

The Femme Fatale Changing Perspectives Through Time

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Introduction

The femme fatale is defined as: an attractive and seductive woman. She causes distress to a man who is close to her. The word "femme fatale" has a French origin and always compared to biblical personae like: Eