did change their dresses for male clothes to act like men, e.g. Mary Read, a female pirate, who killed numerous men (Bolte, and Dimmler 131). These women belong to a small percentage

of murderesses, though, as the group of female offenders consists of all kinds of females. Why do people still believe that a female killer is "but a perversion of nature" while a male one is not? Why is her crime a "crime against nature"? Friedman answers these questions by writing that a woman's crime is "against *her* culturally prescribes nature", that a woman is supposed to give life and not destroy it (62). This answer leads to the scrutiny of the concept of womanhood that has been dominating Western cultures for centuries[8]. The treatment of female characters, who kill, that we can already see in classical mythology, seems to point to the struggle between maternal and paternal world views and may be an expression of a psychological self-defence of the status quo, which means the superiority of the male social order. When powerful women are claimed to be abdominations, they are no longer dangerous for the status quo but help containing it (Friedman 64). Female killers are therefore understood as sensations (Bolte, and Dimmler 298).

Even today we can find two pictures created by art and the media in the Western world, i.e. the "bad" women who are "wicked or inhuman" and the "mad" ones. In the former case "the full weight of the law is brought to bear" but in the latter one, in which there is a kind of "diminished responsibility" (because of a temporary madness linked to anything from pre-menstrual tension to the suffering of abuse), the women's responsibility seems to cease to exist (Birch 4f). We can find a third picture in mass media, namely that of the "victim" who was brutalized before her deed (Bernhard 7).

It is a fact that women kill less than men do. In her study about murderesses in the German Republic Elisabeth Trube-Becker shows that the number of female killers is decidedly lower than the one of males[9]. There were 4080 known cases of killings done by females from 1953 to 1969 compared to 25419 done by males (17). Although the times have changed since then and women have become emancipated, the numbers have not become more similar. On the contrary, the German statistics of 2000 show that of 3196 verdicts for murder only 394 concerned females (Soyka 10). In England and Wales only 14 per cent of the suspects were female (Bernhard 40). It is also interesting to look at murders among lovers as roughly half of all murdered women are victims of their male companions in the United Kingdom as well as in the US but only about four per cent of males are killed by their female lovers (Dolan 250). The numbers of female killings are nevertheless high. Therefore the fact that people perceived murderesses as sensational, shows that the world people wanted to

[8] A female was understood to be a disadvantaged, imperfect or flawed male "with no inherent status of her own (Friedman 66f).

[9] The statistics available are from a later period than the one I deal with and from a different country but since the intrinsic mechanisms of turning a human being into a murderer ought to be universally valid, looking at Trube-Becker's findings are helpful for my purpose as well.

believe in was dissimilar from the one they lived in. Like the difference between sex and gender there must have been a major difference between the actual world and the world view people created for themselves.

Even though they are mostly concerned with murders in Germany, Trube-Becker's findings seem to touch upon universal facts about female killings. She states that in older statistics there often is no differentiation between female or male criminals but she notes that there seems to be a majority of murderers who did not get a good education (5). This fact also shows up in English sources that prove that in 1869 37.2 per cent of all female prisoners were illiterate (V. Morris, *Jeopardy* 35). Trube-Becker believes that the link between a high rate of murder and lack of education arises because of the lack of imagination (5). Her study also reveals that the average criminality of females is not linked to an occupation. While the quantity of female offences rose after the Second World War until the middle of the fifties, it declined afterwards and reached its former percentage (Trube-Becker 9). She also succeeds in proving that the upbringing of a child is a main factor in the individual's capability of murder. Only 18 of the 86 murderesses she talked to had had a good childhood whereas all the others experienced a "broken home" (Trube-Becker 23).

The psychological turmoil the killer goes through is illustrated by the high rate of suicides following the murder. In 1949, for example, 100 people who were older than one year of age were killed in England and Wales and, if we believe the statistics, 34 murderers killed themselves after their deed (Henry, and Short 116f).

A completely different kind of murderer is the one without remorse, i.e. the serial killer. Many believe that the typical serial killer is a sexually motivated male figure and this belief is strengthened by the media, who ignore most of the female ones (Kelleher, and Kelleher Xf), even though there are numerous female serial killers. Belle Gunness killed from 1896 until 1908 and the number of her victims ranges from 16 to 49 (Kelleher, and Kelleher 23). Another example among many is Martha Marek, who destroyed her own family when she killed her husband, her nine-months-old daughter and almost her son as well (Hiess, and Kunzer 210-215). The female serial killer is not normally motivated by desire and therefore more successful and methodical. Moreover, she escapes justice for a much longer period of time (Kelleher, and Kelleher XI).

The Victorian murderess killed people from her own sphere and she used instruments readily available to her. In half of the documented cases the victims were poisoned, which is plausible since arsenic was used as an ingredient for medicine and cosmetics but also as a means to kill vermin (V. Morris, *Jeopardy* 34). Kelleher and Kelleher state that female

American serial killers in the twentieth century still were using poison in a high percentage of the cases and give impressive data: 38 per cent of female team killers used poison while 53 per cent of single killers did (198).

It is of importance that the number of murders committed by women has decreased during the last two decades, possibly because women have more possibilities to solve conflicts nowadays (Soyka 11). Only about 15 per cent of killings are committed by women in the Western world today and this percentage seems to be stable now (Bernhard 110). There are no conclusive theories as to why women kill less often than men but it may be argued that females generally cope very differently with conflicts and catastrophes, for example by directing their aggressions against themselves (Bernhard 26).

Now we have gained the needed background knowledge to fully understand the literary presentation of female killers. So let us go on to the subject proper, namely the female offenders in Victorian and Early Twentieth Century texts.

## 3) *Vanity Fair's* Becky Sharp

Thackeray called his book a novel without a hero, but it definitely has at least one heroine (Taylor 253). Becky has always been a character either loved or despised, being called "the nearest approach to a monster" (Hardy 168) by some and "eternally energetic [...], inspiring and dangerous as fire" (Brander 10) by others. To understand a character as complex and fascinating we will have to take a look at Thackery's influences both in the world he lived in and the world he read about.

### 3a) The illustrations of *Vanity Fair*

*Vanity Fair* was written in instalments and published every month, which almost led to the end of the story as it was not popular at first and sold well only after the twelfth number (C. Peters 143). Thackeray had to send Bradbury and Evans the instalment and illustrations by the fifteenth of each month but he sometimes could not manage to be on time and the final double instalment actually reached the publishers only close to the publication date (Harden, *Emergence* 8). Although Thackeray was dissatisfied with his illustrations, the book should not be read without them. They consist of full-plate steel engravings, wood-block illustrations, and wood-cuts presenting the elaborated capital letters at the beginning of each chapter (C. Peters 164-167). Most critics believe that he was "a talented amateur as a draughtsman" and

even Brontë was of the same opinion although she was aware of the charm that these pictures possess (Elwin 76). This may be the reason why it is so hard to lay hands on an illustrated version of the novel in its original language[10]. Reading it with the pictures is a totally different experience since the story is richer, funnier and more ironic as well. It also needs to be said that among the many illustrations some stand out and can be compared to other artists' masterpieces. The bad quality of others may be blamed on the fact that many a picture was not drawn onto wood by Thackeray himself but by others using his sketches only (Taylor 261). Moreover, the quality of the pictures is not as important as the meaning they convey. It only needs a smirk on a face to underline the irony in the text or negate it. Therefore the pictures themselves turn into text and ignoring them would be like deliberately leaving out some pages. Fisher rightly claims that many illustrations undercut the text or go directly against it. This forces the reader to read more sceptically and one even starts to distrust the narrator (68). To say it in Prawer's words: "It cannot be emphasised too strongly that drawings such as these are an essential part of Thackeray's discourse which should never be omitted in reprints of his work" (*Breeches* 300). Knowing these vital facts about the pictures of the novel, let us now turn to this chapter's subject proper: Becky Sharp.

### 3b) The creation of Becky Sharp

It seems odd that one of the most outstanding characters in Victorian fiction should be a woman, of whom men thought very little as far as intelligence was concerned. Yet Thackeray had been convinced that women's intellect could be judged like men's, as can be seen when he writes about his daughter, "I am afraid very much she is going to be a man of genius: I would far sooner have had her an amiable & affectionate woman – But little Minny will be that, [...] and when I see […] little girls at all resembling my own, become quite maudlin over them" (240f). He was nevertheless enchanted by the demeanor the female sex was indulging in among men and said so in another of his letters: "Mrs Brookfield is my beau-ideal. I have been in love with her these four years [... and] she always seems to me to speak and do and think as a woman should" (Thackeray 231). There are two instances of importance in these quotations, i.e. women possess the capability of developing genius but they are most successful in life when they stick to the existing gender rules. This we can find in the persona of Becky Sharp, as we shall see later on.

[10] There are German versions that include all illustrations and I had to rely on one of them to be able to read the novel in its entirety, which Thackeray surely intended his readers to do.

We can also find some hints of actual people in the novel's heroine. For example, her physical appearance was modelled after Isabella Shawe as she too was "tiny, red-haired and thin". Isabella's musical ability and taste seem to have manifested themselves in Becky as well (C. Peters 163).

Lady Morgan, too, was an inspiration for Thackeray as the former governess managed to rise socially and even married into upper-class high society, although her ancestors had belonged to the theatre, as Becky's did. She may have had her triumphs on the continent (Colby 239) but the Irish novelist was living near Thackeray and invited him frequently (Stevenson, *Showman* 172). Lionel Stevenson states that Thackeray had her in mind when he created Becky and gives plenty of evidence comparing Lady Morgan's – or Sidney Owenson's – life and work with Thackeray's. Both authors caricatured John Wilson Croker, created a Crawley family and had their members named after influential people in politics. Owenson was a feminist, a champion for Irish freedom and a freethinker, which made her the unfortunate target of the Tory Press. When sketching out the similarities in Lady Morgan's and Becky's lives one must bear in mind that Thackeray was influenced by the opinion that his friends and the media had of her. Still, the parallels are striking, e.g. Owenson's father was an Irish actor who fell in love with an English girl, whereas Becky's father was a foreign painter. Becky and Sidney both spent their childhood among their fathers' friends, which made them independent and witty. They lost their mothers while still being very young, and their fathers had to hide from their creditors. They nevertheless could spend some time at boarding schools and they both boasted of their ancestry, saying that they belonged to the highest circles of their original countries. They both earned their money as governesses at some point and although they could not be described as beauties, they managed to win their employers' hearts by knowing when to be silent and when to be of good humour. They were able to entertain others with their singing or impersonations and managed to become the lady-companions to rich women. It is also said that Sidney's husband Sir Charles Morgan was absolutely enchanted by her wit while he himself was dull, which is exactly what can be said about Rawdon. Both couples spent some time in Paris after the battle of Waterloo, and both women could get their revenge on envious people by caricaturing them (*Morgan* 547-550).

Although these findings are striking, it may be assumed that Thackeray would not be influenced by two models only. We know of at least one more person to set his imagination at work, namely the mysterious Pauline. During his stay in Paris, which happened to be as early as 1830, she had taken the initiative to ask him for a walk around the room. The former governess was at that time working as a seamstress and was dressed in trousers. Although she

claimed to have excellent references from her employer, she had decided to live a Bohemian life (Taylor 62). The thirty-five-year-old who dressed like a man and behaved as such must have been fascinating although she lacked good looks. She certainly had an impact on Thackeray as he claimed that she surely could have found herself a prosperous husband (G. Ray 125f). He visited her in her shabby quarters in the Rue Neuve St. Augustin only to find that her demeanour gave her the air of a lady. He was also sure that she had been well off dancing away every night if she had lived to grow old (Colby 239) and it may be possible that Thackeray's infatuation led to a sexual affair (Carey, *Thackeray* 13). Reading these lines we are reminded of Jos meeting Becky during her Bohemian years, having little money but as high a spirit as ever. Unfortunately, we do not know much about Pauline but that she had worked for a certain Sir John, who may or may not have come from Devonshire (Taylor 63).

It seems highly appropriate to believe in real life influences because even minor characters like Becky's father had a model in real life. At least one of Thakeray's contemporaries believed to know a certain artist called Sharp, who would fit into this role (Tillotson, *Thackeray* 9). Indeed, in one of Thackeray's letters written during his first stay in Paris he mentions a certain Miss Sharp in whom he was interested. Unfortunately, this fragment about her is all the information that survived (Taylor 63).

Last but not least, Frazee claims that Mary Anne Clark and Harriette Wilson, two notorious Regency courtesans, were influences, too. Their rise in society[11] as well as the scandals in which they took part make it likely that Thakeray knew well about them. He certainly had read Wilson's memoirs as he referred to them when writing a review for *The Times* in 1838 (231-233). It seems that she was a formidable imitator that even impressed Sir Walter Scott and this reminds us of Becky's mimicry. Clarke, on the other hand, had good humour and wit, which can be seen in her remarks during the Parliamentary investigation in 1809. Frazee believes that what made these women successful was not only their character, looks or education but their sexual availability. He therefore questions Becky's fidelity after her taking residence in Curzon Street at Mayfair (236f). Frazee also states that all three of them were able to rise after their fall to lead a more or less respectable life (242). It seems logical that Thackeray would also base his Becky on such "sinful" women when we remember that he hoped to help people to understand themselves better. "[W]hat saddened him most was not men's many sins, but their not taking them into account in their self-estimates" (Tillotson, *View* 176).

[11] Clark managed to become the mistress of the Duke of York, the Prince of Wales's brother (Frazee 232).

As far as fictional characters are concerned, one may look at Louis Reybaud's Malvina. While reviewing *Jérôme Paturot* Thackeray may have been inspired to write a story about a woman who is "a product of the bohemia of Paris and married to a captain [and who] crashes the genteel world [...] through charm [and] facility with words [...]" (Colby 240).

The Amelia/Becky opposition may have been derived from Scott's *Ivanhoe,* which can already be seen in Thackeray's own continuation of the novel in *Rebecca and Rowena* (McMaster 58). In *Vanity Fair* he made his Becky a Jewish girl, too, but he made her ruthless and inconsiderate towards others and he also used the diminutive version Becky (Walter 30). Scott's Rebecca was the first Jewish main character in British literature,[12] and that may be the reason why Thackeray made his Becky one as well. This theory is strengthened by the fact that her being a Jew has no influence on the story and is not even mentioned again (Walter 53).

It is also probable that Thackeray wrote a parallel to Bulwer's *Lucretia* because we have a case of a poisoner versus an insurance company in both cases (Hollingsworth 214) and we already know of Thackeray's aversion to the popular Newgate Novels.

Last but not least, we may even find some characteristics of Becky in the Old Testament, in which yet another Rebecca tricked her husband to get what she longed for, namely Isaac's blessing of Jacob (Prawer, *Isreal* 214).

### 3c) The heroine who cannot be called a "heroine"

Becky is so interesting because she remains a mystery even though her character seems to stem from real life. Her bursting out in laughter when she witnesses scenes that seem absurd to her or when she enjoys the defeat of those who have hurt her pride remind us all too well of ourselves. There may be some flaws in Thackeray's characterisation of Becky but we may as well ignore them because humans are not always rational beings. Trollope nevertheless gives an example of one of these "absurdities" when he says that "[n]o schoolgirl who ever lived would have thrown back her gift-book[13] [...]" (95). Still, she is "a clever, lively, fascinating little woman [... although she lacks] conscience or moral principle of any sort" (Mudge 243).

Becky also accepts defeat in a humorous way as long as the defeat can be put down to a reason which is flattering to her, e.g. when she believes that Lady Jane only acted against her because she was jealous (Hardy 32). However, one wonders how quickly she gets over the destruction of her schemes. She can even adjust herself to shabby quarters after falling from

[12] Berenice in Maria Edgeworth's *Harrington* (1816) turns out to be baptized in the end (Walter 53).
[13] If a girl had not cared for the gift, she could have sold it.

grace since she possesses “amiable powers of surviving” (Hardy 130). Even her greatest opponents among the readership will have to grant her this quality.

Moreover, Becky quickly learns to hide her rage and becomes a champion in using double discourse, i.e. she pretends to be helpless and exploits the egotism of others by faking interest. She also manages to use this strategy when she is enraged, by uttering phrases that sound like typical female ones on the surface but are actually mocking such conventional discourses, for example by exaggeration. She also turns her body into an icon that is read as innocent or chaste by most of her contemporaries. In other words, she speaks verbally as well as physically and highlights her acting with the use of devices like lighting or props (Jadwin 42f). Let us take a look at a paragraph illustrating what was just said: “Downstairs, then, they went, Joseph very red and blushing, Rebecca very modest, and holding her green eyes downwards. She was dressed in white, with bare shoulders white as snow – the picture of youth, unprotected innocence, and humble virgin simplicity. ‘I must be very quiet,’ thought Rebecca, ‘and very much interested about India.’” (*Vanity Fair* 30). She does not say a word before choosing the most effective moment, and she lies all the time. Interestingly, Thackeray reminds his readers that Becky does not have a mother to back her up in the marriage-market (Hardy 74), as if this made her lying more respectable. While other heroines have their mothers to tell them what to say or when to remain silent, Becky has to make all her decisions on her own and therefore does not seem innocent. Nevertheless, the reader feels most with her in these moments and is willing to forgive her. She also lies to herself, though, and we are torn between pity and antipathy when we read the following lines: “’I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year. I could dawdle about in the nursery [...] and pick off dead leaves from the geraniums. I could ask old women about their rheumatism, and order half-a-crown’s worth of soup for the poor [...] I could pay everybody if I had but the money.’” (*Vanity Fair* 490). We feel such estrangement because we know that money is not needed to show affection, utter a few words of compassion, or to take care of flowers. Moreover, the text offers scenes in which all of Becky’s claims are negated. She does not turn good even when she is financed by her benefactor, she is bored being with her son, she sleeps well into the day instead of doing some work, and although she is given diamonds and money, she never pays any debt or participates in charities unless it is for the sake of showing her “respectability”.

She knows how to touch upon other people’s weak spots. Making her farewell to Miss Pinkerton in French, for example, although the latter does not understand it at all, is not only offensive but shows the limitations of the headmistress and therefore inflicts pain to her twice.

Becky is well aware that "[t]he psychological pecking-order can override the social [...]" (Hardy 54). Moreover, she wins men's admiration because she "satisfies their vanity" (Fisher 148). Doing so she even wakes ambition in the men she makes fun of in front of others, for example her brother-in-law: "Pitt Crawley was amazed and enraptured with her speech. 'How that woman comprehends me!' he said. 'I never could get Jane to read three pages of the Malt pamphlet. *She* has no idea that I have commanding talent or secret ambition.'" (*Vanity Fair* 526). This trick allows her to win numerous men but only those who belong to society's Vanity Fair. "Dobbin's lack of vanity gives him no surface upon which Becky's glance can play [... and he] always sees the serpent's tail beneath Becky's dress" (Fisher 83f).

Being a witty woman, she gets the most tasteful furniture, jewellery, and clothes to impress even people of higher social standing, which enables her to gain enough money to obtain acceptance in the best circles and even more property. They "express her artfulness and artifices" (Hardy 103) and she manages to achieve the air of a real lady using them. Although Thackeray does not enjoy describing backgrounds, he nevertheless allows us to see Becky's good taste through them. This is an advantage she has to rely on while climbing the social ladder.

She is also more "practically useful" (C. Peters 155) than most other characters. Put differently, Becky is such "an attractive character because she is refreshingly active and lively" (Williams 61), which is rare in Victorian literature. She provides for her family on nothing a year and tricks rich gentlemen out of their money.

It is an interesting fact that she can behave like a lady while gaining some masculine characteristics as well. She even occupies so much of the space that would normally be occupied by the husband that Rawdon more or less is forced to show a more feminine side, e.g. when the parents depart from their boy, it is him who gets all sentimental and worried. This leads to Becky growing even more bored and she "develops a very masculine indifference to his person and his moods [... while his] sincere love for the serpent-woman allows her to drain him of [his] masculine will and strength [...] In fact, Rawdon's end parodies the archetypal descent of the fallen woman: exile and death [...]" (Fisher 85). After all, "[h]e was Colonel Crawley no more. He was Mrs Crawley's husband" (*Vantiy Fair* 439). He is even afraid of her, which can be seen in chapter 37, in which his son is hurt and Rawdon beseeches him not to cry because Becky is asleep.

We have seen that Becky knows how to strike at other people's weak spots but she is blind to some of her own. Faking respectability all the time, she even makes herself believe

that she could be a virtuous woman if she had five thousand pound a year.[14] Some people believe in her remark although it was meant to "provoke an indignant denial from the reader" (C. Peters 164). A spoilt character will not change for the better, no matter how much money is given to the person in question. Our assumption is strengthened by the fact that Becky only uses her wits for her own good and "she never was known to have done a good action in behalf of anybody" (*Vantiy Fair* 17). She is a clever and educated woman who could have been a splendid teacher but she abuses her employers' trust and wastes opportunities to educate her pupils. In her letters to Amila she even calls them "insignificant little chits" (*Vanity Fair* 86) and arrogantly writes: "[A]s if I cared a fig about my pupils!" (*Vanity Fair* 115). Prawer reminds us that the books she has the girls read have a "reputation for irreligiousness and immorality [... and that] Becky takes a malicious pleasure in introducing her young pupils to such texts in the guise of French lessons, secure in the knowledge that her uncouth employer [can]not check them for himself" (*European* 22). If she cannot be good even when she gets a salary for it, why should we ever believe she would be without it?

Becky also has a "conventional little character. Hence her Royalism [sic], and the way it displays itself" (Hardy 28). Being born into Bohemian surroundings Becky "can only imitate, not act, the grand lady [and o]n her way to be presented at court [...] Becky is overacting – if gentle Lady Jane laughs, Becky must be ridiculous" (Fisher 152). She nevertheless is a gifted liar and her stories do not lack credibility. Who among her contemporaries would not believe her to be the descendent of French aristocracy? Twenty-first century readers forgive her as far as her lying about her ancestors is concerned because it makes no difference for the middle class reader anymore if somebody had a nobleman in his ancestry. That the poor Jew Rebecca is able to convince the British aristocracy that she belongs to the French aristocratic family of the Montmorencis is telling, especially because her French grandmother had to work as a box-opener. This fact actually confirms the theory that her mother's maiden name (Entrechat) is connected to the ballet (Prawer, *European* 18).

John Hagan reminds us that Becky is a hypocrite when she claims to hate stingy people while refusing to pay her debts to her creditors, for example Raglles or the loyal Briggs (482). She actually only manages to keep her pretty establishments because she abuses her admirers and tradesmen to an extent that the latter ones are ruined (Mudge 243).

Nonetheless, her critics are sometimes too harsh in judging her. Hardy, for example, believes that her letters to Amelia are only meant to get her some fine things, as her letters to all other people do (59). One has to argue for Becky in this case because – knowing Amelia's

[14] Thackeray had similar thoughts when he experienced poverty for the first time in 1839 (Carey, *Thackeray* 179).

kindness – she could have easily gotten consolation presents if she had made up worse lies. That she cannot be honest has nothing to do with exploitation but with her character that cannot bear the mediocre. She is aware of the only relationship which means something to her. "[... S]he like[s] Amelia rather than otherwise" (*Vantiy Fair* 355). After all, she does not give in to the flirtation with George and she means to open Amelia's eyes to accept Dobbin's courting. She nevertheless enjoys her triumphs over Amelia, which can be seen in chapter 32. One may also say that it is easy for her to be good because she has nothing to lose in the cases mentioned, but that is not important. The results are. Her confession does estrange Amelia after all. The clever adventuress must have had some doubts and yet she decided to help her friend. Critics like Hardy bring into the case that she kept the revealing message from George all the years to use it for her own good one day (103) and they also say that it must have given Becky pleasure to be virtuous and simultaneously "smack [Amelia] in the face" (Carey, *Thackeray* 181).

Hagan was also concerned with the question of Becky's cleverness and concludes that she is not as witty as one may believe when reading the novel superficially. He rightly states that her wooing of Jos is seen through although she is sure to be subtle. He is also right when he says that Becky is naive when she believes that Miss Crawley will not get angry at her when she marries Rawdon. For a woman not interested in love her marriage with a man like Rawdon is a mistake in the first place anyway (492f). She also underestimates people like her own husband or her friend Amelia – the first one finally breaking loose from her and the latter falling in love with the right man. That it is not Becky's doing that her friend gets herself a new husband cannot be blamed on her, though, because Thackeray was willingly refusing her the role as a saviour (Hardy 33). She wanted to help, although it may have been a cheap trick to fight off her boredom, too. Her fatal mistake is her behaviour around Lady Jane. It is the kind-hearted noblewoman who gets Rawdon out of the spunging house, so he returns in time to find Becky in the shameful company of Lord Styne. Moreover, it is her doing that Becky loses all of her influence on Sir Pitt (Hagan 493).

Reading about all of Becky's vices, one wonders why Thackeray decided to use his "Becky puppet" to portray the world. Trollope claims to know when he states that the author "thought that more can be done by exposing the vices than extolling the virtues of mankind" (94). Living in the twenty-first century we are still asking the same question and we tend to agree with Trollope. Becky has a fatal influence on her surroundings after all. Catherine Peters writes that she "destroys Rawdon; and [...] has a delirious effect on all the men who fall for her charms except Lord Steyne, who is even more corrupt than she is" (156). And even he

turned into “her slave [and] followed her everywhere” (*Vanity Fair* 602) claiming that he was “a greenhorn [...] and a fool in her hand” (*Vanity Fair* 611).

Although we tend to see this adventuress as the strongest woman in the novel, it is actually Amelia who manages to cope with all suffering and eventually gets everything she wants. Becky, on the other hand, fails in certain moments of crisis (Brander 21) and even thinks about committing suicide: “She thought of her long past life, and all the dismal incidents of it. Ah, how dreary it seemed, how miserable, lonely, and profitless! Should she take laudanum, and end it, too [...]?” (*Vanity Fair* 625). Many of the problems she has to encounter have been brought into being by herself. For instance, she never was in love with Rawdon, which can be clearly seen at Waterloo. Other wives care for their husbands but Becky is “cold-bloodedly calculating the benefits she might get from his death if he were to fall” (Hagan 485). While Rawdon dresses in his oldest uniform, tries to leave her some items to sell and prays for her wellbeing while leaving for the battle, she is just worried about her pale cheeks and eventually goes to bed to sleep “very comfortably” (*Vanity Fair* 339). She more or less tolerates him but her lack of affection sets her apart from “normal” people (G. Ray 424) and makes it impossible for her to find any fulfilment in her home. “She [does] not miss him or anybody. She look[s] upon him as her errand-man and humble slave” (*Vanity Fair* 607). She underestimates Rawdon, of whom she only thinks highly at the moment she loses him. Hardy observes that this scene “shows up the limitations of Becky’s intelligence and artifice” (25). The question of actual adultery is less important than her destroying Rawdon’s reputation (Hardy 31), who is unjustly believed to be Becky’s accomplice in what may or may not be actual adultery.

Becky cannot find happiness in what society expects her to do and she seems to be “emotionally disabled [... She also] feels impelled to seek out excitement in social performance, like a drug addict [...]” (Harden, *Thackeray* 173). Thackeray himself compares his heroine with an addicted person when he writes that “Becky love[s] society, and, indeed, could no more exist without it than an opium-eater without his dram” (*Vanity Fair* 755). It is true that Becky is not able to understand or accept kindness either. While throwing away the dictionary given to her secretly as a present, she does not only attack the establishment – the symbol of which she gets rid of so cold-heartedly – but she also rejects the loving gesture of the one woman who has suffered with her (Hardy 55). Even worse is her treatment of her son, whom she visits only once or twice a week. She does not bother herself to raise him, and when he cries, he is only ever comforted by the loving Rawdon. Her coldness makes the proud father ashamed of his affection, though, while his kindness makes her angry. Even the

narrator, who so often takes sides with Becky, suffers with the boy, saying that "[m]other is the name for God in the lips and hearts of little children; and here was one who was worshipping a stone!" (*Vanity Fair* 441). It is possible that the only kiss the boy gets from her happens in chapter 45, when she only mimics Lady Jane's affectionate gestures. The reader actually feels satisfaction when little Radwon states that he is never kissed at home, which leads to Lady Jane's estrangement and eventually to Becky's downfall.

Does her lack of affection and morality point at her being an adulteress, though? We have heard that her personality and curriculum vitae may have been modelled on two notorious mistresses. It therefore makes sense to take a closer look at her actions concerning infidelity. Frazee states that Thackeray gives us more hints about her sexual vices after the unfortunate night which ruined her schemes (238). Indeed, at the beginning of chapter 64 the narrator says that he had to pass over certain parts of Becky's biography because morality demands it. He nevertheless goes on saying: "In describing this siren [...] the author with modest pride, asks his readers all around, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent [...]" (*Vanity Fair* 747). Victorian readers would have been disgusted if they had been sure that Becky's success in society was linked to sexual activities, which are at least probable when we remember the narrator telling us that she was not worse in her years of fame than during her time of disgrace (Frazee 238f). Frazee also tells us to keep her little snuff-box in mind that had once belonged to the best-known mistress of them all, Madame du Berri, the lover of Louis XV (240). Although we cannot be sure about her fidelity, we know that various characters believe that she is Lord Styne's mistress. After all, some of them only give her credit because she has power over him but "[s]uch social credit has power only as long as it remains a supposition" (Fisher 157). The most striking evidence for her guilt is the fact that the narrator – who had claimed omniscience before – pretends to be clueless when Becky wants to assure Rawdon of her innocence. He therefore "has decided, provocatively, to become his appealing little sinner's confederate [...]" (Reed 343).

Becky is sometimes loved for being a rebel but this view of her is a misconception of her character. The narrator wonders if Becky could be a good woman if she had the means of the rich and although this is unlikely, it clearly shows that Becky is not a rebel but an impostor (Hagan 500). Women like her "are not revolutionaries; in fact, their opposition strengthens the patriarchal system [ ... and] as mirrors of male vanity [...] the sirens use their seductive powers to take from the system [...]" (Fisher 165).

The question whether she is a rebel or not can be ignored compared to the one mystery concerning her person that still leads to discussions among readers: has Becky killed Jos? There still are many who do not believe it. They are allowed to do so because *Vanity Fair* "achieves its effect through ambiguity and indirection" (C. Peters 144) and Becky seems to be more of a climber than a radical (Hardy 28). Nevertheless, one must not forget that Thackeray was against glorifying murder and he had to stick to the rules of good taste. "His fiction represented the life that the Victorians knew, or, more importantly, the life they were willing to know" (Flamm 3). The introduction to *Pendennis* also contains Thackeray's statement that he did not want to portray murderers bearing the mark of Cain because he had never met such people in real life (Walter 45). On the other hand, authors like Catherine Peters call Becky "an adulteress and murderess" without hesitation (151). The characters in the book believe that she is capable of murder. We see it clearly in her second husband's fear of her and Dobbin's refusal to even speak with her after the former's death. It is this capacity that makes Lord Styne fall for her as "[h]e is enthralled to discover that her amorality reaches even to homicide" (Henry 281). The author wanted his readers to believe in her bad character, which can be seen in his portrayal of her as mother. We must not forget that Thackeray was enchanted by all children, gave expensive presents to them (C. Peters 141), called himself "child-sick" (Thackeray 240) and took care of his daughters himself instead of having them raised by his mother (C. Peters 136). It is obvious that such a man would never believe a terrible mother to be a good person. Andrew Henry even claims that Thackeray went too far showing her cruelty by letting Becky box her son's ears. He believes that Becky is not angry at her son for witnessing her meeting with Lord Steyne but that she strikes little Rawdon because he is the symbol of the domesticity that she started to hate (279f). On the other hand, all children bore her and she has reason to do so because she had been forced to be their guardian before she grew into an adult herself (Carey, *Thackeray* 180). Furthermore, "she never had been a girl, she said; she had been a woman since she was eight years old" (*Vanity Fair* 19). Becky was cared for by a "lazy, dissolute artist father" (Harden, *Thackeray* 173) who used to beat his wife and daughter when he was drunk. Her unfortunate upbringing may have led to her inability to love her child but her father cannot be blamed for Becky's growing contempt. The narrator says that her "dislike increased to hatred: the consciousness that the child was in the house was a reproach and a pain to her. His very sight annoyed her" (*Vanity Fair* 518). Modern readers already see the neglect of her son long before, namely when she gives him away to be nursed by someone else outside Paris. She even blames Rawdon for her lack of emotion by saying: "'Do what you like [...] only don't expect *me* to busy myself with

the boy. I have your interests to attend to, as you can't attend to them yourself.'" (*Vanity Fair* 609). She does not even accompany her son when he departs from home but drives into a park to chat with some dandies.

Let us look at the information that hints at her crime now. It will be wise to start at a point in the novel still remote from the murder: the charades, which illustrate her world of lies (Hardy 77) as they combine the ancient myths of the unjustly injured Philomela and the cold-blooded Clytemnestra. Thackeray uses the myth of Philomela to show that women can use art to fight men's power (Jadwin 48). Indeed, Becky is an almost perfect actress and her rise in society depends solely on her talent. It is also the combination of different pictures like these that strengthens our belief in her capacity to murder because we have long been aware of her absence of innocence and honesty at this point in the story. This knowledge makes her presentation of the song "The Rose Upon My Balcony" ironic because it delivers a statement on her "'theatrical' youth and equally theatrical innocence" (Williams 63f). When Becky acts Clytemnestra's murder of her husband, and Lord Styne says "'Brava! brava [sic]! [...] By –, she'd do it too,'" (*Vanity Fair* 598) the reader does not find any irony in the utterance because Lord Styne's knowledge of people still seems flawless at this point. We may even ask ourselves: Is it possible that this nobleman knows Becky better than her own creator? When Thackeray was asked whether Becky had killed Jos, he mostly answered that he did not know. As the writer he is bound to know everything and we therefore assume that he takes sides with Dobbin, who claims not to know her in the end although he knows her better than any other character. His denial of the author's omniscience has to be related to the times in which he lived in and which demanded a murderer to be punished. Therefore, the text cannot speak about her guilt explicitly. It has to be encoded in the given literary devices (Sutherland n.pag.). Carey states that there is "anecdotal evidence that Thackeray *did* think of Becky as Jos's murderer [because a] friend who asked him what he meant by the final etching records him as replying, 'I mean she had committed murder – but I didn't want anything *horrible*.'" (*Vanity Fair* xl). Since this is an anecdote only, we should not necessarily trust it.

There are enough pieces of information to solve the puzzle anyway. We have the illustration "Becky's second appearance in the character of Clytemnestra" (see figure I) that shows Becky hiding behind a curtain with an evil look on her face which makes her appearance frightening. Prawer calls it "an expression that bodes no good for Jos" (*European* 396) and points out that the painting behind the miserable man shows "Abraham preparing to sacrifice Isaac" (Breeches 297). More importantly, her left hand rests next to a cup while she is holding an ampoule in her right one. The "text" in the picture combined with its title is

telling. The latter connects Becky to the charades as well as the figure in classical mythology, and also the painting called *Clytemnestra* by Pierre-Narcisse Guérin. It therefore "identif[ies] Becky as the successor of an ancient tradition" (Jadwin 45f). Furthermore, Prawer states: "The Becky who knows how to use apparent submissiveness as a weapon and revels in such power over the wretched Jos as she can garner, is a welcome antidote to fantasies of female subjection to a 'pasha' with absolute power over women's bodies and lives" (*European* 396).

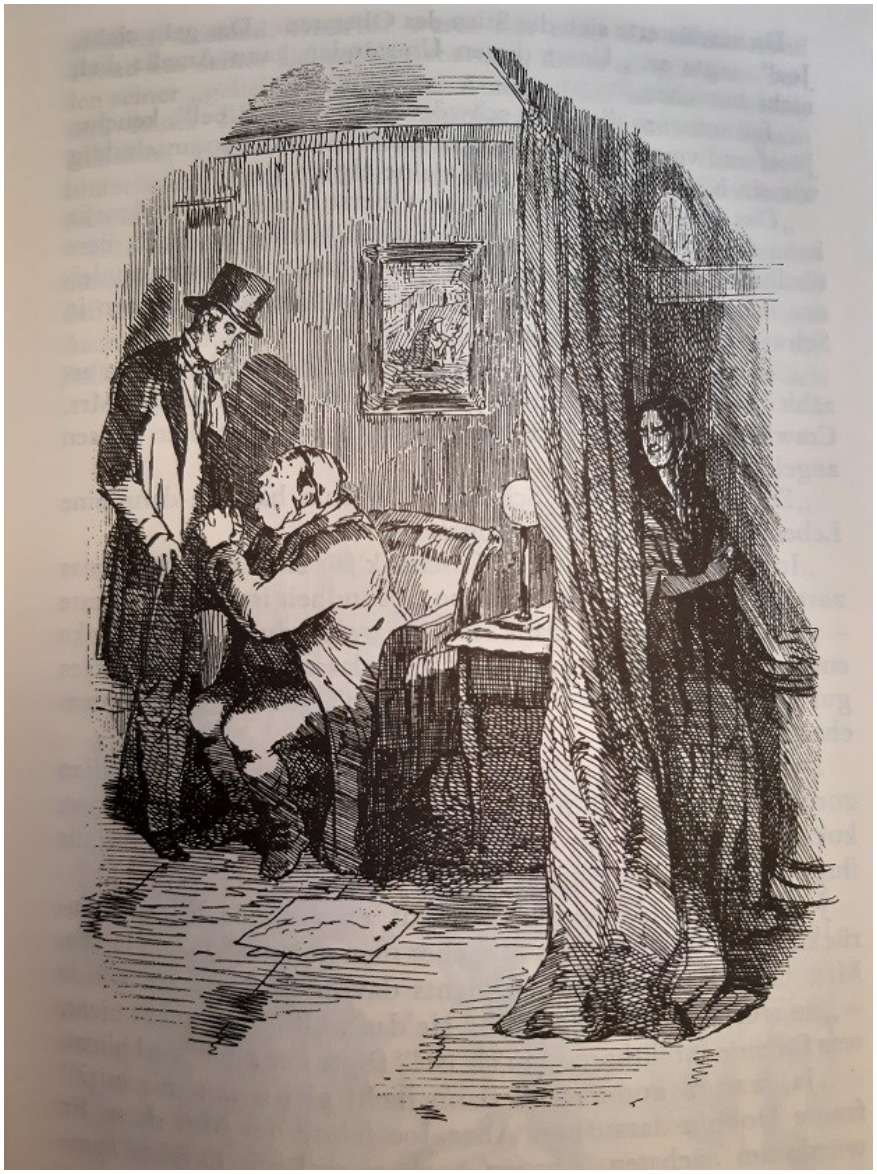

**Fig. I "Becky's second appearance in the character of Clytemnestra"**

From: Thackeray, William Makepeace. Jahrmarkt der Eitelkeit oder Ein Roman ohne Held. 1848. Trans. Theresa Mutzenbecher. 1975. München: DTV, 2011. 909.

The first illustration bearing Clytemnestra's name is titled "The Triumph of Clytemnestra" (see figure II) and shows Becky still in costume bowing to King George. It is interesting to watch her back as "Rawdon's scabbard [...] seems to protrude from her back like a satanic tail [which is] an ambiguously incidental hint" (Jadwin 50).

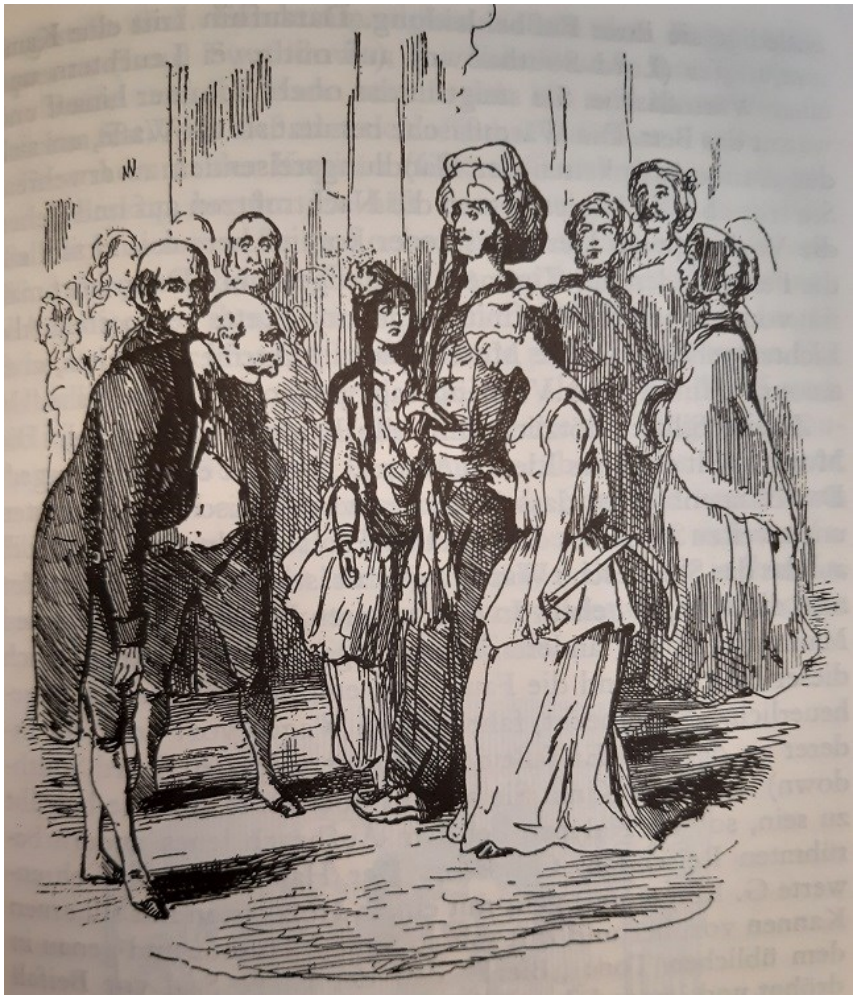

**Fig. II "The Triumph of Clytemnestra"**

From: Thackeray, William Makepeace. Jahrmarkt der Eitelkeit oder Ein Roman ohne Held. 1848. Trans. Theresa Mutzenbecher. 1975. München: DTV, 2011. 671.

Lisa Jadwin points out the irony that emerges from the additional information given in the illustration accompanying the song "The Rose Upon My Balcony" (see figure III) by stating that "Becky's exaggerated hourglass shape, her curiously dangling hands and the dense vertical folds of her skirt suggest the malevolent outline of a black widow spider, the metaphorical designing woman who attracts a mate only to consume him" (51). We may take a look back at the time when Becky had Jos entangled in the threads she knitted a silk purse with (see figure IV). The image of spider and victim therefore appears already in chapter 4 but the reader has no clue yet that the smirking girl will turn out to be a black widow. We also have the names of Becky's lawyers, which are taken from Victorian murderers. John Thurtell was a killer hanged in 1824, William Burke murdered people and sold their bodies, and Catherine Hayes killed her husband (Jadwin 58). Writing about these names K.C. Phillipps asks: "Did Becky murder Jos? [...] Thackeray leaves this sinister hint in the reader's mind, and passes on" (181). All the pieces of information taken together do not only hint at Becky's

guilt but make it highly probable. It would be naive to believe that Thackeray's choice of names was accidental or that his cleverly done illustrations only seem to have meaning by chance. After all, Thackeray himself states that Becky is capable of murder when he describes her as a dangerous mermaid surrounded by the skulls of her victims in chapter 64:

> Those who like may peep down under waves [...] and see [Becky's tail] writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses [...] When however the siren disappears and dives below, down among the dead men, the water of course grows turbing over her [...] and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims. And so, when Becky is out of the way, be sure that [...] the less that is said about her doings is in fact the better. (*Vanity Fair* 747f)

Thackeray also illustrated this siren (see figure V), which reminds us of Goethe's sea monster that lured her victim to his doom. Maybe he had exactly this vision in mind. Since he translated the ballad, he must have been familiar with it (Prawer, *Breeches* 271). Yet this passage is still not explicit enough for some. Saintsbury, for example, claims enthusiastically: "Becky is very great, but she is ill-treated [...] Yet how great she is! [...] Becky has in her the makings not only [...] of a quite respectable person but of all manner of persons, bad and good" (169). And, indeed, Thackeray believed that we can only judge people well when we look at their vice as well as their cunning (Colby 240).

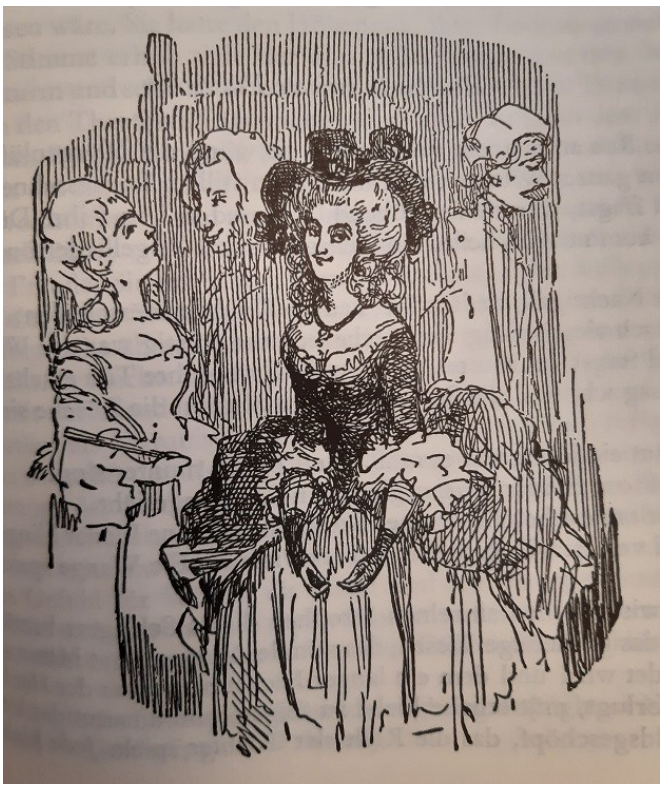

**Fig. III Becky as Black Widow**

From: Thackeray, William Makepeace. Jahrmarkt der Eitelkeit oder Ein Roman ohne Held. 1848. Trans. Theresa Mutzenbecher. 1975. München: DTV, 2011. 673.

**Fig. IV Becky and Jos entangled**

From: Thackeray, William Makepeace. Jahrmarkt der Eitelkeit oder Ein Roman ohne Held. 1848. Trans. Theresa Mutzenbecher. 1975. München: DTV, 2011. 51.

**Fig. V A dangerous mermaid**

From: Thackeray, William Makepeace. Jahrmarkt der Eitelkeit oder Ein Roman ohne Held. 1848. Trans. Theresa Mutzenbecher. 1975. München: DTV, 2011. 575.

While writing the last instalment he may have claimed that he did not like any characters in the book with the exception of Dobbin and his wife (Stevenson, *Showman* 172) but bringing a story as long as *Vanity Fair* to an end many an author is fed up with his creation to a certain extent. He nevertheless must have liked his characters because he willingly sketched their future lives in a letter to the Duke of Devonshire on May 1st 1848:

> Mrs. Crawley now lives in a small but very pretty little house in Belgravia, and is conspicuous for her numerous charities [...] and her unaffected piety. Many of the most exalted and spotless of her own sex visit her, and are of [the] opinion that she is a *most injured woman* [...] She took the style and title of Lady Crawley for some time after Sir Pitt's death in 1832; but it turned out that Colonel Crawley, Governor of Coventry Island, had died of fever three months before his brother, whereupon Mrs. Rawdon was obliged to lay down the title which she had prematurely assumed. (375f)

While one can imagine Thackeray writing these lines with a smirk on his lips, he goes on to draw a more negative picture of Becky's future as he continues telling the Duke more about her: "She has lost what little good looks she once possessed, and wears false hair and teeth[, and t]he India mail just arrived announces the utter ruin of the Union Bank of Calcutta, in which all Mrs. Crawley's money was" (376f). This account of her fate is pessimistic and would have been preferred by many of his contemporaries. Why did he not write it into the book then? As his letter was written to a person belonging to the highest circles, we may suppose that he was flattering his noble friend by punishing the impostor more severely. This theory is strengthened by the fact that he normally did not punish his characters harshly because he did not feel the urge to hunt evil down. He was content when it was discovered (Reed 307). On the other hand, "no character in the book enjoyed a completely successful outcome of his affairs" (Flamm 9). Be it as it may, Becky's life remains only "superficially respectable" (Mudge 243). Judith L. Fisher draws a line between her last appearance in the novel and sexual availability that sheds some more light on the question of her respectability. It seems that Thackeray's contemporaries believed that bazaars turned into places where not only goods but also the human body was sold. The print called "A Bazaar" from 1816 or the poem "The London Bazaar, or, Where to get Cheap Things" published in the same year are proof of the dubious character of the bazaars, which kept their overtones even after the better off classes took them over in the twenties of the same century (Fisher 157f).

Reading the lines above one might conclude that Thackeray could not possibly like a character whom he treats that badly but we ought to remember that Thackeray's first book *Flore et Zéphyr* satirized the ballet that he loved all his life (Buchanan-Brown 11). It is proof that Thackeray was able to laugh about adored things. Becky cannot find absolute happiness because she is a tool to "illustrate the destructive operation of the standards of Vantiy Fair" (G.

Ray 422). Catherine Peters even argues that *Vanity Fair* can be seen as a parody of the popular *bildungsroman* as the outsider Becky attempts to reach the highest social goals only to find that they bore her utterly. She claims that "Becky's punishment is no more than the boredom and weariness that she feels after each successive triumph [...]" (149). There may be some among us who think that her estrangement with her only son is punishment enough but this is unreasonable. Becky was not interested in her son in the first place and it is logical to suppose that the only regret she feels about their relationship is the fact that she cannot enjoy his new won status as heir of the baronetcy as she would have done if she had invested more into her relationship with him. Indeed, flipping through the pages we see her invest time, money, and wits into gaining more status and wealth only to lose most of it in the end. Had she tried to accept her son's feelings, she would have led the life of a lady in the end – maybe suffering from boredom much earlier. She used to fight her boredom through working hard to achieve her ends. For example, Thackeray, who had tried to care for his sick wife himself, turns Becky into a nurse at one point of the story. In contrast to devoted professionals that never claim to be interested in the patient for the patient's sole good only – they have to earn their wages after all –, Becky acts as a loving nurse for old Miss Crawley to influence her, although the latter is a hypochonandriac woman (C. Peters 155).

In the end, we know what Becky herself is unaware of, namely, that "her social striving is only one manifestation of the need for stimulation" (Williams 64f) and that she is "forced by her own desires to seek something which cannot satisfy her" (Williams 76). Indeed, the climbing of the social ladder was not what satisfied her. It was the thrill of the risks that she was taking (Reed 331). Hardy believes that the most fascinating revelations about her are her limitations and that her way to survive make her the woman she is (28). We may think about her as we please but she certainly can be praised for her staying power.

## 4) *The Secret Agent*'s Winnie Verloc

Reading the novel one cannot help feeling sympathy for Winnie. She is loyal, hardworking, willing to sacrifice her whole life for her mentally handicapped brother, and even her peculiarities seem excusable when one remembers her terrible childhood. Indeed, Conrad scores his ultimate success when his readers witness Winnie killing her husband and yet forgive her immediately. Psychologically speaking, hers is the most interesting personality to analyse among my chosen killers and it is obvious that Conrad was especially interested in

Winnie. After all, Winnie Verloc is the true "secret agent"[15] in a novel presenting an actual spy. That she is a highly interesting character is also visible when we look at her critics' perception of her, which ranges from Winnie being a "heroic wife" (Warner, *Conrad*, 1950, 23) to "meat" (Ching 42) – but let us look at her creation first.

**4a) The creation of Winnie Verloc**

To find models for Winnie in real life and literature is a risky task and it may also be in vain. Conrad tells us in his "Author's Note" from 1920 (that is also part of the edition I use) that "the tale […] came to [him] in the shape of a few words uttered by a friend in a casual conversation about anarchists" (*The Secret Agent* 8). He then goes on claiming that "the story of Winnie Verloc stood out complete from the days of her childhood to the end [… and that i]t was a matter of about three days" (*The Secret Agent* 10). This period of time seems too short for an extensive character study. Furthermore, Conrad himself claims that, apart from an anarchist event that he had knowledge of, *The Secret Agent* is "*purely a work of imagination*" (qtd. in Watt 113).

Let us nevertheless take a look at the words that were uttered in an "omniscient manner" (*The Secret Agent* 9) by one of Conrad's friends. Said friend was Ford Madox Ford and the conversation included the bomb attack at the Greenwich Observatory, which happened on 15th February 1894 (Knowles, and Moore 332) and in which an anarchist called Martial Bourdin "was blown to pieces by his own bomb [… that had] been furnished by his sister's husband, one Samuels[16]" (Batchelor, *Life* 156). It was not the political side of the incident that was of interest to Conrad but the social one, which offered itself through one significant (yet false) claim of Ford Madox Ford's[17]: "Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards" (*The Secret Agent* 9). Because Conrad was inspired by these words, one may jump to the conclusion that he based Winnie on Mrs. Samuels. However, there are reasons to reject this theory, for example the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Samuels lived on into the 1930s (Knowles, and Moore 332). More importantly, Mrs. Samuels' behavior after the death of her brother does not bear any similarities to that of Winnie. In his *Conrad's Western World* Norman Sherry includes the account of Isabel

[15] Owen Knowles and Gene M. Moore call Winnie "the secret agent of her brother's survival" (387), a perception of her character that Norman Sherry approves of by saying that "[t]he true secret agent in the world of the anarchists is not Verloc but Winnie […]" (*Western* 363).
[16] H. B. Samuels was the editor of an anarchist paper and a leading anarchist (Sherry, *Western* 238f).
[17] In his biography Ford explains that the words he uttered to Conrad were actually: "Oh, that fellow was half an idiot! His sister murdered her husband afterwards and was allowed to escape by the police" (qtd. in Schrader 22). As a matter of fact, this description of the Samuels' lives is not true either.

Meredith, in which she talks about the fact that Samuels was saved during his interrogation by his wife, who stormed into the office and "amid a volley of abuse and oaths" denounced anarchy (qtd. in Sherry, *Western* 315). We also know that Mrs. Samuels was aware that her husband was connected to her brother's death because of a letter written by a certain Mrs. Bevington to David Nicoll. In it she writes that it was Samuels who sent Bourdin to Greenwich Park and that Mrs. Samuels had told her this fact herself (Sherry, *Greenwich* 222). Therefore I am of Sherry's opinion when he states that "Winnie is obviously not based upon Mrs Samuels, who does not seem to have been particularly moved by her brother's death, but [that] the idea of the presence of a Mrs Verloc was no doubt derived from the existence of Mrs Samuels" (*Western* 315).

John Batchelor looks at Bernard Meyer's theory that Conrad's jealousy of his son John[18] can be found in the structure of the novel (which was written during and after his wife's pregnancy) and concludes that "Verloc, Winnie and Stevie can in a way be identified with Joseph, Jessie and John". He also claims that "[o]ne cannot help thinking that Conrad is dealing with hostile feelings towards Jessie and her mother" (*Life* 154f). Therefore we may as well take a look at Conrad's wife to find similarities between her and Winnie. Jessie George, whom Conrad married some eighteen months after he had first met her, was "attractive, maternal and quite undeterred by practical difficulties" (Warner, *Conrad*, 1951, 65). She was also much younger than her husband (Karl 592) and had a rounded figure (Sherry, *Western* 369). She was "very dark" and possessed "a calm, placid temperament and a self-control that withstood all provocations" (Meyers, *Conrad* 135). Even her son Borys said that her "unassailable placidity was almost frightening at times" (qtd. in Meyers, *Conrad* 135). There seems to have been a lack of proper conversation between the couple reminiscent of the Verlocs as well. For example, one night when Jessie "came into terrified contact with a tramp stealing from [her] garden", she did not even tell Conrad about it when he criticised her for taking too long to prepare his meal (Sherry, *Western* 367f). Moreover, Batchelor supposes that "like Verloc's Winnie, she seems to have accepted that things would not take too much looking into and that business was for gentlemen and not the weaker sex […]" (*Jim* 15).

Another model might be Mary Penelope Krieger, the wife of his friend Adolf Krieger, who not only shares his first name with Verloc but who repeatedly travelled to Continental

[18] In a letter to Helen Sanderson on February 26th 1899 Conrad writes that he was "horribly frightened of the [first] baby", Borys, and that even though he is now "amused", he also experiences "a feeling of being confronted by a grave problem" (172). If Conrad was unable to properly cope with one child, it is not unreasonable to believe that the arrival of a second child stressed him considerably more. We also know of an extreme moment of jealously, in which Conrad threw all of four-months-old John's clothes out of a train window (Meyers, *Conrad* 236), and that Conrad originally was "determined that there would be no children" (Sherry, *Western* 370).

Europe and was supposedly a spy, too. Mrs. Krieger was "a strong and silent person [… and she] was passionately fond of Felix, the youngest of her three sons, particularly since he had suffered from meningitis[19] when he was young" (Sherry, *Western* 328f).

It is easy to claim that every fictional character possesses traits of his or her creator[20] but I nevertheless want to add two details that I deem worthy of mentioning. Conrad claims that "[m]an may smile and smile but he is not an investigating animal. He loves the obvious. He shrinks from explanations" (*The Secret Agent* 7). These lines could be uttered by Winnie but surprise when Conrad writes them because he is a master of looking into things and describing them in a way that forces his readers to look beneath the surface as well (and doing so find the explanations Conrad claims we are not interested in). His words seem ironic but they link him to Winnie's personality nevertheless. Interestingly, we may also find his loneliness in her since Conrad goes on telling us that he "had to fight hard to keep at arm's length the memories of [his] solitary […] walks all over London […]" (*The Secret Agent* 11) while writing the novel. Susan Jones sees this connection as well when she writes that his female characters' "sense of exclusion from the central narratives of men often match Conrad's self-confessed feelings of dislocation and despair" (8).

Let us move on to women in fiction on which Conrad may have based Winnie. For example, L. R. Leavis stresses the similarities between Winnie and Tess Durbeyfield, the heroine of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles,* and reminds us that Conrad had met Thomas Hardly, which may have inspired the former to read the latter's story of yet another female killer. Indeed, there are instances of resemblance. After all, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is about "a girl finally beaten down by social convention and sheer fate […]" who is denied the chance to be with the man she loves because of the appearance of the one she kills later on (162f). Leavis also emphasizes that "Winnie shares with Tess a mixture of the passive with an inner fire" (165).

J. H. Stape and Allan H. Simmons have found a model for Winnie's lethal rage in the world of the opera, which Conrad knew and used in his own work. The character in question is Tosca, specifically from Victorien Sardou's *La Tosca* from 1887 and Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* from 1900 (107). When the evil Scarpia blackmails Tosca to give herself to him using the life of her lover Cavaradossi as a bargaining chip, she grabs a knife from the dining-table and kills him. Moreover, after her lover is executed after all, she leaps to her death (111f).

[19] Although one cannot compare Felix's illness to Stevie's permanent situation, the fact that they needed special care at least for some time in their lives, explains the heightened instinct to protect in both women.
[20] Conrad himself believed that "[e]very novel contains an element of autobiography […]" (qtd. in Schwarz xiv).

Last but not least, Thomas Moser sees Conrad's own Amy Foster (of the homonymous short story) in Winnie since they share "the same dull tenacity [… and] the same capacity for resolute, even violent, action under stress of terror or hatred" (90f).

With these pieces of information in mind let us move forward to looking at Winnie's personality in detail.

**4b) The woman sacrificing lives**

Winnie's most prominent feature is her willingness to sacrifice. She sacrifices her first love, her mother's wellbeing and her own freedom for her beloved brother Stevie – and after his loss, she sacrifices her husband's life for Stevie's soul by taking revenge for him. The root of the term "sacrifice" goes back to the Latin word "*sacrificium*", which means to make something sacred. Sacrificial rites can already be found in ancient western traditions but nineteenth century anthropologists discussed the concepts of sacrifice while creating the colonial other. Conrad uses it to show that the Western civilisation is decaying and not superior to the rest of the world. He even takes one step further and links it to cannibalism (Ching 37f), which has a long history in classic myths. Jeffrey Meyers compares the bloody elements of *The Secret Agent* with the myth of King Agamemnon, who fed his nephews to their father as well as sacrificing his own daughter for his political goals. Conrad uses this picture of cannibalism as a political motif, and just as Agamemnon falls through his wife's hand before she dies herself, so does Verloc before Winnie's suicide (Myth 57f).

The novel contains moments of sacrifice by different people[21] but the one sacrificing herself utterly is the novel's heroine. A woman who is willing to give all of herself for a loved one seems noble but Winnie is far from being a one-dimensional character. One may even wonder if a love as possessive as hers is still selfless or if it has become part of a self-absorbed vision of oneself. No matter which answer one believes to be true, Winnie is a wonderful companion for one person but lacking in compassion and humanity around almost anybody else[22]. For example, "Winnie after the death of her father [finds] considerable consolation in the feeling that she need no longer tremble for poor Stevie" (*The Secret Agent* 40). Winnie is never shown to mourn her father but she is forgiven because we know that her

[21] For example, Verloc is willing to sacrifice Stevie to secure his own easygoing life (Ching 40). There is Stevie's mother who self-sacrifices herself by spending the rest of her life in a tiny almshouse, so Verloc does not get upset with too many members of Winnie's family depending on him. Moreover, Ossipon sacrifices the happiness of numerous women who he only seduces for their money.

[22] Harrington describes this situation as an "excess of compassionate feeling [that] is entirely concentrated on Stevie" (Offender 61).

father had “a propensity to brutal treatment” (*The Secret Agent* 41), and that “Stevie knew what it was to be beaten” (*The Secret Agent* 142) because of him. She proves to be a hypocrite, too, when her blindness towards the pain she inflicts on others is shown. She only calls the miserable horse that brought her to her mother’s almshouse a “[p]oor brute” (*The Secret Agent* 142), when she is no longer benefitting from the animal’s hard labour, which the text ridicules openly by stating that she possesses “that ready compassion of a woman for a horse (when she is not sitting behind him)” (*The Secret Agent* 142). Her hypocrisy is even more telling when we remember that exactly ten pages prior she stopped Stevie from reducing the animal’s struggle by walking next to the cab. She also seems to forget her own utterance of compassion a moment later, when she comments on Stevie’s expression, that it is a bad world for those who are poor, with a simple: “Nobody can help that” (*The Secret Agent* 143). Another interesting (and foreshadowing) example is her passionate statement that a useless act of brutality should be punished in extreme ways. After Stevie read about an officer who had torn off a part of a recruit’s ear without punishment, Stevie is so overpowered by his feelings of injustice, that he grabs a knife. Winnie tells about this episode and states that she understands her brother perfectly by adding: “He would have stuck that officer […] if he had seen him then. It’s true, too! Some people don’t deserve much mercy” (*The Secret Agent* 57). Moreover, Winnie is not able to understand other people. For instance, when she is offended by her mother leaving them. If Winnie had acted like an adult and spoken with her mother about her reasons, she would have understood the old woman or even honored her for her decision. Not to look beneath the surface, is a habit of Winnie’s that we will have to look into detail later on.

Before we concentrate on Winnie’s life, her talents and lack thereof any further, we ought to cast a look at her appearance. It will help us to understand her possibilities as a woman as well as people’s reactions towards her. The first impressions we get of her are predominately positive because “Winnie Verloc [is] a young woman with a full bust […], and with broad hips. Her hair [is] very tidy” (*The Secret Agent* 14) and “dark” (*The Secret Agent* 15). Furthermore, her „sallow cheeks“ are sometimes „tinged […] with a faint dusky blush“ (*The Secret Agent* 56). It is reasonable to assume that she had a choice whom to marry and, indeed, she ended a flirtation with a man she adored to secure Stevie’s wellbeing. That she is pretty and respectable enough to get herself a fitting husband is also illustrated by her mother’s confusion as to why Winnie would choose Verloc of all possible suitors: “She had never really understood why Winnie had married Mr Verloc. It was sensible of her, […] but her girl might have naturally hoped to find somebody of a more suitable age” (*The Secret*

*Agent* 41). Winnie nevertheless has to possess some tomboyish features as well, because her resemblance to her brother highlighted by gas-light is "so profound as to strike the casual passers-by" (*The Secret Agent* 142), a curious fact that will be important when we take a look at her mental health.

Among her features her big eyes are especially important, which can be seen by the excessive number of mentions as well as descriptions. Sometimes they are mentioned various times on the same page, for example on page 147, which tells us twice that they are "big" and "dark" and once that they are "inert" and "unblinking" (*The Secret Agent* 147). On other occasions her eyes are described as "large" (*The Secret Agent* 161) and, as "incredible as it may appear, the eyes of Mrs Verloc [sometimes seem] to grow still larger" (*The Secret Agent* 210). They are also "fine" – a fact that the text tells us more than once (for example, *The Secret Agent* 167 and 214). Winnie possessing big eyes is deeply ironic because "[s]he [feels] profoundly that things do not stand much looking into" (*The Secret Agent* 147), a mistake that leads to the destruction of her whole family.[23] After Winnie learns of her brother's death, Conrad describes her pupils as "extremely dilated" (*The Secret Agent* 198), "enlarged" and again as "dilated" (*The Secret Agent* 202). They illustrate that Winnie is now able to look into things properly. However, Winnie's eyes are not only used as a tool for Conrad's irony but also to create a gloomy atmosphere. For instance, when "[s]omething peculiar in the blackness of his wife's eyes disturb[s Verloc's] optimism" (*The Secret Agent* 204). Conrad's use of Winnie's eyes to create atmosphere is even more impressive in the train scene, when Winnie is thinking of the gallows that may await her if she is not able to flee: "She had uncovered a face like adamant. And out of this face the eyes looked on, big, dry, enlarged, lightless, burnt out like two black holes in the white, shining globes" (*The Secret Agent* 238). A totally different yet interesting reading is offered by Allan Hunter, who uses "the standard medical view" of epilepsy found in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for 1910. He writes that "[t]he repeated references to Winnie's black eyes are [t]here explained as the preliminary indications of epilepsy, although they are also a symptom of the epileptic fit itself" (205f).

The text also tells us about Winnie's strength, which is considerable. When she pushes Ossipon into the shop, he is "astonished at the strength of the woman […]" (*The Secret Agent* 229). What is even more telling than the power of her push, which Ossipon was not prepared for, is the fact that he cannot free himself from her hug when "[h]er hands ha[ve] locked themselves with an inseparable twist of fingers on his robust back" (*The Secret Agent* 230).

[23] Not at all ironic but interesting is Martin Ray's observation that Brett Street is the perfect address for *The Secret Agent* because "its lack of illumination is […] appropriate for Winnie Verloc, whose sole philosophy of survival is that 'things don't bear looking into very much'" (198).

This is so impressive because Conrad does not cease to remind the reader that Ossipon is a strong man. We are already told about his "robust legs" (*The Secret Agent* 44) when we meet him first. The term "robust" is repeated throughout the novel in the same way that Winnie's eyes are, which stresses the importance of his strength. It is also used in various combinations like "the robust Ossipon" (*The Secret Agent* 58), "robust form" (*The Secret Agent* 241), or various mentions of him being a "robust anarchist" (for example, *The Secret Agent* 219, 221, or 229). Winnie being able to hold Ossipon against his will therefore illustrates her remarkable physical power.

It is interesting that Winnie's appearance only starts to be described negatively when she almost loses her mind mourning Stevie, for example when "the resemblance of her face with that of her brother [grows] at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes" (*The Secret Agent* 212). Her pretty appearance is soon overshadowed by the ugliness that fear and terror awake in Ossipon's perception of her. Alexander Ossipon, "nicknamed the Doctor, ex-medical student without a degree" (*The Secret Agent* 46) and firm believer of erroneous medical theories that a person's "degeneracy" can be read from said person's looks, suddenly believes to see only signs of inferiority and madness in the woman he had shamelessly flirted with: "He gazed at her cheeks, at her nose, at her eyes, at her ears…. Bad!... Fatal! […H]e gazed also at her teeth…. […] a murdering type" (*The Secret Agent* 239). After he learns of Verloc's death, Ossipon experiences her lips as "cold" and believes them to "move[…] creepily on his very ear" (*The Secret Agent* 230). The woman he was interested in turns into a "savage woman" (*The Secret Agent* 232) and worse: "He saw the woman twined around him like a snake, not to be shaken off. She was not deadly. She was death itself […]" (*The Secret Agent* 234).

However, we must not forget that Ossipon is an unreliable character who has no knowledge of human nature and instead relies on questionable scientific theories. The only time we can trust him without doubt is when he comments on Winnie being a killer: "'I wouldn't have believed it possible,' he muttered. 'Nobody would.'" (*The Secret Agent* 232).

It is not unrealistic that Winnie's impression on others changes drastically, though, because she is a contradictory character throughout the novel. She is described as a "calm, self-contained character" (*The Secret Agent* 128) that "dislike[s] controversy" (*The Secret Agent* 144) but "she [is also] not a submissive creature" (The Secret Agent 200) and calls one of Verloc's friends "a disgusting old man" (*The Secret Agent* 56) without any hesitation in a conversation with her husband.

I already quoted Winnie's belief that looking into things is harmful, and explained that this mistake of hers destroyed her whole family. Since it is such an important part of Winnie's personality as well as a significant element of the story, we will have to learn from her mistake and look into this element in more detail. The text explicitly reminds us of this conviction of hers in different parts of the novel as well as through her actions and to the point that Winnie looks ignorant towards the world around her. Winnie even stays true to her conviction when her mother leaves the family. Winnie feels betrayed but does not try to discover the older woman's motive. If she had bothered to do so, she could have saved her mother. Before her departure Winnie could also have noticed her mother only picking the cheapest of furniture to take with her, but this "passe[s] unacknowledged, because Winnie's philosophy consist[s] in not taking notice of the inside of facts" (*The Secret Agent* 129).

Because of this belief of hers Winnie makes her first mistake even before she marries Verloc. In chapter 1 there is a flashback to when he tells her that "[h]is work [is] in a way political" and that she will have "to be very nice to his political friends" (*The Secret Agent* 16). It seems like madness not to ask in what way a job could be political, especially when one is warned to be especially friendly towards somebody's friends. Remembering Winnie's wish to create a safe home for Stevie, it is reasonable to believe that she would have married Verloc even if she had known about him being a spy. However, it would have changed her behaviour during the time span of Verloc's despair after his visit to the embassy, which could have saved all of them. It makes one of the narrator's descriptions of her belief not to look into things, not only ironic but cruel since he is clearly mocking the ending of her life: "Mrs Verloc wasted no portion of this transient life in seeking for fundamental information. This is a sort of economy having all the appearances and some of the advantages of prudence. Obviously it may be good for one not to know too much" (*The Secret Agent* 141). The ending of the novel clearly negates this statement. It is also interesting that Winnie's physical resemblance to her bother is stunning but their beliefs differ greatly, i.e. Stevie "wish[es] to go to the bottom of the matter", while she "put[s] her trust in face values" (*The Secret Agent* 144).

Surprisingly, for somebody not looking into things too much, Winnie cares about what people think about her home. "Whatever people'll think of us – you throwing yourself like this on a Charity?" (*The Secret Agent* 133) Winnie asks her mother when she leaves the household to take one burden off Verloc's shoulders. However, Winnie's heartless treatment of her mother can partly be blamed on Winnie's fear that Verloc could be angered. The novel never shows her caring about what other people think of her but she always tries to be the

perfect wife to Verloc, in order to assure that he allows Stevie to stay. Therefore it is reasonable to suppose that she does not want other people to think badly of Verloc as the head of their family, which could blemish his reputation in a job that is "in a way political" (*The Secret Agent* 16). Her harshness is also connected to Stevie directly. She is literally pouting before confronting her mother with the fact that "[t]hat poor boy will miss [her] something cruel" (*The Secret Agent* 136). It would be unfair to think that Winnie does not care for her mother at all, though. When the old woman tells Winnie about her plan to leave the house for good, "[t]he shock of the information [is] so unexpected that Mrs Verloc, against her usual practice when addressed, interrupt[s] the domestic occupation she [is] engaged upon" (*The Secret Agent* 128). Winnie even asks her once why she desires to leave, but does not seem interested in the answer after all because she wants to know how her mother managed to get into an almshouse before the old woman answers her. She is also ignorant of her mother's fear, which is visible both when the old woman tells her about her plan and when she is walking towards the cab that will bring her to the almshouse. The very fact that her mother is afraid to tell her the truth, is a sign of their estrangement. It is also visible during the cab ride, when Winnie says after a stubborn silence: "You've done what you wanted, mother. You'll have only yourself to thank for if you aren't happy afterwards" (*The Secret Agent* 133). She is not only blind to her mother's scared behavior, she also blames her for her future unhappiness, instead of offering the solution that she may return to the house in Brett Street if she wishes to[24]. Winnie nevertheless cares somehow because she tells her mother not to worry twice when the old woman despairs when thinking of not being able to see Stevie anymore. Furthermore, before they mount the cab, Winnie arranges her mother's collar properly. We are also told that she misses her mother "very much" (*The Secret Agent* 145) during a dinner after her departure.

Although Winnie is married to an anarchist, she is not one of them. She only shares a few opinions with them, e.g. that policemen "are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have" (*The Secret Agent* 144). While Stevie is shaken by the injustice of the political system, Winnie has accepted it. This is shown best when she answers his "Beastly!" with a passionless "Nobody can help that" (*The Secret Agent* 143). She is also against Verloc selling F.P.[25] tracts, which would be unlikely for an anarchist, even though the leaflets do not sell well and rouse Stevie's temperament.

I already mentioned that Winnie, afraid that her brother might end up in one of the miserable workhouses, sacrifices her happiness and marries a man she does not love but of

[24] Biles goes as far as to claim that Winnie "attempts to wash her hands of her mother's affair" (102).
[25] The F.P. are an anarchist society called "The Future of the Proletariat" (*The Secret Agent* 31).

whom she expects a secure home for her whole family[26]. During the Edwardian era women still counselled their daughters to tolerate sex with their husbands as best as they could. These unhappy relationships led to the belief that only "light women" could enjoy sexual intercourse (Cecil 161). Verloc therefore cannot link Winnie's lack of sexual desire to her indifference towards him and believes that his wife loves him. After all, "for every angel in the house there was a God on the premises too" (Dickerson xvii). His inability to understand the true reason of their marriage is one of the reasons that lead to his destruction because Winnie is not compassionate towards him. The way she acts towards her husband in various scenes makes one wonder if she has become too confident in her role. We never see Winnie hugging Verloc when he returns home or kiss him goodbye when he leaves for his journeys. Her conversations with him are cold or neutral at best and often the sentences spoken to Verloc are reduced to the bare minimum. For example, her "usual brief manner" of calling him to supper is a simple "Adolf" (*The Secret Agent* 145). These limited interactions are partly rooted in her lack of affection for Verloc but also in her personality because Winnie is "a woman of very few words" (*The Secret Agent* 199), "temperamentally a silent person" (*The Secret Agent* 200) and "always undemonstrative and silent" (*The Secret Agent* 205).[27] We know that she does not simply ignore Verloc all the time because "she had lived [with him] without distaste for seven years [… and] she had grown accustomed [to him] in body and mind" (*The Secret Agent* 202). Why is their marriage never happy then?

Conrad wants to tell us that there was often an "unbridgeable gap between the period's domestic ideals[28] and domestic realities" (Shaffer, *Domestic* 314). Moreover, "in *The Secret Agent* [he] pointedly debunks the notion of 'home' as a locus of security and affection" (Jones 64). To properly appreciate this, we have to remember that "[t]he home was 'other', a narrow and colonized female space that existed in opposition to and in support of the master space, that place outside the home where the business of making a living took place [...]" (Dickerson xiv). But "Conrad collapses the absolute Victorian distinction between home and world, private and public domains, and familial and commercial values by situating Winnie's past and present abodes in places of business. Whether it is her mother's Belgravian boarding house [...] or her present domicile [...]" (Shaffer, *Domestic* 318). In other words, Winnie not only works in public spheres but they are literally a part of her homes since both work places

[26] To John Batchelor Winnie is a humanist because she "find[s] the highest value in another human being", namely her brother Stevie (*Life* 159).
[27] The text repeats this trace of her personality because it goes hand in hand with her feeling that things do not stand looking into. After all, a talkative person would sooner or later be forced to see beneath the surface, if only by accident.
[28] Conrad disapproved of any form of idealism, not only the one connected to private spaces (Ross 195).

are either the same rooms or inseparable from her private chambers[29]. It is important to understand that this collapse in Winnie's case means that her job as seller of shady wares becomes indistinguishable with her other "job" as Stevie's protector, for whom she also becomes a seller, namely of her body. Her mother unknowingly supports this "contract" by uttering lines like: "If you had not found such a good husband, […] I don't know what would have become of that poor boy." (*The Secret Agent* 41). The old woman does not understand that Stevie is the reason for the marriage in the first place. Winnie, on the other hand, understands her marriage as a contract to keep her brother safe. With the years going by and her plan seemingly working out perfectly, she considers their relationship as a kind of "security growing into confidence, [which turns] into a domestic feeling, [which is] stagnant and deep like a placid pool, whose guarded surface hardly shudder[s]" (*The Secret Agent* 198). "Mrs Verloc's philosophical, almost disdainful incuriosity [… is] the foundation of their accord in domestic life" (*The Secret Agent* 193) but it is also the reason for its ruin because "[t]heir accord [is] perfect, but it [is] not precise. It [is] a tacit accord, congenial to Mrs Verloc's incuriosity and to Mr Verloc's habits of mind, which [are] indolent and secret" (*The Secret Agent* 199). When both partners in a relationship are unwilling to look into things, unspoken problems are bound to turn into catastrophes. It also means that these partners never fully grasp the mind of the other, which "introduce[s …] a certain element of vagueness into their intimacy" (*The Secret Agent* 199). Moser even claims that "the Verlocs are morally so isolated from each other as to be utter strangers" (94). This is best illustrated by a scene in their bedroom: "[… Verloc] beheld his wife re-enter the room and get into bed in a calm, business-like manner which made him feel hopelessly lonely in the world" (*The Secret Agent* 55).

Herbert Tingsten writes about the dichotomy that wives were expected to dislike sex and just yield to their husbands' lust while the belief in the biblical temptress was still alive, too (56f). We can find the former concept in Conrad's Winnie, who understands her marriage as a contract only, and who is used as a tool to argue against this old-fashioned belief. She ends tragically because her sexuality is remote from any feeling and her husband is not aware of this fact. Actually, her marriage only lasts seven years because Verloc's understanding of marriage is devoid of deep connections as well. He is satisfied with finding "at home the ease of his body and the peace of his conscience, together with Mrs Verloc's wifely attentions" (*The Secret Agent* 15), which on the surface seem perfect. Verloc is dutifully presented with tea or food and Winnie even brings him the breakfast tray to the bed in the morning, so he can

[29] Her home in Brett Street No. 32 can only be entered by passing through the shop because there is only one entrance door.

rest longer. There is a fire to warm him and the house is always clean[30]. We also see her warning him not to catch a cold in chapters 3 and 8, and she obeys his order "to be very nice to his political friends" (*The Secret Agent* 16). However, when one looks beneath the surface, the imperfections of her perfectly respectable attentions are visible. For instance, when she finds her husband "sitting […] shadowy and bulky" (*The Secret Agent* 40) in their shop after he was instructed to carry out a bomb attack, she ignores his terrible mood and simply returns to the stove instead of talking to him. Although he does not move for an hour and a half, she does not show any kindness and she does not ask about his problems, not even when she is finally "impressed" by his lasting silence (*The Secret Agent* 40). Actually, the lines about this seemingly unimportant neglect of wifely attentions represent the exact moment in which the tragedy of the Verlocs is set in motion. If Winnie had acted against her belief, "that things do not stand much looking into" (*The Secret Agent* 147), Verloc might have poured his heart out to her before the thought of using Stevie to carry out the bomb attack even crossed his mind.

Winnie is unaware of her limitations as a wife and judges her success on grounds of Verloc's continued loyalty and her workforce in the house. We see her clean, support her husband in their shop and prepare food and drink for him before he can even ask for it. For an outsider she appears to be the perfect partner and the narrator calls her "an experienced wife" (*The Secret Agent* 55), too. This leads to her being "a very self-confident wife" (*The Secret Agent* 135). She does not have many reasons to doubt herself, either, because her husband "appreciate[s] this woman" and even after seven years of marriage "[t]he sight of his wife [is still] agreeable to Mr Verloc" (*The Secret Agent* 56).

However, Winnie does not have children of her own, which would have caused people to frown upon her during the Victorian era because having many children was seen as an evidence of a successful marriage (D'Cruze 256). Her wedding happened before Queen Victoria's death but there is no instance in the story, that would hint at her caring for what people thought about her childlessness. On the contrary, even though the text tells us that "Winnie was a most devoted sister" (*The Secret Agent* 135), her feelings for her brother are clearly those of a mother[31]. She says so herself, when she claims that he was her own while telling Ossipon about her tragedy: "He was much more mine than mother's. I sat up nights and nights with him on my lap, […] when I wasn't more than eight years old myself. And then – He was mine, I tell you" (*The Secret Agent* 222). A claim she repeats with even more conviction, when she describes the last moments of Verloc's life: "He had been telling me

[30] Interestingly, she does not do all the cleaning on her own but pays a certain Mrs. Neale, a charwoman, to lend her a hand.
[31] Conrad himself calls her feelings for Stevie "maternal passion" in his "Author's Note" from 1920 (*The Secret Agent* 10).

that nothing could touch him. After taking the boy away from under my very eyes to kill him – the loving, innocent, harmless lad. My own, I tell you. He was lying on the couch quite easy – after killing the boy – my boy" (*The Secret Agent* 233). Her motherly feelings are understandable when we remember that she not only "attend[ed] to the boy's hands and face herself" (*The Secret Agent* 40) but also "carr[ied] him off to bed with her" (*The Secret Agent* 144) when he was a depressed child. Moreover, "before the natural outbursts of impatience on the part of his father he could always, in his childhood's days, run for protection behind the short skirts of his sister Winnie" (*The Secret Agent* 17). Even as an adult she is protecting Stevie with so much passion that it is physically visible, for example when "[t]hat ardour of protecting compassion exalted morbidly in her childhood by the misery of another child tinge[s] her sallow cheeks with a faint dusky blush, [and makes] her big eyes gleam" (*The Secret Agent* 56).

The term "[t]hat boy" (*The Secret Agent* 41), that is used for Stevie between Winnie and her mother, strengthens her feelings of him being her son as well. And like a mother, Winnie knows tricks to influence Stevie into behaving the way she wants him to. For instance, when she claims that Stevie has to look after her on their way back from the almshouse, when in reality she wants him to take special care of himself. It works, too, since "[t]his appeal to manly protection [is] received by Stevie with his usual docility" because it "flatter[s] him" (*The Secret Agent* 141). She also feels the same kind of pride that mothers in unhappy marriages feel when they look at their children and tend to overlook their weaknesses: "She saw him amiable, attractive, affectionate, and only a little, a very little peculiar. And she could not see him otherwise, for he was connected with what there was of the salt of passion in her tasteless life – the passion of indignation, of courage, of pity, and even of self-sacrifice" (*The Secret Agent* 144f).

Children were meant to pay back the care and affection given to them during their childhood later in life (D'Cruze 260) but Winnie never expects anything of Stevie. The novel repeatedly reminds us that she is his "guardian and protector" (for example, *The Secret Agent* 212) and it even compares Stevie's importance to her to the sun, when his loss overpowers her: "She kept still as the population of half the globe would keep still in astonishment and despair, were the sun suddenly put out […]" (*The Secret Agent* 233). She not only loves her brother truly but adores him to an extent that she feels guilty when she still wants to live after his death. Her disappointment in herself is best shown through her own words when she utters: "How could I fear to die after he was taken away from me so cruelly! How could I! How

could I be such a coward! […] How could I be so afraid of death! Tom, I tried! But I am afraid. I tried to do away with myself. And I couldn't" (*The Secret Agent* 233).

It also seems that the affection she feels for Ossipon, which she never allows herself to show before the death of her husband, is aroused by his interest in Stevie. There is no reason to doubt her words when she confesses: "You took a lot of notice of him, Tom. I loved you for it" (*The Secret Agent* 239). She does not understand that it is the "scientific" interest of a failed medical student for an object of study that makes the man nicknamed "the Doctor" observe Stevie more than others. Winnie has a "special sense of sisterly devotion developed in her earliest infancy" (*The Secret Agent* 141) that makes her understand her brother's emotions, but she lacks a knowledge of human nature in general and therefore is not aware of the true reasons behind the actions of the people around her.

Although her infatuation with Ossipon starts long before the day of the bomb attack[32], Winnie never gives him any hope for an affair before Verloc's death. She is always aware of her status as a married woman in the public sphere of the workplace as well and refuses any kind of flirtation. "Steady-eyed like her husband, she preserve[s] an air of unfathomable indifference behind the rampart of the counter" (*The Secret Agent* 14) and she even creates a special look for the casual costumer in their shop of "shady wares" (The Secret Agent 15), namely a "fixed, unabashed stare and [a] stony expression" (*The Secret Agent* 165).

It is not strange to think of her having admirers since the novel tells us about Winnie's charms like "her youth; her full, rounded form; her clear complexion; [and] the provocation of her unfathomable reserve". Winnie is aware of her beauty and she heightens it by wearing "a tight bodice" and a "neat and artistic arrangement of her glossy dark hair" (*The Secret Agent* 14f). She also knows how to use her sexuality when she twists Verloc around her finger. For instance, one night when he is not responding to her talks about Stevie being useful, she "turn[s] towards her recumbent husband, raise[s] herself on her elbow, and [hangs] over him" (*The Secret Agent* 56). However, the moment she has his attention, she only goes on talking. An even more explicit example is the scene in which Winnie uses her sexuality to stop Verloc from making plans to emigrate:

> Winnie leaned on his shoulder from behind, and pressed her lips to his forehead. […] With his features swollen and an air of being drugged, he followed his wife's movements with his eyes. […] She turned her head over her shoulder and gave that man […] a glance, half arch, half cruel, out of her large eyes – a glance of which the Winnie of the Belgravian mansion days would have been incapable, because of her

[32] We learn of Winnie's interest in Ossipon as early as in chapter 3 when we are told that she always feels "uneasy" in his presence (*The Secret Agent* 56), while chapter 11 still claims that her "domestic feeling" only "hardly shudder[s] on the occasional passage of Comrade Ossipon" (*The Secret Agent* 198).

> respectability and her ignorance. But the man was her husband now, and she was no longer ignorant. (*The Secret Agent* 160f)

Selling her body to Verloc is considered respectable because they are married but her respectability is completely lost when she throws herself at Ossipon after the killing of her husband. At this point Winnie literally degrades herself to the level of a prostitute[33]: "'[…] I'll work for you. I'll slave for you. I'll love you [… and] I won't ask you to marry me,' she breathe[s] out in shamefaced accents" (*The Secret Agent* 233). The situation escalates quickly but when Winnie first meets Ossipon on the street, he is the one who initiates physical contact and "[t]o his astonishment she [comes] quite easily, and even rest[s] on his arm for a moment before she attempt[s] to disengage herself" (*The Secret Agent* 219). She jumps at this unexpected possibility of salvation and with the confidence of a woman married for seven years "[s]he slip[s] her hand under his arm" (*The Secret Agent* 220) in an attempt to influence Ossipon in the same way she has done with Verloc. Although she is "flinging herself at him" (*The Secret Agent* 225) within minutes, she still has self-esteem at this point, which can be seen by her shocked reaction to his claim that he cannot bring her to his place: "But you must. Don't you care for me at all – at all?" (*The Secret Agent* 226). It is a far cry to her groveling on the ground and "clinging round his legs" (*The Secret Agent* 234) not much later. She has become what Leavis calls a "fallen woman" (167) – metaphorically and literally. Shaffer supposes that Winnie's image as a "woman-for-hire" starts right at the beginning of her story in the novel because "her eroticized description […] invites comparison with […] a pornographic picture", showing a dancing-girl that is for sale at the Verlocs' shop of shady wares (*Commerce* 458). Yuet May Ching even believes that the reader is supposed to compare her with meat[34] since her body is for sale, too, and reminds us that Winnie's former suitor was a butcher boy, which highlights this theory (42).

We have seen that Winnie gives her body and labour to Verloc because "marriage is a 'trade' – an exchange of domestic labour for the means of subsistence" (Shaffer, *Domestic* 314). However, in Winnie's case she did not make this trade for herself. On the contrary, she could have lived a happy life with a man she loved because "[his] business was good, and his prospects excellent" (*The Secret Agent* 42). She did it because Verloc was willing to care for the rest of her family as well, something that the butcher's son could not or refused to do. Her

[33] Even the moralistic people of the nineteenth-century understood that prostitution was the result of poverty and not insatiable sexual desire (Shaffer, *Commerce* 457). This is true for Winnie throughout the novel but in the case of her attempted seduction of Ossipon, her fear of poverty is mixed with her sheer will to live and the crippling fear of the gallows. Harrington therefore is right when she states that Winnie's "immoral behavior is a direct result of her limited options as a woman unable to make her own way in the world" (Wife 56).

[34] Frederick R. Karl sees the symbolism of meat on a larger scale when he describes the Verlocs' household as "a group that cannibalize[s] itself [sic]" (592).

reason for accepting Verloc's proposal was the "security for Stevie [which was] loyally paid for on her part" (*The Secret Agent* 198). Therefore Stevie's death means the termination of this unspoken contract, while Verloc is not even aware of it because he is lost in "the idealistic [but completely mistaken] belief in being loved for himself" (*The Secret Agent* 232). With Stevie gone, Winnie has no reason to stay with Verloc and for a moment she feels liberated like a "free woman" (*The Secret Agent* 204). However, since she has never been released of the burden as caretaker before[35], she does not know how to act accordingly. Therefore, when Verloc tells the leaving Winnie that it is too late so see her mother, Winnie sits down immediately, although she had not even meant to see her. It is another proof of how deeply shaken she is because we already know that "she [is] not a submissive creature" (*The Secret Agent* 200).

Although Winnie suffers from a severe shock after she learns of her brother's death, she does not murder Verloc in cold blood. The killing happens because Verloc, unaware of the grave impact of his words, refuses to leave Winnie alone to cope with her breakdown. It is a fatal mistake since Winnie was already about to lose her mind before she went upstairs to dress for leaving Verloc forever. We can see this by the repetition of one fundamental idea: "This man took the boy away to murder him. He took the boy from his home to murder him. He took the boy away from me to murder him!" The text strengthens the idea of her going insane because of this epiphany by stating that "Mrs Verloc's whole being [is] racked by that inconclusive and maddening thought. It [is] in her veins, in her bones, in the roots of her hair [… Moreover,] her teeth [are] violently clenched, and her tearless eyes [are] hot with rage" (*The Secret Agent* 200). Once she even mutters at the whitewashed wall she has stared at like a crazed woman during Verloc's talk about the embassy. The already dangerous situation is aggravated by Verloc losing his patience and blaming Winnie for the death of Stevie: "[…I]f you will have it that I killed the boy, then you've killed him as much as I" (*The Secret Agent* 209). Since Winnie has shoved Stevie towards Verloc relentlessly and claimed that he would do anything for him, she has all the reasons to believe this accusation in the mental state she is in[36]. When her husband eventually begs her to come to him in a tone that is "intimately known to Mrs Verloc as the note of wooing" (*The Secret Agent* 212), she snaps[37]. In a moment of complete mental incapacity she grabs the carving knife and kills Verloc.

[35] Harrington writes that Stevie's death "destroys" Winnie's identity (Offender 62). In other words, when her burden is taken from her, everything that defines her as person is torn from her at the same time.
[36] To Biles Winnie is a "causative agent, [who] functions initiatively [… while] Verloc [is an agent, who functions] merely operatively" (102). Although Winnie wants only the best for her brother, her schemes end in his destruction and therefore "love becomes a destructive rather than a redeeming force" (Wiley 116).
[37] Reminiscent of Stevie's death through a bomb, Leavis describes the outcome of her shock as "a sudden explosion" (165).

Winnie shows symptoms of psychological disturbances long before she loses her brother. Soyka explains that often the emotions of people suffering from schizophrenia are weak at best. Sometimes the mentally ill even seem autistic because there is no or only little motive power within them. Furthermore, some psychosis may occur acutely and may be accompanied by hallucinations or compulsive acts (12). "Winnie [is] always undemonstrative and silent" (*The Secret Agent* 204f), she never looks into things properly and before the killing it is as if Stevie's soul has entered her body. Conrad gives us other clues to decide whether Winnie is mentally ill throughout the novel. Long before Stevie's death the text tells us of the startling similarity of the siblings. Stevie is shown to be and is called half-witted[38] various times, so Winnie's resemblance to her brother is telling. While we can blame reactions like her staring at the wall on the lingering shock of the revelation of her brother's death, Winnie's description during the act of killing leaves no room for arguments: "As if the homeless soul of Stevie had flown for shelter straight to the breast of his sister, guardian and protector, the resemblance of her face with that of her brother grew at every step, even to the droop of the lower lip, even to the slight divergence of the eyes" (*The Secret Agent* 212). Now the line about the siblings' likeness being "so profound as to strike the casual passers-by" (*The Secret Agent* 142) gains new meaning as it hints at mental disabilities being part of Winnie's DNA, albeit less dominant and only triggered by shock and mourning. The ongoing shock boosted by Verloc's words triggers Winnie's mental disease and she eventually kills her husband. The deed is tragic because Winnie is free to leave Verloc after Stevie's death and almost does. However, Conrad abuses the image of the New Woman for his ironic storytelling when he liberates Winnie only for the shortest amount of time. She rejects the passive role she had accepted for Stevie's sake and achieves complete independence (Moran 146), but her feelings of utter freedom do not last, and "the New Woman Winnie is depicted instead as degenerating into a 'savage woman' who remains as dependent on men and chained to housekeeping as the old Winnie ever was" (Shaffer, *Domestic* 314). Her fear of being hanged drives her into the arms of the first man who seems to fit the role of protector, namely her husband's friend Ossipon, whom she promises to give her whole life in exchange. Although her panic forces her to reject the self-determined life of a New Woman, her death ironically links her to them because the suicide of the heroine is typical of New Woman plots[39], which can be found even in the most successful novel of its kind, i.e. *The Woman Who Did* (Moran 125). Winnie is most afraid of "[...] the gallows, the ultimate enforcers of the law,

[38] Comrade Ossipon goes as far to think of the world "degenerate" (*The Secret Agent* 239).
[39] The New Woman fiction (1880s and 1890s) was a genre that emerged from social concerns and confronted traditional views about sexuality and gender roles (Moran 124).

[which] hovered in the imagination of Englishmen in the eighteenth century [ ... as they were supposed to] frighten spectators away from evil courses" (Hollingsworth 3). Although Winnie is living in a different century, all she can think of right after the killing of Verloc are the gallows. The freedom which she believes to have gained quickly turns into horror. Her fear is understandable but unreasonable because class was an important factor at trials and middle-class women were not commonly hanged. If there were circumstances which moved people, the risk of being hanged was further reduced, too (V. Morris, *Jeopardy* 30f). Winnie therefore does not commit suicide because of the gallows but because she fears life on her own. Her will to protect her family had forced her to act but after Verloc's death there are no ties left that could have supported her since her mother is living in an almshouse already. Winnie, who has never left the country, may not even be a citizen of England anymore because a woman's citizenship was often determined by whom she married. This fact culminated in the law of 1870, which robbed all wives of foreigners of their citizenship no matter if they had been born in Great Britain or not (Dolan 259). The horror of Winnie being all alone in a hostile world is even more menacing when we consider this fact because Verloc's claim to be English is dubious when we look at his heritage. Although Winnie's mother "consider[s] herself to be of French descent" (*The Secret Agent* 15), there obviously are no relatives on the continent to whom Winnie could flee for shelter. Ossipon may never know whether Winnie's suicide is an "*act of madness or despair*" (*The Secret Agent* 246), but we know that it is both.

## 5) *Unnatural Death's* Mary Whittaker

"'I don't think I've ever met a more greedy and heartless murderer. She probably thought that anyone who inconvenienced her had no right to exist.'" (*Unnatural Death* 297). Detective Inspector Parker of Scotland Yard is harsh in his description of Mary but he is right when he refuses to show sympathy for this offender. It therefore seems odd that the main character of the novel, Lord Peter Wimsey, shows sympathy when Mary faces her ultimate demise. It is this dichotomy in perception that makes this character interesting, even though she looks like the average villain at first. There is far less literature about Mary than about the other two killing women I have dealt with, but like Becky and Winnie she is a fascinating character and not only a tool to sell more copies. After all, Kenney describes it perfectly when she states that Sayer's detective fiction is "an exploration of the mystery of human nature" (270). Let us try to solve one of her puzzles.

## 5a) The creation of Mary Whittaker

Even though Mary is one of the most fascinating villains in detective fiction, she does not get the attention she deserves. Maybe even her creator was ignorant of the brilliance of her character because in contrast to Thackeray, who continued Becky's story in a letter to a curious reader, Dorothy L. Sayers did not invent additional stories for Mary. Sayers believed that everything the reader needs to know is to be found in her texts (Hitchman 85). I beg to differ because looking at the life of the author enriches any scholarly reading experience.[40] Although it seems curious that one is reminded of the likeable author while reading about her evil creation, they were both "very particular" (*Unnatural Death* 111) and often one can find telling similarities. Simple facts like the ones that Sayers was large (Hitchman 170) and had dark hair like Mary or that Mary's father was a clergyman while Sayers was the daughter of Reverend Henry Sayers are interesting but not as fascinating as the shared personality traits which I want to present next. For instance, Sayers wore clothes intended for men unironically[41] and doing so kept her tomboyish femininity, while Mary disguising herself comes across as manly because "she look[s], in an exotic smoking-suit of embroidered tissue, like a young prince" (*Unnatural Death* 179). It is not the effect that ought to be of interest here but the fact that Sayers chooses her criminal to wear fashion closer to her heart instead of Miss Climpson, the amateur sleuth who helps to discover the truth. It is proof that the author sympathises with her creation, which strengthens my theory of Mary being based at least partly on Sayers herself.

Sayers' feminism is a feminism of individuality[42] and her belief in the importance of the individual enables us to negate any ideas of her creating her murderess as a lesbian to make her more disgusting for her contemporaries. We shall see this in the next chapter when I elaborate on the fact that Mary is witty and attractive as was her lesbian great-aunt Agatha

[40] Trevor Henry Hall may talk about a seminar he once attended, in which he was told that "to understand Dorothy L. Sayers as a writer it is a waste of time 'to ferret among the details of her personal life'" (1) but I have to reject this statement. I appreciate Virginia B. Morris, though, who states that Sayers must have read various works of psychological theory about deviant behavior when she created characters like Mary because at her time there were fewer cases "based on homosexual […] evidence" (*Arsenic* 488).

[41] Sayers looked smart in the suits she always wore along with a tie and cuff links (Hitchman 170). It is not an outfit one would expect for a woman of her times but perfectly fits the image of a feminist sure of herself and her femininity, even though some of her items were literally mistaken for those of a man's like a certain forgotten hat that led to some confusion (Gilbert 17).

[42] Susan Haack states that in Sayers' case "individualist" means "valuing the individuality of individual human beings, […] and [that it] carries no connotation of every-man-for-himself-ism" and that for Sayers "women [too] are individuals, each one different", before elaborating that Sayers rejects radical feminism by insisting that there is no woman's point of view and "deliberately play[ing] down the idea of women as a class, category, or group" (12f). Sayers explicitly warns us of the dangers inherent in the wrong understanding of feminism: "It used to be said […] that women had no *esprit de corps*; we have proved that we have – do not let us run into the opposite error of insisting that there is an aggressively feminist 'point of view' about everything" (qtd. in Haack 14).

Dawson, and good at her job as her lesbian relative Clara Whittaker. Sayers has one of her lesbian couples live happily for a long while, which is best illustrated by the account of Mrs. Coblin, who has been in the Dawson family's service since she was a girl: "Often [Agatha] used to say to me, 'Betty,' she said, 'I mean to be an old maid and so does Miss Clara, and we're going to live together and be ever so happy […]' And so it turned out […]" (*Unnatural Death* 146). Through the creation of two juxtaposed lesbian couples Sayers allows her readers to understand queer people as being part of the whole spectrum of humanity as we experience the most toxic, selfish, and evil lesbian relationship within the same story as the healthiest, altruistic, and kindest. Lesbians for Sayers can be good or bad and in case of Vera both, but not a group of people only defined by their sexual orientation,[43] a trap authors happen to fall into even today.

It is difficult to talk about Sayers' sexual orientation but we know of her marriage to Oswald Atherton "Mac" Flemming as well as her infatuation with at least two of her teachers at the Godolphin. Barbara Reynolds writes about young Dorothy not being afraid to tell people about her feelings towards a certain Miss White and that "[th]ere was a clear case of *schwärmerei*" which other pupils shared and of which the teacher was well aware. Reynolds links this episode of Sayers' life to *Unnatural Death,* in which Miss Climpson considers this kind of passionate idolisation normal in schoolgirls, yet unwanted in matured women, and concludes that this could as well be Sayers' belief. Moreover, the adoration of Fräulein Fehmer, Sayers' piano teacher, turned into a long lasting friendship that was not tainted by the turmoil of war, which can be seen not only by Sayers sending her copies of her books whenever they were published but also by writing a loving tribute[44] to her as well as a poem called "Target Area" (30f). Janet Hitchman, on the other hand, claims that there is no evidence that Sayers was in love with another female and that, if she had noticed such feelings, she would have fought against them because of her religious upbringing (44). Whatever her own infatuations may have meant, she refuses to punish her lesbians for their sexuality.[45] The elder lesbian couple is allowed to have a fulfilling relationship without any condemnation by the author. It is Mary's greed that leads to her downfall, not her sexual orientation. In the case of her lover, it is toxic idolization of another person that destroys her, not the gender of the idol in question. Sayers did not make one of her most terrible offenders a lesbian out of spite.

[43] By creating each character as a distinct individual Sayers also avoids cliché (V. Morris, *Arsenic* 485).
[44] It is interesting to note that Sayers mentions Fräulein Fehmer's dark hair and strong hands, which can both be found in Mary's description as well.
[45] Virginia B. Morris believes that Sayers not only refuses to condemn the presented sexuality but "uses it to demonstrate the popular biases that defined the role of the woman criminal both in fiction an in life" (*Arsenic* 485). Therefore it is important to read Mary's story against that of her happy lesbian relatives (Rowland 163).

She is too gifted a craftsman to miss the opportunity of giving the reader new information during the costume scene, in which a disguised Mary is so disgusted by kissing a man that she destroys her whole scheme. This part of the novel is hilarious and combines Lord Peter's wit with his larger than life ego. This scene might even be the original reason for Mary being a lesbian, before Sayers – in contrast to what Hitchman believes – created two lesbian couples to reinforce what she already made clear through her openminded feminism[46], namely that we as human beings are individuals who belong to certain groups but are not ultimately defined by them. As mentioned above, it is typical of Sayers to create a woman who is clever, strong, evil, and a lesbian but does not represent each and every woman who is clever, strong, evil, or a lesbian.

I already mentioned that Mary's first crime happens for money and Virginia B. Morris claims that this fact "suits the masculine role [Mary] adopts in her only romantic attachment" (*Arsenic* 489). Although I disapprove of the notion that financial matters were only men's business at Sayers' times (because women of the lower class had always had to help earn money), Morris is right when she sees Mary as the dominant partner and the one taking financial matters into her hands. This is important because even though Sayers married, she had to act as the breadwinner because "Mac's income scarcely covered his drinks" (Hitchman 74).

We may find the prototype of the toxic love that connects Vera to the abusive Mary in Sayers' affection for Eric Whelpton as "Dorothy threw herself at him, and got very little in exchange […, yet h]e was too much of a 'gentleman' to ignore her entirely" (Hitchman 52). And in the same way that Vera follows Mary on travels to give her an alibi, Sayers followed him to Les Roches in France because he needed an administrative assistant, even though he told her that he was in love with somebody else (Hitchman 53). Sayers might have regretted her blind dedication later on as she allows Vera to be terribly jealous when she sees Wimsey leave Mary's flat and believes him to be her lover. Moreover, during their alibi travels Vera has to spend time away from Mary, so the latter can go through with her schemes. Sayers, too, had to forego Whelpton's company but to a worse extent as "for all she saw of Eric he might have been in Timbuctoo" (Hitchman 53f). My theory is especially probable since Sayers quite possibly also started to create Lord Peter and other characters during this time (Papinchak 807).

[46] Margot Peters believes to read misogyny out of Sayers' depiction of women but completely ignores characters like Mary, who perfectly fit into her description of representation, i.e. women that are "self-sufficient [… and who] possess[…] a zest for life depending in no way on a man's support of approval" (152). Since Mary is a lesbian, it has to be stated that she does not need any woman to complete her happiness either.

Since Mary can only be arrested because she kills too often, it is possible to link her to all the real (and alleged) murderers that were doomed because of their lack of creativity and who are mentioned in the text, e.g. George Joseph Smith, William Palmer, Herbert Rowse, and the infamous duo Burke and Hare[47]. The first three supposedly killed at least one of their wives and the former two committed their crimes for money (McCrumb 95), which mirrors Mary's murder of her lover Vera and her longing for the heritage of her great-aunt's.

Furthermore, Sayers loved to act out stories she had invented herself during her lonely childhood years (Kenney 7), which can be connected to Mary's vivid imagination to create various masquerades that we will look at in more detail in the following chapter.

Last but not least, the author and her creation may even share the same interest in reading because Mary uses a mystery magazine called "The Black Mask" for one of her schemes, while Sayers "was a woman who teethed on melodrama, [and] who spent school holidays happily reading 'rubbish'" (Kenney 41).

**5b) "A more greedy and heartless murderer"**

At the beginning I have quoted the belief of a member of the executive in the story that Mary is the most heartless murderer he ever met. The fact that he is a successful professional and that at the moment of speaking he does not differentiate between murderers and murderesses is relevant. Hitchman, too, claims that she is "quite the nastiest of [Sayers'] villains" (44), and she *is* terrifying. After all, she not only kills people dangerous to her but also people close to her heart and even her own lover. "Greedy and malicious" (*Unnatural Death* 297), indeed. Yet it is of importance to appreciate that she is only turning into a serial killer because Wimsey tries to solve the case of her great-aunt's death. Mary possibly did not intend to kill anybody at first. She felt forced to only after hearing about changes in the law that would have taken from her what she believed to be her heritage – and indeed was hers according to the law she was familiar with. Therefore Mary murdered her terminally ill great-aunt before the new Property Act came into force in January, 1926.[48] She must have felt betrayed by British legislation yet again. The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 had criminalised all homosexual acts and the Vagrancy Act of 1898 had made homosexual importuning a criminal

[47] See McCrumbs, especially pages 95f and 98, for a description of the men mentioned and an explanation of how Sayers uses their names to echo the plot, to give her readers clues, and to make Wimsey and Parker look like real detectives with a broad professional knowledge.

[48] If Agatha Dawson had died under the new act without a will, her property would have been given to the Duchy of Lancaster, i.e. the crown, because Mary was only the granddaughter of Agatha's sister Harriet. Even though everybody calls her Agatha's niece, she therefore is only her great-niece and excluded from the succession.

offence (J. Black 10). Legalisation of homosexual acts came into being only after the passing of the Sexual Offences Act in 1981 and the discrimination against lesbians ended only in 1974, the same time in which legal and financial independence was granted to women (J. Black 121). A female who broke British law every time she had sex must have despised her country's legislation. This is by no means an excuse for her behaviour but knowing about her background makes her willingness to break the law more understandable. How much easier it must be to commit a crime when your very existence is believed to be a never ending offence. Moreover, her great-aunt wanted her to inherit her possessions and if the old lady's superstition had not prevented her from making a will, she would have lived. The act of killing a suffering and fatally ill person for the money s/he intended the killer to inherit is so important as Mary's first murder that Sayers has four different people look at it from three very distinct points of view. Lord Peter, who "really can't see that it's very much of a crime to bump a poor old thing off a bit previously when she's sufferin' horribly, just to get the money she intends you to have" (*Unnatural Death* 166), the solicitor Mr. Murbles, who observes that "[l]egally […] murder is murder, however frail the victim or convenient the result" (*Unnatural Death* 166), Detective-Inspector Parker, who is a defender of the law but also adds that "Agatha Dawson didn't want to die" (*Unnatural Death* 166), and the vicar Mr. Tredgold who believes that even cutting somebody's life short by a few hours is wrong because during that time "the soul may be undergoing some necessary part of its pilgrimage on earth" (*Unnatural Death* 235f) and that benefiting from that deed makes it worse as "[s]in is in the intention, not the deed" (*Unnatural Death* 236).

While people's opinions of the first murder differ, every murder afterwards is without doubt terrible. The most callous among them is the killing of Vera Findlater, who is in a relationship with Mary. We do not know what her feelings towards Vera truly are, but Miss Climpson describes them best when she writes to Lord Peter that she is "afraid none of us are above being *flattered* by such outspoken admiration" (*Unnatural Death* 84). Vera is madly in love with Mary and the latter surely is flattered by the absolute adoration she receives but never shows us emotions as powerful or even kind. Throughout the novel we only ever see Mary abuse Vera to achieve what she wants and manipulating her for the same reasons. However, considering Mary's personality, one must not disregard the idea that she would be able to kill somebody she cares about[49]. After all, love cannot grow without fertile soil to nourish from and for Vera Mary is better than any man and even "worth fifty of them"

[49] Catherine Kenny not only believes in Mary's love for Vera but even identifies "the destructive power of possessive love" as one of the themes of *Unnatural Death*, which makes the novel the first among Sayers' books to possess a well-developed theme (45).

(*Unnatural Death* 187). Her infatuation is so overpowering, that she does not even notice that the object of her love is influencing her while she is making the most personal choices. We can see this when Vera explains that she "mean[s] to be an old maid [… because] Mary and [herself] have quite decided that" (*Unnatural Death* 188), as if Vera is not able to decide her way in life on her own anymore. This behaviour contradicts Mary's otherwise feminist or supposedly male behaviour, since she "is acting out the stereotypical woman's role of emotional manipulator" (Kenney 139). This makes the relationship of the two young women terribly unbalanced, which ultimately leads to its ruin, because to Sayers a relationship has to be one of equality and understanding, no matter the gender of the couple (Kenney 156f). Therefore, Vera's insistence that "Mary and [she] are *absolutely* happy together" (*Unnatural Death* 189), sounds like a desperate attempt to convince herself of her non-existent happiness. Even at the time of her utterance the stressed word gives us a clear hint. While Mary's feelings remain dubious until the end, we know for certain the extent of Vera's love as she cries out that "Christian love means [… that] one's ready to die for the other person" (*Unnatural Death* 190f). What a hilarious moment of foreshadowing! After all, Vera Findlater's body is found later in the novel. It is also proof of Mary's mastery of manipulation.

That Mary cannot be categorised properly is one of the reasons that she is so interesting to look at. There is enough ambiguity to read her to one's own desires. One can easily doubt Kenney's reading of Mary's feelings as love because her behaviour after Vera's murder would seem out of character for a person in love, no matter how self-absorbed the lover may be. Vera's body has to be a horrid sight because even Wimsey thinks that "[i]t must have been a pretty heavy blow […] to smash the back of the skull in like that" (*Unnatural Death* 243). To not only kill your lover but to be able to disfigure her like this hints at a completely ruthless murderess. That she also let the body lie in the open to rot, with insects eating it up, adds to the horror. The fact that "[t]he flies rose up in a little cloud" (*Unnatural Death* 243) shows that Mary did not care how long it would take the corpse to be found, nor did she think of the relatives who could find Vera like this. It would have been a sign of humanity to at least cover the body with some kind of cloth – not clever but decent for a person supposedly in love with her victim. "When a woman is wicked and unscrupulous, […] she is the most ruthless criminal in the world – fifty times worse than a man, because she is always so much more single-minded about it" (*Unnatural Death* 256), claims Parker, and Wimsey adds that "[t]hey're not troubled with sentimentality, that's why, […] and we poor mutts of men stuff ourselves up with the idea that they're romantic and emotional"

(*Unnatural Death* 256). This correlates perfectly with Kelleher and Kelleher explaining that female serial killers are hardly ever motivated by desire and therefore more methodical (XI).

After the murder of Vera and the treatment of her corpse, it is hard to imagine that Mary could shock the readers even more and yet she manages to do so during a conversation with Miss Climpson. After the latter asks about Wimsey in disguise leaving Mrs. Forrest's flat, Mary jumps to the conclusion that Vera talked about the things she was supposed to be quiet about. She has murdered her lover but instead of feeling any remorse, she feels betrayed and angrily utters: "So that's it. Vera told you. The liar. I thought I had been quick enough" (*Unnatural Death* 280). More egotism is hardly imaginable.

It is even more difficult to understand the true nature of her feelings for her great-aunt. Since Mary murdered Agatha, it is tempting to say that her desire for money was of greater importance to her than the life of her great-aunt but one must not forget the state in which the latter was in. Her pain was terrible and she had no chance to survive the cancer that would have killed her within the next months if not sooner. Sayers has Wimsey wonder about the moral implications of euthanasia twice for a reason. Mary's guilt seems less grave when we imagine her as profiting from releasing a loved relative from pain. Considering the fact that Mary is a contradictory character throughout the novel, this reading of the murder is possible but the possibility is slim at best. One of the nurses, who happens to be the fiancée of Doctor Carr, claims that "[Agatha] got on better with [the nurse] than with Miss Whittaker" (*Unnatural Death* 100), which makes one wonder if Mary's behaviour towards her great-aunt was less affectionate than that of a stranger. Moreover, even Doctor Carr, who only thinks the best of Mary, reckons that "all this long-drawn-out business was getting on [Mary's] nerves" (*Unnatural Death* 10f). When Mr. Trigg meets her to explain the effects of the new Property Act, she looks "almost more annoyed than concerned" (*Unnatural Death* 206). On the other hand, when Mary forgets that she is impersonating someone else, she calls Agatha "Auntie" (*Unnatural Death* 207), which is important because she is not faking a caring great-niece at this moment but a woman not connected to her real self. You hardly unwittingly give a loving nickname to somebody if you do not care for that person. Mary also does not want Agatha to suffer. In one particularly bad night she calls for the doctor, so Agatha can be given a morphia injection to ease her pain. Judging her character we must take into account that all her murders happen fast. Mary is a selfish murderess but not a cruel one. This fact does not undo the severity of her crimes but for the victims it makes a difference.

Yet Mary already plans to kill Agatha at a time when she can by no means know that she will not be the heiress if her great-aunt dies under the new act. The lawyer she consults

tells her that even if the law was against her, "the Crown would, in all probability, allot the estate, or a suitable proportion of it, in accordance with the wishes of the deceased" (*Unnatural Death* 206) but also warns her that the court may decide differently if there was a quarrel about the will.

Mary does not have friends or at least nobody she can fully trust (with Vera being the only exception). We know this because she needs two maids to witness the signing of the fake will, which is more dangerous than asking trustworthy people of her own circle. She is also impatient and does not appreciate servants hesitating when she needs them. We can see this when she intends to have Bertha and Evelyn unknowingly witness her great-aunt signing the fake will. Her dictatorial behaviour makes Evelyn suspicious even though her explanation, that the sisters have to witness the signing because the nurse has not returned from her walk yet, is sound.

Mary is a "well-educated, capable girl [… who is s]elf-reliant, cool, [… q]uite the modern type [and t]he sort of woman one can trust to keep her head and not forget things" (*Unnatural Death* 7). She nevertheless "never was one to stand any back-chat" (*Unnatural Death* 118) which contradicts the image of a self-controlled woman and, indeed, throughout the novel we experience Mary as a person in conflict with her own characteristics. Mary is a trained nurse "nearing the thirties, and her eyes [are] mature and aware" (*Unnatural Death* 75). On one of her hands there is "an odd scar, running across the backs of all the fingers […] as though a chisel […] had slipped at some time" (*Unnatural Death* 206). She is a "powerful woman" (*Unnatural Death* 259) strong enough to punch a person's skull in. Even the doctor who looks at Vera's wound calls it a "terrible blow" (*Unnatural Death* 250) without knowing that it is a woman who committed the murder. Her strength is mentioned various times, like when her "strong white hands" (*Unnatural Death* 282) are mentioned.[50] She is "tall and handsome, with a very clear skin, dark hair and blue eyes – an attractive girl [and she has] very fine brows, rather straight, and not much colour in her face […]" (*Unnatural Death* 205). This description of feminine beauty differs from the image we get of Mary when she acts in front of Wimsey, who sees her like "a young prince" (*Unnatural Death* 179). Mary also behaves in a way that reminds Mr. Trigg of a man, although he describes her like a pretty movie star. For example, he is fascinated by her "almost masculine understanding" (*Unnatural Death* 208) because he believes that "[i]t is rare […] to find a woman with a legal mind. [Mary is] unusual in that respect. She [takes] a great interest in some case or other […] and ask[s …] remarkably sensible and intelligent questions" (*Unnatural Death* 208). We are

[50] Interestingly, Mary also uses chloroform at least once to take her victim out before killing her, even though she is strong enough to commit murder without any sedatives.

also told that "Miss Whittaker was dead against sentimentality and […] might have a boyish taste in fiction" (*Unnatural Death* 248). It is important to note that these descriptions are all uttered by men and that an interest in legal matters or mystery fiction is no more masculine than being sentimental is female. Sayers uses prejudice in the same way that Mary abuses racism, i.e. as means to an end. This is to be expected, too. Susan Rowland states in her book about female writers in detective fiction that "[a] fascinating aspect of the golden age genre's self-referentiality is that gender […] tends to be inscribed as masquerade" (162). In *Unnatural Death* we are not only confronted with actual acts of masquerading but also those intrinsic in the society of Sayers' times. Reading Mr. Trigg's description and witnessing his surprise, one is bound to ask oneself why Mary's behaviour and interests would be considered masculine at all and this fact alone twists her supposedly "masculine" understanding into a genderless one to be found both in males and females[51].

However, if we accept different gender roles, it is interesting to see how contradictory Mary's character is. We have seen that Mary's interests and way of thinking are perceived as masculine by the characters she interacts with but she also makes decisions that fit old-fashioned expectations of femininity, for instance she stops working for good as soon as she no longer needs to provide for herself. However, Mary's decision to stay at home is juxtaposed with the fact that she does not need a lasting relationship to be happy, which contradicts yet another supposedly female personality trait because "proper" women were supposed to be sentimental and chase after love.

Just, Kreutzer and Vogt look at the findings of critics specializing in detective stories and mention one of the important rules used in the genre, namely the tabu of turning a person responsible for people's safety into a killer (69). Sayers, who created her own canon, would not have been Sayers if she had not violated this rule. By giving Mary the occupation of a nurse, she did not only ignore it but actually reversed it as her nurse is one of the most cold-blooded murderesses. It also tells us more about Mary's intellect because she has to be bright and capable of dedicating herself to a long period of studying to become a nurse. Seeing that all her schemes are uncovered rather quickly, one might jump to the conclusion that she is a dull character when in truth she is anything but. Mary is a clever murderess and she is ahead of her time as well. Vaccination had been used against illnesses for a long time and it was already celebrated in the 1880s (Roberts 220). As weapons used for murder, on the other hand, syringes were still considered dubious. Sharyn McCrumb calls the method of killing somebody by injecting air into the victim's vein with a syringe "unlikely", "decidedly tricky"

[51] Sayers, too, indulged in supposedly male behavior like smoking in public or "unashamedly" buying cigarettes on her own (Reynolds 159).

and “more likely to fail than not” (89) as late as in 1993. Nevertheless, Mary’s great-aunt is murdered this way and “two qualified doctors [… falsely] agree[…] that Miss Dawson died a natural death” (*Unnatural Death* 173). Actually, the method of murder is only discovered when Parker remembers a motorcyclist who “[ha]d never heard of an air-lock in his feed” (*Unnatural Death* 286). Therefore it is tempting to believe Mary to be of high intelligence, even though various of her actions are hinting at the opposite. Indeed, it is an important part of Mary’s personality that she is contradicting herself in almost anything. Her intelligence can be said to be considerable while planning actions in advance while being limited when immediate decisions are essential.

It is interesting that even some of her clever plans are not successful. That the fake will is never signed is not Mary’s fault. Agatha simply refuses to sign the document without checking what it is about. The preparations were meticulous, though. Also, one has to be imaginative to have people witness the signing of a legal document first hand without the agent noticing them.[52]

Her mastery of planning in advance is most visible when Mary tries to blame her distant relative, a black parson called Hallelujah Dawson, for Vera’s murder and her fake abduction. Her first step is to buy an expensive cap to be left at the crime scene that can be traced back to Stepney, where Hallalujah’s mission is. To hint at Hallelujah directly, she buys the cap in his name and sends a cheque for ten thousand pounds to him, which he presents at the Lloyds Bank not knowing that it makes him a suspect of kidnapping. The true character of her evil genius is shown when she manages to use racism for her means, though. She leaves a mystery magazine called “The Black Mask” at the crime scene and draws a pencilmark under the first two words. When Parker wonders if this is a message describing the kidnappers’ skin colour, he instantly triggers Chief Constable Pillington to say in a horrified manner: “God bless my soul, […] an English girl in the hands of a nigger. How abominable!” (*Unnatural Death* 248). Parker’s sentiments are not much better and neither are those of various other people in the novel as “[t]he idea of two English girls – the one brutally killed, the other carried off for some end unthinkably sinister, by a black man – aroused all the passion of horror and indignation of which the English temperament is capable” (*Unnatural Death* 254).

It is interesting that Mary trusts the police force to get the hint she leaves with her pencil while at the same time expecting that the police trusts her intelligence enough to leave

[52] Mary put a screen next to the bed of the patient, so Agatha could not see the maids but the girls were able to see Agatha’s reflection in a big looking-glass. Therefore they could have declared under oath that they had witnessed the signing of the will while being within the same room as Agatha.

such a hint in the first place. This means that she has confidence in her own brilliance because she believes that she can trick men she considers to be smart.

Mary not only uses racism to her favour but also abuses antisemitic feelings by buying the cap from a Jewish man and choosing a pair of shoes for her supposed kidnappers that seem "affected by Jew boys of the louder sort" (*Unnatural Death* 246).

I already mentioned that she is good at planning things when she has time to think about them properly, which is also noticeable when she not only destroys portraits of hers but also manages to not being photographed often in the first place. She rethinks former decisions and learns from mistakes, too, as we can see when she tries to drug Wimsey, using her Mrs. Forrest persona. This time she perfectly hides her scar under jewellery because "her fingers [a]re stiff with rings to the knuckles" (*Unnatural Death* 291). She also produces tracks of a fight in mud and chooses different footgear for the two supposed kidnappers and herself. She "ma[kes] no mistake about superimposing the footprints […] – each set over and under the two others" (*Unnatural Death* 261). She did this so properly that Wimsey believes her to have studied the books of Austin Freeman.

After speaking about her clever decisions we have to look at those which destroy the image of her being extraordinarily intelligent. Generally speaking, they are all based on her belief that people are less bright than she is and therefore not able to read her actions properly. For example, after the maids become witness to Agatha being furious because of the will that Mary put among unimportant papers, Mary gives them an afternoon off and a present too. Although she claims that these are gifts connected to her great-aunt's birthday, Evelyn suspects that they are bribery meant for them to keep their mouths shut. It is even more obvious for her when Mary uses the first opportunity to get rid of the girls, i.e. when she fires them after Bertha breaks a teapot. It is most telling that Mary not only gives them the best of character but the means to go to London afterwards. It is understandable that Evelyn does not believe in Mary feeling guilty because if she wanted to, she could rehire them but instead helps them to get away as far as possible.

Mary's belief in her superiority also leads to mistakes in her own field as medical staff. As a nurse she ought to know that extensive use of chloroform will leave roughened or burnt marks on the face of her victim, which contradicts the story she tries to tell. Kidnappers, who are brutal enough to smash somebody's head in, do not administer an anaesthesia first. Wimsey therefore does not believe that a gang has killed Vera, especially not after he is told that the scratches on her arms and the broken skull were inflicted post mortem. It is an unnecessary error, too, as Mary is clearly strong enough to kill the unsuspecting Vera with a

single blow to the head. Her judgement of all people being beneath her also saves the Gotobed sisters at first. Mary does not believe that Evelyn knows that she only helps them to go to London because she does not want them to talk about her trying to trick Agatha into making a will to anybody who may know her. Long before the murder of Vera she does not think that Mr. Trigg, a lawyer working in London, pays much attention to his clients as she forgets to hide her scar while acting as Miss Grant and later as Mrs. Mead. He does but also notices that the latter does not wear a wedding ring even though she claims to be married. At one point Mary even forgets that she claims to be the friend of a great-niece that asks about the new Property Act for the latter's behalf and calls the lady she claims not to be related to "Auntie" (*Unnatural Death* 207).

Moreover, she believes her acting to be so flawless that she repeats her tricks, e.g. the drugging of Mr. Trigg and the attempted drugging of Wimsey in disguise, which leads the latter to discover the connection of the personae Mrs. Mead and Mrs. Forrest. Her knowledge of acting skills also fails when she is confronted with other actors. When Wimsey at one point during his impersonation of Mr. Templeton has to come up with a story to hide the fact that he is investigating the murder of Bertha Gotobed[53], she does not recognize that she is presented with lies.

The shoes she uses to pretend that two men have abducted her are both new and "[leave] prints entirely free from the marks left by wear and tear" (*Unnatural Death* 260). It is not impossible that kidnappers buy new clothes for a criminal act but rather unlikely. And even though she thinks of buying shoes of different seizes to create the image of men of different height and weight, she does not think about differentiating the length of stride.[54]

Mary is most careless when she repeatedly draws out huge sums from her bank account to pay them into the one of Mrs. Forrest. Even though the police does not yet know that both women are one and the same person, the repeated transfer is connecting the two names and makes them believe that Mrs. Forrest "has […] a big hold over Miss Whittaker, ever since old Miss Dawson died" (*Unnatural Death* 255).

Mary also fails to remember people, which is highly important when one creates different personae. It is no less important to remember which person one meets under which name. We see an example of this when Mr. Trigg meets Mary at a restaurant in Soho and greets her as Miss Grant.

[53] After Mary notices that the death of her great-aunt is no longer believed to be of natural causes, she turns into a serial killer to not leave any tracks. Bertha, one of the maids, is her second victim.

[54] I add this circumstance to the list of mistakes although one may argue that one and the same person can have different lengths of stride wearing different footgear, e.g. the different tracks produced by wearing high heels or comfortable boots. Wimsey observing the length of the strides therefore does not necessarily mean anything.

We may conclude that Mary fails every time she is in panic or forced to react spontaneously. That Mary is a contradictory character, who acts cleverly in one instance and ruins her own scheme with almost simpleminded actions later, is most obvious when she tries to trick Mr. Trigg. As mentioned above, Mary did not intend to kill anybody at first, which is shown by her consulting a layer after hearing about the new Property Act. This she had to do because this alteration of the law even confused judiciary authorities. Mr. Murbles, a friend of Lord Peter's, is a solicitor but begs him to ask Mr. Towkington, a specialist in the law concerning property, because he himself dares not to decide if Mary is to inherit under the new law. Yet, even Mr. Towkington is not sure about it when he is called first and only is able to give an ultimate answer after some time. The mere fact that she consulted a lawyer is no proof of her being a murderess, therefore the actions that follow her decision to visit Mr. Trigg are unintelligent. Her introducing herself as a certain Miss Grant already casts doubt upon her intentions but when she lures Mr. Trigg into an empty house claiming to be yet another woman called Marion Mead, her supposed innocence can no longer stand any scrutiny. Especially because she drugged him and we shall never know what would have happened to him if his taxi driver had not entered the house. Her mistake is fatal because not only is Mr. Trigg able to connect Miss Grant and Mrs. Mead because of the scar that both share but it also connects both to Mary, who bears the same scar, too. Moreover, as Mrs. Forrest lures Wimsey into her flat to drug him, this persona of Mary's is connected to her true self as well. This makes us question Mary's shrewdness because her visiting a lawyer would not have cast too much of a doubt on her while her actions covering it up certainly do.

The irony of the novel is that Mary already fails before the first murder happens. Her insistence that her great-aunt's health is worse than it is, annoys the doctor so much that he tells Wimsey about it, which bugs the latter to the point of suspecting her of murder when there is no talk about any murder yet.[55] Actually, the crime is never solved within the novel as the deed cannot be proven. Mary would have been sentenced to death only for the murders she committed to get rid of the people whom she believed to endanger her, which is ironic as well. Mary fails because of her excessive claims to know the patient's condition better than any other, although Wimsey believes that "[t]he real slip-up was forgetting to take back that £5 note from Bertha Gotobed" (*Unnatural Death* 296f), which can be traced back to Mrs. Forrest, who is no other than Mary Whittaker.

[55] It is Wimsey, the hobby detective, who convinces the professional detective-inspector to look deeper into the case because "[Mary] prepared the way for the death […] by describing her aunt so much worse than she was" (*Unnatural Death* 21).

In the end Mary had bad luck. If Doctor Carr had not overheard Wimsey and Parker talk about crime by chance, she would not have been found out. Even with Wimsey being on her heels she might have succeeded if there had not been especially educated and intelligent men like Doctor Faulkner investigating alongside dull professionals.

What differentiates Mary from most other criminals in detective fiction is the huge number of personae she invents and impersonates for her criminal acts. She creates Miss Grant to seek information from Mr. Trigg and the dying Marion Mead to drug him, she plays another nurse to accept the cap to set the police on the wrong track, and the nameless woman with the red hat that is after her former maid. She also invents Mrs. Forrest to be able to go into hiding for a longer span of time as well as the two men who supposedly abduct her. The thought she puts into creating two distinct kidnappers is remarkable. Not only does she give them different shoe seizes, which hint at different heights of the men, she also gives them different ethnicities, religions and even classes. For instance, the first kidnapper "seem[s] to possess rather narrow feet and to wear the long-toed boots affected by Jew boys of the louder sort" (*Unnatural Death* 246) and "appears to be something of a dandy [… who] wears a loathsome mauve cap" (*Unnatural Death* 253). In contrast to "him", the other of Mary's fake kidnappers "wears number 10 shoes, with rubber heels" (*Unnatural Death* 253). With the help of a mystery magazine she also makes one of them a person of colour.

With a list of personae this remarkably long one may think that she is a gifted actress but sometimes her scheme is ruined before the actual act. For example, when she forgets to wear a wedding ring while acting a married woman. Her choice of costumes is not always clever either, for instance, Mrs. Forrest is so "heavily overdressed" (*Unnatural Death* 279) that she does not melt into the mass of people on the streets but draws curious looks to her. And yet, throughout the novel Mary's acting is crowned with differing success. It can be said that she manages to trick people who lack a healthy knowledge of human nature or who do not know her well. This is why at the funeral there is "a great deal of sympathy for the niece" (*Unnatural Death* 17) and Doctor Carr believes her to be "very nice" (*Unnatural Death* 7), while for Parker she is "[a]n evil woman, if ever there was one" (*Unnatural Death* 298), and Miss Climpson sees her as a "[b]eastly, blood-sucking woman" (*Unnatural Death* 270) when she comes to the conclusion that Mary abuses Vera's *schwärmerei* and is "only making use of the girl" (*Unnatural Death* 270). Miss Climpson even doubts Mary after their second encounter already because Mary "seems *very anxious* to give [a certain] impression [… and] doth protest *too much*" (*Unnatural Death* 53).

We may say that there are as many opinions about Mary as there are characters she plays and her level of success as actress has a broad range, too. She is best when her acting only lasts short instances, like at the train station when all she has to do is accept the bought cap, or when the relationship to people is superficial. We can see an example of the latter when Chief Constable Charles Pillington reacts to Mary being suspected of the deeds she actually is responsible for: "Criminal – accomplice – bless me! I have had considerable experience in the course of a long life […] and I really feel convinced that Miss Whittaker, whom I know quite well, is as good and nice a girl as you could wish to find" (*Unnatural Death* 232). It is remarkable how Mary made a professional policeman believe that he knows her well when indeed he does not know her at all. Mary also has success tricking people who are not as intelligent as herself. The murder of Bertha must have been especially easy as even her sister describes her as follows: "I wouldn't say Bertha was a very quick girl […] She'd always be ready to believe what she was told and give people credit for the best" (*Unnatural Death* 110). That Mary must have at least some talent for acting is proven by her relationship to Vera. I already stated that Mary manages to trick less bright people and, indeed, Vera lacks intelligence as Miss Climpson describes her as a "very gushing and really *silly* young woman" (*Unnatural Death* 84). Vera is also deeply infatuated with Mary. Even though love makes blind, Mary has to be convincing since she plotted the murder of Vera at least one month prior to the execution of her plan. We know this because she cleverly knitted a web of lies to frame her relative Hallelujah around that time. Considering the massive amount of time the couple spent together, it must have been hard to never let anything slip. *Schwärmerei* or not, Mary successfully managed to act the loving partner until the bloody end. This is another instance of Mary's contradictory character as she does not appear to be a successful actress in various other cases. As mentioned above, Mary is easily agitated and makes mistakes when being surprised but it is also visible to observant people through her physical reactions. For instance, when her scheme with the mirror is ruined she "look[s] awful white" (*Unnatural Death* 117). When Wimsey interrogates her harshly, she is "visibly taken aback [and e]ven under the thick coat of powder [he can] see the red flush up into her cheeks and ebb away, while her eyes [take] on an expression of something more than alarm – a kind of vicious fury" (*Unnatural Death* 77). When Miss Climpson appears at Mrs. Forrest's door, Mary can only speak "in a hurried, breathless tone, as if there was somebody behind her who she was anxious should not overhear her" (*Unnatural Death* 279f).

Mary is good at using props like the magazine mentioned or the bandages she uses while acting the fatally wounded Mrs. Mead. Therefore it is surprising that she does not

manage to use her body as a tool in the same way. I have mentioned that her physical reactions give her away but she is also unable to overcome her distastes. The look she casts Wimsey while flirting is so terrible that "[i]t remind[s] him of a man waiting for an operation". Her approach is "akward" and although Wimsey perceives her as "handsome enough, […] she [has] not a particle of attraction for him. For all her make-up and her somewhat outspoken costume, she struck him as spinsterish – even epicine [… A]s something essentially sexless" (*Unnatural Death* 181f). Even when she explicitly tells him that she is willing to spend the night with him, she does so in a grim, non-passionate way, and when Wimsey slips one arm around her, he can feel her body stiffen. She fails even more when he kisses her because "[n]o one who has ever encountered it can ever again mistake that awful shrinking, that uncontrollable revulsion of the flesh against a caress that is nauseous. He thought for a moment that she was going to be actually sick" (*Unnatural Death* 183).

Moreover, her knowledge of femininity is so limited that she cannot even imagine what a man may like in a woman. Even though she wants to seduce Wimsey, she hides most of her hair under a turban, wears a suit which evokes the image of "a young prince of the Arabian Nights" (*Unnatural Death* 179), and her rambling is so "fatuous" that it takes some time for Wimsey to even notice that she "clumsily, stupidly, as though in spite of herself" (*Unnatural Death* 181) tries to have sex with him.

As mentioned above, Mary has a contradictory personality and many flaws that contradict her talents. This is not a limitation of her as character, though, but her most entertaining quality. It is wasted potential that Mary only appears as Wimsey's nemesis in one volume of his series.

## 6) From comparison to understanding

Although people were afraid that vice was taking over Britain in the 1820s, they were not suing all criminals as many crimes were still seen as capital offences and the victims did not wish to see the offender of a petty crime being executed. Robert Peel's reforms eventually enabled people to get their right, and imprisonment was seen as a way to reform (Wilson 387f). Looking at *Vanity Fair*'s treatment of criminals one wonders if Thackeray believed in reformation. In the end Becky is neither reformed nor punished although the author was well aware of the personality he had created. He wrote to his mother on July 2nd , 1847:

> My object is not to make a perfect character or anything like it. Dont [sic] you see how odious all the people are in the book (with the exception of Dobbin) – behind whom all there lies a dark moral hope. What I want is to make a set of people living without

> God in the world [... -] greedy [sic] pompous [sic] mean [sic] perfectly self-satisfied for most part at the ease about their superior virtue. (Thackeray 309)

His characters may not be perfect but they possess credibility. Becky is mean and ruthless but she is inconsistent in her spitefulness and shows signs of a caring friend. Although readers are fascinated by her malevolent actions, her success as a literary creation stems from her plausibility as a round character. Becky is even an "outstanding example of a 'round' character [because] she defies any rule of characterisation that simple logic might prescribe, and becomes as familiar and unpredictable as if we had known her all our lives" (Dyson 164). In our everyday lives we know more people like Becky than perfect angels, although many of us want to believe in the existence of the latter. That is why Thackeray is "forcing [his readers] to re-examine their preconceptions [as well as] challenging assumptions about perfectibility" (C. Peters vii). Winnie is credible as character as well because she still suffers from the impact of a brutal childhood, in which she had to fight for her little brother on a daily basis. That her instinct to protect transitions into her adult life feels natural. Conrad also gives us enough information about her peculiar way of thinking that the fatal outcome of her marriage seems almost inevitable and her helplessness afterwards logical. The clues about her mental health bring her characterisation to perfection and turn an otherwise cold-blooded act of revenge into a terrible moment of lunacy. Since Conrad is interested in showing the danger of the dichotomy of the supposedly ideal woman and real women, he does not only refrain from showing the possible reformation (or healing through psychological help) of his female offender but ruins her completely to give his message as much force as possible[56]. Mary, on the other hand, seems almost unreal in her spitefulness and we have to look back at cases of real murderesses to remember that there are criminals far worse and more cold-blooded. Mary is so interesting because she possesses as many negative characteristics as positive ones. The contradictory elements of her character are even found in details, for example when she is clever in planning her schemes in advance but ruins them when she has to adjust them spontaneously. Sayers' "sense of evil [is] realistic and true to life" (Love 41) and since she believed that there were enough "one-dimensional" and "predictable" characters already (Elkins 101), it makes sense that she would produce the opposite, i.e. multi-dimensional characters who surprise her readers. She also managed to combine "vanity, weakness and cleverness just as they are, coexisting in the same person" (Merry 26), which is clearly the case in *Unnatural Death*.

[56] Conrad explicitly states that telling Winnie's story "was a necessity" (*The Secret Agent* 10).

It is interesting that the upbringing of the characters does not matter as far as their spitefulness is concerned. Winnie was so impecunious that she had to marry a man she did not love but since she knows how to write and read, she must have been allowed to go to school, as did her brother Stevie. Mary was able to receive good education and had the prospect of inheriting a large estate. Becky is the daughter of a penniless artist but she was able to go to a boarding school and achieved a level of education that allowed her to work as a governess and teacher in a private household. She can be seen as belonging to two classes even, i.e. she is born without any title and yet she is successfully presented at court[57].

Having an occupation does not influence the characters' ability to kill either. While Winnie is still working in Verloc's shop, Becky and Mary have already left their former jobs for good when they murder their victims. Considering the fact that all of them belong to the work force at least at one point in time, it is interesting to look at them as representatives of the modern woman, too. Although it was considered inappropriate to act like a member of a different class[58], Becky is so gifted an actress that she is believed to fit in everywhere but in the highest circles in which she has had no insight before her presentation. If we see Becky as an actress who provides for herself and her family by acting different roles in society, she can be appreciated as a successful professional, but as her behaviour strengthens the status quo rather than fighting it, calling her a modern woman is not fitting. Winnie is caught in an unsatisfying space between old-fashioned expectations and modernity. She is an experienced caretaker, who longed for a traditional life with a man she loved, but she also has to work in her husband's disreputable shop. She cannot afford having children because she has to care of her brother. Mary, on the other hand, is clearly modern as she manages to have a respectable occupation, provides for herself and breaks various old-fashioned rules of society by choosing not to marry or have children. All three have in common that they work at least for some time to earn their living. Becky educates children in French and later becomes the governess at the Crawley's, Winnie runs a boarding-house with her mother before she marries and helps her husband as a shop keeper[59], and Mary is working as a nurse before she moves in with her great-aunt.

Becky and Mary are at some point in their lives affluent but only Becky keeps up appearances while Mary even refuses to help a relative of hers who is in dire need of money. Philanthropy was considered necessary for both middle-class women and ladies. A lady actually did not risk her respectability even when she worked full-time in this field (Watson

[57] In reality the first middle class woman was only presented at court in 1881 (Mitchell 25).
[58] In Victorian England people believed in the "fact" that the higher classes were entitled to their supremacy (Altick 18) but Becky never doubts that her place can be among the highest circles.
[59] This fits our expectations because even in 1951 40 percent of married women were employed (Bourke 62).

107). Becky therefore does not risk her social status when we find her at the bazars at the end of the novel. On the contrary, lending the poor a hand raises her respectability in the eyes of her contemporaries, which is her sole reason for participating in philanthropy after all. Mary is not as interested in her appearance anymore. Decades have passed and respectability is no longer the highest goal for British citizens. Mary therefore does not have to spend money on the poor. She even has the freedom not to marry and enjoy the independence that her great-aunt's murder has given her. Winnie never has such liberties. She already has to work hard when she is a child and as an adult she is forced to marry to secure Stevie's wellbeing. However, she does not care much for people outside her family either and even gets angry at people begging her easily tricked brother for money.

Mary is the only one of my chosen offenders who decides not to marry. It is entertaining that she defies the old-fashioned belief that spinsters lead unfulfilled lives and that they are robbed of "deep emotion, meaningful activity, and centre of gravity" (Fasick 75f). Mary seems perfectly content with her inheritance and has a meaningful occupation as nurse before she moves in with her great-aunt. Winnie finds happiness in caring for her brother, not her husband or the children she never gives birth to. To Winnie her marriage is a contract to keep Stevie safe, not the source of happiness or emotional fulfilment. Becky's marriage is even more remote from being happy. She gets married only to climb the social ladder – a thrill, which is what truly gives her joy – and she does not care whom she has to hurt for it. This is a lesson that both her husbands have to learn and which Jos does not survive. What makes Becky so dangerous for men is the fact, that she is an "utterly self-controlled courtesan who feigns passion rather than feel[ing] it" (Hardy 79). She also becomes "less and less like a wife and mother and more and more like a prostitute" (Hagan 487). Becky uses her body as a tool and succeeds every time, for example when she makes Jos believe that she loves him. In contrast to her, Mary is completely unable to do that and her physical reactions even give her away, when her life depends on it. She may trick her obsessed lover into believing that she still adores her but we never get to see what happens in her bedroom and therefore cannot know whether she is using sexuality to keep Vera in line or not. Winnie, on the other hand, clearly uses her body as bribery and although her coldness makes her husband feel lonely sometimes, he remains loyal to her because of his misconception concerning appropriate sexual appetites. Although she does not love him, Winnie is able to get from him what she desires for seven years and without the interference of powers outside her home, she would have managed to keep their family intact even longer.

Interestingly, maternity does not protect characters from turning into killers either. Becky is a mother and yet murders Jos as coolly as the childless Mary kills her victims. Winnie may not have given birth to Stevie but she cares for him like a mother and she kills Verloc out of revenge and despair. How the characters feel about their "children" does not matter any more than their status as mothers does. Becky is the only one that biologically becomes a mother but she is not good at being one and ignores her son as much as possible. Winnie, on the other hand, acts as a most loving mother to a "child" not even her own.[60]

While Becky is a gifted actress, who hardly ever gets exposed, Mary not only lacks considerable talent but also makes grave mistakes, like forgetting people she met in disguise. But not even Becky can compete against Winnie, whose acting is so brilliant that it destroys at least three lives. Their level of success may be different but they all share the strategy of using their femininity when they want to manipulate men for their goals. Becky is aware that she can achieve security and status when she marries the right man and therefore acts out the roles expected by society (Ferris 28). Winnie, too, is aware of this fact and sacrifices a life with the man she loves for a secure life for her family. She is actually the more gifted actress concerning her role as wife. While Becky estranges Rawdon with her neglect of both him and their son, Winnie manages to make Verloc believe that he is loved for himself. She is so gifted in doing so that he cannot even grasp the truth when his marriage is already ruined. When he woes Winnie after she has learnt of Stevie's death, he believes to calm his wife with the love he supposes they share. The difference between these two women's acting is that Becky's schemes are ruined because she cannot remain the perfect actress forever, while Winnie is so convincing that Verloc risks Stevie's life believing that his wife would forgive him everything because of her love for him.

It is also interesting to see how Sayers and Thackeray use masquerading to show their "actresses" in a completely different way. Mary disguises herself so people do not see who she really is, i.e. a murderess. Becky, on the other hand, masquerades herself as Clytemnestra to make people believe that they are only seeing her playing a role, when indeed she shows them her true self in this rare moment of honesty, i.e. the future murderess of her husband.

It seems odd that Becky is such a talented actress in most situations but fails as far as her murder of Jos is concerned. Becky gets away with her crime but she is not good at hiding it. While it takes one of the most talented sleuths in British history to find out Mary's secrets, everybody close to Becky seems to know about her being a murderess. Even the victim

[60] It is hard to imagine the narcissist Mary as guardian of helpless children. It is not only her free way of living but her sexual orientation that would make a pregnancy difficult as well. When she tries to seduce Wimsey, she cannot even start her scheme without revulsion. Therefore it is questionable if she could go through with the whole act of impregnation.

himself knows while she "tend[s] him through a series of unheard-of illnesses" (*Vanity Fair* 806). He is aware of the laudanum that she has always around as he tells Amelia about the bottle in chapter 65. Three months before his death he even begs Dobbin to save him but keep quiet about it because she would murder him immediately if she knew about his preparations to leave her. He explicitly says: "[S]he'd – she'd kill me if she knew it! You don't know what a terrible woman she is" (*Vanity Fair* 807). After his death "[t]he solicitor of the Insurance Company swore it was the blackest case that ever had come before him" (*Vanity Fair* 808). Becky gets away with murder only because she lives at a time when forensic medicine was not yet able to prove her guilt.

Looking back at the definition of murder, Becky and Mary can clearly be classified as murderesses. Since Winnie's act of killing was not planned in advance, she is not part of the former group. Moreover, her disturbed mental state combined with the illness of her mind hinted at speak against her being a murderess in legal terms as well.

In *The Secret Agent* and *Vanity Vair* the killings are domestic and happen within the private spheres of the couples[61]. Only Mary leaves the secure space of her home to kill the people she deems dangerous to her. It is important to note that the original murder, which was the only one she initially planned to commit, happens inside her home as well. It is interesting that all of the female offenders discussed have killed one of their partners but not surprising, when we take a look back at the chapter about real life murderesses.

*Vanity Fair* is the only text in which we get but the most basic information about the murder and we have to look at the text and the illustrations closely to find out that Becky is a murderess at all. The rules of decency of Thackeray's times are responsible for this. Lord David Cecil thinks that it was unfortunate that Thackeray was born into the wrong age because he needed "an atmosphere of moral tolerance" to express himself fully (qtd. in Olmsted xix). However, Thackeray has Becky punished in his own way. If Gordon Norton Ray is right when he claims that "[l]ife is redeemed for Thackeray only by affection, by love, by loyalty [...]" (421), the author robbed Becky of what matters most to him. On the other hand, Becky never longed for affection. Becky therefore is not punished but cursed "to be forever the victim of insatiable romantic yearning and to achieve only the most fleeting happiness" (Hagan 488). Hagan even supposes that her ultimate punishment is the life of a corrupted person who is not able to bow to a loving God's will and therefore not able to gain happiness. It is ironic that she exchanged all morality for a life that does not make her happy,

[61] "Conrad felt passionately about politics […]" (Warner, *Conrad*, 1951, 36), which is logical when we remember his parents' fight for their home country. Authors like Najder even call the two "political martyrs" (xvii), which makes the fact that the killing in *The Secret Agent* is purely domestic and not motivated by any politics at all even more fascinating.

but Hagan believes that her estrangement from god is worse, as he claims that the choice of the title and the closing phrase of the novel ("Vanitas Vanitatum") both indicate that the "real frame of reference" is religious (501-503). It is also probable that Thackeray simply did not want to punish Becky harshly because he had an „understanding of the means available to women to redress their own condition within the conventions that limited them" (Shillingsburg 81). Within the text Becky is not punished because she is abusing the status quo but she is also the one most remote from modern society. The mortality rates were high and around 20 per cent of marriages contracted in the 1850s ended with one of the partners dying within ten years. Most of these widowed people were female (Roberts 239f). Society therefore did not frown upon Becky surviving two husbands. On the contrary, many people must have felt pity because she supposedly lost a married woman's security a second time.

Conrad is the only writer in the literary corpus analysed in this thesis, who not only allows us to witness the killing but who also allows us to see it through the eyes of the offender as well as the victim. The question whether the female character has killed somebody, does not even arise in *The Secret Agent* but it is as interesting to decide if it was an act of manslaughter or lunacy. Because we know so such about Winnie adoring and protecting her brother since her earliest childhood, we also tend to root for her and hope that she can escape the ultimate punishment. However, even though Conrad was aware of the inequality among the sexes, he refuses to save Winnie – which surely is the best strategy to raise awareness since it moves his readers' hearts. Most readers pity her and our knowledge of mental illnesses running within her family probably makes most of us hope that Winnie will not be sentenced to death. That may be the reason why Conrad has her commit suicide. It is the only way for him to not openly take sides (when, indeed, he manipulates his readers to be on Winnie's side). Her suicide pleases the hardliners among the defenders of the law while at the same time moving the hearts of those who already feel sorry for her.

In Mary's case it is easy to conclude that such a nasty person does not arouse any pity within any reader. Sayers made her so heartless that we agree with the enforcers of the law when they call her exactly that. Nevertheless, Sayers adds a layer of humanity to the ending of the notorious Mary Whittaker when Lord Peter, the main character of the Wimsey books, feels "cold and sick" (*Unnatural Death* 299) looking at her body after she committed suicide. Sayers' message is clear: even a murderess is a person, not a thing to get rid of. She could not let Mary go unpunished, though, since the detective story for Sayers was rooted within the medieval morality play "in which a drama of good and evil is played out" and "[the] detective

functions as a modern Arthurian knight […] to restore and heal a wounded society" (Rowland 10f).

To find out if there is a lesson to be learnt from reading about the survival and deaths of the female offenders presented, we shall interpret these in regard of morals and morality one last time. Thackery refuses to judge anybody and is satisfied with showing humankind how we are, i.e. ugly and beautiful. He is only interested in presenting the world as he sees it and lets people decide on their own what to do with the "dark moral hope" (309) of his realism. Conrad creates a female killer that is likable and worthy of our pity and who is even innocent of the act of murder as she kills during a mental breakdown. Nothing within the text hints at the author wanting his readership to despise her. We have even seen that he kills Winnie to move his readers' hearts. There may also be another factor playing a role in Conrad's decision, one that also shaped detective novels as a genre and clearly influenced Sayers in her conclusion of *Unnatural Death*, namely the longing for stability of the middle and upper classes, who felt that their world was falling apart and who craved stories in which the evil is removed from a then restored world (Just, Kreutzer, and Vogt 100-102). Conrad had to fit his plea for equality and honesty within marriage into this framework or he would have lost readers. Sayers, on the other hand, wholeheartedly obeys this rule and has her murderess punished as well as the girl who unknowingly becomes her accomplice. After all, Sayers "was an upholder of the law, and the law demanded death for the murderer" (Hitchman 135). By having Mary turn into a murderess only because of time running through her hands, Sayers tells us that people we know may only be innocent because the circumstances have not seduced them to do evil yet. Moreover, Mary turning into a serial killer to not leave any tracks, can be read as a warning that vice, if we accept it, will lead us down a path of selfishness that is infinite.

Mary is under pressure because of the new law and one is reminded of Becky's self-delusion that she could "be a good woman if [she] had five thousand a year" (*Vanity Fair* 490). Would Mary be a better person if there was no new Property Act? As in Becky's case the answer is quite possibly no. The surface level of the novel may hint at it when Wimsey states that the new law will cause problems, but Sayers being one of the most sublime writers in detective fiction is not describing her offender in this instance but offers one of the clues to solve the puzzle. I described in detail how evil Mary is to show how similar her and Becky's vice are. Becky simply is the more talented actress. She shows the readers how evil people can be while still fitting perfectly into the society they live in. Mary's brutality, on the other hand, proves that a woman can be as terrible as any man. However, both are human beings,

not “only” women, and both writers created them for this purpose. Doing so, Thackery is a true feminist, who can be compared to Sayers no matter their different sex and era of writing. They only differ as far as their aim is concerned. While Thackeray shows his readers how he perceives the world but lets them decide what to do with these pieces of information on their own, Sayers wants to teach lessons and strengthens people’s belief in the existing law. Becky is not punished but she does not get rewarded for the murder she committed either. Mary shows that women are as brutal as men but like any male criminal she has to face the consequences of her deeds.

To conclude, Thackeray was mostly interested in showing his worldview and he did not normally ruin his main characters because he was content when evil deeds were discovered (Reed 307). Conrad, on the other hand, was interested in the “unbridgeable gap between the period’s domestic ideals and domestic realities” (Shaffer, *Domestic* 314), while Sayers stresses “the frustrations and insecurities of women coping on their own with a changing world, particularily a world in which women have opportunities […] which had not been available to them before (V. Morris, *Arsenic* 494f). All three authors used round, believable female characters to achieve these goals and doing so created unforgettable personalities that have not lost any fascination.

In conclusion, the presented female killers in Victorian and Early Twentieth Century texts are round, believable characters with individual reasons and ways to kill their victims and who are used to show their writers’ beliefs and therefore are still interesting and worth being looked at today.

I will end my thesis with a quote by Virginia B. Morris about Sayers’ women, which also describes the mastery of my other chosen authors: “By adding psychological dimensions and a social context to the depiction of her characters, particularly when she examines the relationship of their criminality and their sexuality, she provides […] a fine distinction between conventional woman criminals and criminals who are women” (*Arsenic* 495).

**Number of words of the main text**

32250

## 7) English summary

During the Victorian era and the early Twentieth Century the definition of femininity in English-speaking countries experienced a shift. The ideal of the perfect wife and mother, whose sole purpose was her home, could no longer be sustained. The convergence of imaginary ideal and existing conditions also led to a shift of femininity in literature. Especially the character of the murderess, who represents the complete opposite of the life-giving housewife, is of interest when studying this shift of femininity. Since murderesses were perceived as exceptions and abominations of female nature, one may jump to the conclusion that the authors of the eras mentioned abused them as mere tools in order to sell books in higher quantities. Using the literary corpus I have chosen for this thesis, I will prove that this theory is wrong and that William Makepeace Thackeray, Joseph Conrad, and Dorothy L. Sayers use their female offenders to present their world views. Thackery is interested in morality and the uncovering of hypocrisy, Conrad denounces the dichotomy between ideals and the reality that women faced during his time of writing as well as the suffering that resulted from such contradictions, and Sayers creates an icon of feminism with her murderess, who is as clever, educated and evil as any man – and who is not even inferior to a man when the brutality of murder is concerned. Origin, education, and sexual orientation of the characters play no important role. Even the question of mental incapacity, due to genetically determined insanity or deep-seated shock, can be found in the texts. However, the characters in question are not mere conveyors of world views, but true-to-life personalities with talents and weaknesses, as well as dreams and fears. The female killers of the eras chosen therefore are not one-dimensional, but complex and unique characters, who have not lost any of their fascination to this very day.

## 8) Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Im Laufe des Viktorianischen Zeitalters und des frühen Zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts wandelte sich die Definition von Weiblichkeit im englischsprachigen Raum. Das Ideal der perfekten Ehefrau und Mutter, deren einziger Daseinszweck das Heim war, konnte nicht länger aufrechterhalten werden. Diese Annäherung von Vorstellung und real existierender Zustände führte auch in der Literatur zu einem Wandel von Weiblichkeit. Besonders die Figur der Mörderin, die das vollkommene Gegenteil der lebensschenkenden Hausfrau darstellt, ist dabei von Interesse. Da Mörderinnen als eine Ausnahme und Abartigkeit der weiblichen Natur angesehen wurden, liegt der Verdacht nahe, dass die AutorInnen der bearbeiteten Epochen sie als bloßes Werkzeug zur Steigerung der Auflagenstärke missbrauchten. Anhand meiner gewählten Primärliteratur beweise ich, dass dies nicht den Tatsachen entspricht und William Makepeace Thackeray, Joseph Conrad und Dorothy L. Sayers mit Hilfe ihrer Lady Killer ihre unterschiedlichen Überzeugungen in die Welt hinaustragen. Thackeray beschäftigt sich mit Moral und dem Aufdecken scheinheiliger Äußerlichkeiten, Conrad prangert den Widerspruch zwischen Ideal und Lebensrealität der Frauen seiner Zeit und das daraus resultierende Leid an, und Sayers entwirft mit ihrer klugen, gebildeten und bösen Mörderin eine Ikone des Feminismus, da sie Männern in nichts nachtsteht – nicht einmal in der Brutalität des Mordens. Herkunft, Ausbildung und sexuelle Orientierung der Figuren spielen dabei keine Rolle und selbst die Frage der Unzurechnungsfähigkeit durch genetisch bedingten Wahnsinn oder tiefsitzenden Schock findet sich in den Texten wieder. Die Charaktere sind aber nicht bloße Übermittlerinnen von Weltanschauungen, sondern lebensnahe Persönlichkeiten mit Talenten und Schwächen, ebenso wie Träumen und Ängsten. Die weiblichen Killer in den von mir gewählten Zeitaltern sind also nicht eindimensionale, sondern vielschichtige und einzigartige Charaktere, die bis heute nichts an ihrer Faszination verloren haben.

## 9) List of Illustrations

# 10) Bibliography

## 10a) Primary literature


Conrad, Joseph. *The Secret Agent*. 1907. Penguin Popular Classics 1. London: Penguin, 1994.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Jahrmarkt der Eitelkeit oder Ein Roman ohne Held.* 1848. Trans. Theresa Mutzenbecher. 1975. München: DTV, 2011.

---. *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*. 1848. Ed. John Carey. Penguin Classics 9. London: Penguin, 2001.

Sayers, Dorothy L. *Unnatural Death.* 1927. NEL. London: Hodder, 2003.


## 10b) Secondary literature


Altick, Richard Daniel. *Victorian People* and *Ideas*. London: Dent, 1973.

Batchelor, John. *The Life of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Biography.* Blackwell Critical Biographies 4. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

---. *Lord Jim*. Unwin Critical Library. London: Hyman, 1988.

Bernhard, Erika. "Tötungsdelinquenz von Frauen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Medienberichterstattung." Diss. U of Vienna, 1996.

Biles, Jack I. "Winnie Verloc: Agent of Death." *Conradiana* 13.2 (1981): 101-108.

Birch, Helen. Introduction. *Moving Targets: Women, Murder and Representation.* Ed. Helen Birch. London: Virago, 1993. 1-6.

Black, Henry Campell. *Black's Law Dictionary.* 3rd ed. St. Paul, MN: West, 1933.

Black, Jeremy. *Modern British History since 1900*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

Bolte, Christian, and Klaus Dimmler. *Schwarze Witwen und Eiserne Jungfrauen: Geschichte der Mörderinnen.* Leipzig: Reclam, 1997.

Bourke, Joanna. *Working-class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity.* London: Routledge, 1994.

Brander, Laurence. *Thackeray.* London: Longmans, 1959.

Buchanan-Brown, John. *The Illustrations of William Makepeace Thackeray*. Newton Abbot: David, 1979.

Butler, David, and Gareth Butler. *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts 1900-2000*. 8th ed. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000.

Carey, John. A Note on the Text. *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*. By William Makepeace Thackeray. Penguin Classics 9. London: Penguin, 2001. Xxxviii-xl.

---. *Thackeray: Prodigal Genius*. London: Faber, 1977.

Cecil, Robert. *Life in Edwardian England*. English Life Series. London: Batsford, 1969.

Ching, Yuet May. "'A Heap of Nameless Fragments': Sacrifice, Cannibalism, and Fragmentation in *The Secret Agent*." *Conradian* 32.1 (2007): 36-48.

Clark, Sandra. *Women and Crime in the Street Literature of Early Modern England.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

Coats, David. *The Context of British Politics.* Contemporary Politics 3. London: Hutchinson, 1984.

Colby, Robert A. *Thackeray's Canvass of Humanity: An Author and His Public*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1979.

Conrad, Joseph. *The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad: Volume 2: 1898-1902.* Ed. Frederick R. Karl and Laurence Davies. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.

D'Cruze, Shani. "The Family." *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Ed. Chris Williams. Malden: Blackwell, 2007. 253-272.

Dickerson, Vanessa D. "Introduction: Housekeeping and Housekept Angels." *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays.* Ed. Vanessa D. Dickerson. New York: Garland, 1995. xiii-xxxi.

Dolan, Frances E. "Battered Women, Petty Traitors, and the Legacy of Coverture." *Feminist Studies* 29.2 (2003): 249-277.

Dyson, A. E. "An Irony Against Heroes." *Thackeray:* Vanity Fair. Ed. Arthur Pollard. London: Macmillan, 1978. 163-182.

Elkins, Aaron. "The Art of Framing Lies: Dorothy L. Sayers on Mystery Fiction." *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration.* Ed. Alzina Stone Dale. New York: Walker, 1993. 99-107.

Elwin, Malcolm. *Thackeray: A Personality.* London: Cape, 1932.

Emsley, Clive. "Crime, Police and Penal Policy." *A Companion to Early Twentieth-Century Britain.* Ed. Chris Wrigley. Malden: Blackwell, 2003. 438-452.

Fasick, Laura. "God's House, Women's Place." *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays.* Ed. Vanessa D. Dickerson. New York: Garland, 1995. 75-103.

Ferris, Ina. *William Makepeace Thackeray*. Twayne's English Authors Series 365. Boston: Twayne, 1983.

Fisher, Judith Law. *Thackeray's Skeptical Narrative and the 'Perilious Trade' of Authorship.* The Nineteenth Century Series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002.

Flamm, Dudley. *Thackeray's Critics: An Annotated Bibliography of British and American Criticism 1836-1901.* Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1967.

Forbes, Shannon. *Women's Transition from Victorian to Contemporary Identity as Portrayed in the Modern Novel.* Lewiston: Mellen, 2006.

Frazee, John P. "The Creation of Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*." *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 27 (1998): 227-244.

Friedman, Vanessa. "Over His Dead Body: Female Murderers, Female Rage, and Western Culture." *States of Rage: Emotional Eruption, Violence, and Social Change.* Ed. Renée R. Curry and Terry L. Allison. New York: New York UP, 1996. 62-73.

Gerard, Jessica. "The Chatelaine: Women of the Victorian Landed Classes and the Country House." *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays.* Ed. Vanessa D. Dickerson. New York: Garland, 1995. 175-206.

Gilbert, Michael. "A Personal Memoir: Dorothy L. Sayers." *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration.* Ed. Alzina Stone Dale. New York: Walker, 1993. 15-21.

Haack, Susan. "After My Own Heart: Dorothy L. Sayers's Feminism." *New Criterion* 19.9 (2001): 10-14.

Hagan, John. "*Vanity Fair*: Becky Brought to Book Again." *Studies in the Novel* 7 (1975): 479-506.

Hall, Trevor Henry. *Dorothy L. Sayers: Nine Literary Studies*. London: Duckworth, 1980.

Harden, Edgar F. *The Emergence of Thackeray's Serial Fiction*. London: Prior, 1979.

---. *Thackeray the Writer: From Journalism to* Vanity Fair. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998.

Hardy, Barbara. *The Exposure of Luxury: Racial Themes in Thackeray*. London: Owen, 1972.

Harrington, Ellen Burton. "The Anarchist's Wife: Joseph Conrad's Debt to Sensation Fiction in *The Secret Agent*." *Conradiana* 36.1 (2004): 51-63.

---. "The Female Offender, the New Woman, and Winnie Verloc in *The Secret Agent.*" *Conradian* 32.1 (2007): 57-69.

Hart, Carolyn G. "Gaudy Night: Quintessential Sayers." *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration.* Ed. Alzina Stone Dale. New York: Walker, 1993. 45-50.

Henry, Andrew. "Misunderstandings about Becky's Characterization in *Vanity Fair*." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 18.3 (1963): 279-83.

Henry, Andrew F., and James F. Short Jr. *Suicide and Homicide: Some Economic, Sociological and Psychological Aspects of Aggression.* Clencoe: Free, 1954.

Hiess, Peter, and Christian Lunzer. *Mörderinnen und ihre Motive: Spektakuläre Fälle aus sechs Jahrhunderten.* Erftstadt: Area, 2007.

Hitchman, Janet. '*Such a Strange Lady': An Introduction to Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957).* London: NEL, 1975.

Hollingsworth, Keith. *The Newgate Novel 1830-1847: Bulwer, Ainsworth, Dickens, and Thackeray.* Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1963.

Hudson, Derek. "Reading." *Edwardian England 1901-1914*. Ed. Simon Nowell-Smith. London: Oxford UP, 1964. 303-326.

Hunter, Allan. *Joseph Conrad and the Ethics of Darwinism: The Challenges of Science.* London: Croom, 1983.

Jadwin, Lisa. "Clytemnestra Rewarded: The Double Conclusion of *Vanity Fair*." *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*. Ed. Alison Booth. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993. 35-61.

Jones, Susan. *Conrad and Women*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1999.

Just, Klaus Günther, Leo Kreutzer, and Jochen Vogt. *Konstruktionsschema und Gesellschaft bei Agatha Christie.* Detektivroman und englisches Bürgertum 23. Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag, 1974.

Karl, Frederick R. *Joseph Conrad: The Three Lives: A Biography.* New York: Farrar, 1979.

Kauhl, Gurdrun. *Joseph Conrad:* The Secret Agent*: Text und zeitgeschichtlicher Kontext.* Bremer Beiträge zur Literatur- und Ideologiegeschichte 4. Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1986.

Kelleher, Michael D., and C.L. Kelleher. *Murder Most Rare: The Female Serial Killer.* Westport: Praeger, 1998.

Kenney, Catherine. *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers.* Kent: Kent State UP, 1990.

Knowles, Owen, and Gene M. Moore. *Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Leavis, L. R. "Marriage, Murder, and Morality: *The Secret Agent* and *Tess*." *Neophilologus: An International Journal of Modern and Mediaeval Language and Literature* 80.1 (1996): 161-169.

Lee, Stephen J. *Aspects of British Political History, 1815-1914*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Love, William F. "Butler, Dabbler, Spy: Jeeves to Wimsey to Bond." *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration.* Ed. Alzina Stone Dale. New York: Walker, 1993. 31-43.

McCrumb, Sharyn. “Where the Bodies Are Buried: The Real Murder Cases in the Crime Novels of Dorothy L. Sayers.” *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration.* Ed. Alzina Stone Dale. New York: Walker, 1993. 87-98.

McMaster, Rowland D. *Thackeray’s Cultural Frame of Reference: Allusion in* The Newcomes*.* Houndmills: Macmillan, 1991.

Merry, Bruce. “Dorothy L. Sayers: Mystery and Demystification.” *Essays on Detective Fiction.* Ed. Bernard Benstock. London: Macmillan, 1983. 18-32.

Meyers, Jeffrey. “The Agamemnon Myth and *The Secret Agent*.” *Conradiana* 1.1 (1968): 57-59.

---. *Joseph Conrad: A Biography*. London: Murray, 1991.

Mitchell, Sally. *Daily Life in Victorian England*. Daily Life Through History Series. Westport: Greenwood, 1996.

Moran, Maureen. *Victorian Literature and Culture.* Introductions to British Literature and Culture Series. London: Continuum, 2006.

Morris, Robert M. “‘Lies, Damned Lies and Criminal Statistics’: Reinterpreting the Criminal Statistics in England and Wales.” *Crime, Histoire and Sociétés* 5.1 (2001): 111-127.

Morris, Virginia B. “Arsenic and Blue Lace: Sayers’ Criminal Women.” *MFS* 29.3 (1983): 485-495.

---. *Double Jeopardy: Women Who Kill in Victorian Fiction*. Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1990.

Moser, Thomas. *Joseph Conrad: Achievement and Decline.* 2nd ed. Hamden: Archon, 1966.

Mudge, Isadore Gilbert, and M. Earl Sears. *A Thackeray Dictionary: The Characters and Scenes of the Novels and Short Stories Alphabetically Arranged*. Dictionaries to Famous Authors. New York: Humanities, 1962.

Najder, Zdzisław. *Conrad under familial eyes*. Trans. Halina Carroll-Najder. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.

Olmsted, John Charles. *Thackeray and His Twentieth-Century Critics: An Annotated Bibliography 1900-1975.* Garland Reference Library of the Humanities 62. New York: Garland, 1977.

Papinchak, Robert Allen. “Dorothy L. Sayers: (1893-1957).” *Mystery and Suspense Writers: The Literature of Crime, Detection, and Espionage*. Vol. 2. New York: Scribner, 1998. 805-828.

Peters, Catherine. *Thackeray’s Universe: Shifting Worlds of Imagination and Reality.* London: Faber, 1987.

Peters, Margot. “Women and Crime: Sexism in Allingham, Sayers, and Christie.” *Southwest Review* 59 (Spring 1974): 144-152.

Phillipps, Kenneth C. *The Language of Thackeray*. The Language Library. London: Deutsch, 1978.

Prawer, Siegbert Salomon. *Breeches and Metaphysics: Thackeray’s German Discourse*. Studies in Comparative Literature 1. Oxford: Legenda, 1997.

---. *Israel at* Vanity Fair*: Jews and Judaism in the Writings of W. M. Thackeray.* Brill’s Series in Jewish Studies 2. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

---. *W. M. Thackeray’s European Sketch Books: A Study of Literary and Graphic Portraiture.* European Connections 1. Oxford: Lang, 2000.

Purdy, Dwight H. “*The Secret Agent* under Edwardian Eyes.” *Conradian* 16.2 (1992): 1-16.

Rahn, B.J. “The Marriage of True Minds.” *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration.* Ed. Alzina Stone Dale. New York: Walker, 1993. 51-65.

Ray, Gordon Norton. *Thackeray: The Uses of Adversity: 1811-1846.* Vol. 1. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1955.

Ray, Martin. “The Landscape of *The Secret Agent*.” *Conrad’s Cities: Essays for Hans van Marle*. Ed. Gene M. Moore. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992. 197-206.

Reed, John R. *Dickens and Thackeray: Punishment and Forgiveness*. Athens: Ohio UP, 1995.

Reid, Robin Ann. “The Centenary Caper: Casing Two Competing Schools of Detective Fiction.” *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 46.1 (1992): 55-62.

Reynolds, Barbara. *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul.* London: Hodder, 1993.

Roberts, Adam C. *Victorian Culture and Society*. The Essential Glossary Series. London: Arnold, 2003.

Ross, Stephen. *Conrad and Empire.* Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2004.

Rowland, Susan. *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction.* Crime Files. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.

Saintsbury, George. *A Consideration of Thackeray.* Oxford: Oxford UP, 1931.

Schrader, Heinz H. “Person und Wirklichkeit in Joseph Conrads politischen Romanen: Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung von *The Secret Agent*.” Diss. U of Hamburg, 1969.

Schwarz, Daniel R. *Conrad:* Almayer’s Folly *to* Under Western Eyes. London: Macmillan, 1980.

Shaffer, Brian W. “‘The Commerce of Shady Wares’: Politics and Pornography in Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*.” *ELH* 62.2 (1995): 443-466.

---. “Domestic Ironies: Housekeeping as Mankeeping in Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*.” *Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays.* Ed. Vanessa D. Dickerson. New York: Garland, 1995. 313-329.

Sherry, Norman. *Conrad’s Western World*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971.

---. “The Greenwich Bomb Outrage and *The Secret Agent* (1967).” *Conrad:* The Secret Agent: *A Casebook*. Ed. Ian Watt. London: Macmillan, 1973. 202-228.

Shillingsburg, Peter. *William Makepeace Thackeray: A Literary Life*. Literary Lives Series. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.

Soyka, Michael. *Wenn Frauen töten: Psychiatrische Annäherung an das Phänomen weiblicher Gewalt*. Stuttgart: Schattauer, 2005.

Stape, J. H., and Allan H. Simmons. “Tosca's Kiss: Sardou, Puccini, and *The Secret Agent.*” *Conradian* 32.1 (2007): 106-116.

Stevenson, Lionel. *The Showman of* Vanity Fair*: The Life of William Makepeace Thackeray*. 1947. New York: Russel, 1968.

---. “*Vanity Fair* and Lady Morgan.” *PMLA* 48.2 (1933): 547-551.

Sutherland, John A. “Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*.” *Explicator* 32.7 (1973): n.pag.

Taylor, David J. *Thackeray.* London: Chatto, 1999.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thakeray: Vol II: 1817-1840.* Ed. Gordon Norton Ray. Cambridge: Harward UP, 1946.

Tillotson, Geoffrey. *Thackeray the Novelist*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1954.

---. *A View of Victorian Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1978.

Tingsten, Herbert. *Victoria and the Victorians*. Trans. David Grey and Eva Leckström Grey. London: Allen, 1972.

Trollope, Anthony. *Thackeray*. English Men of Letters. London: Macmillan, 1882.

Trube-Becker, Elisabeth. *Frauen als Mörder: Mit 86 Falldarstellungen und 34 Tabellen.* Das Wissenschaftliche Taschenbuch: Abteilung Solziologie 19. München: Goldmann, 1974.

Walter, Erwin. *Entstehungsgeschichte von W. M. Thackerays* Vanity Fair. Palaestra: Untersuchungen und Texte aus der deutschen und englischen Philologie 79. Berlin: Mayer, 1908.

Warner, Oliver. *Joseph Conrad*. London: Longmans, 1950.

---. *Joseph Conrad*. Men and Books. London: Longmans, 1951.

Watson, Janet S. K. *Fighting different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain.* Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004.

Watt, Ian. *Essays on Conrad*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

Wiley, Paul L. *Conrad's Measure of Man*. 1954. New York: Gordian, 1970.

Williams, Ioan Miles. *Thackeray.* Literature in Perspective. London: Evans, 1968.

Wilson, Ben. *Decency and Disorder: The Age of Cant 1789 – 1837*. London: Faber, 2007.

# 11) Index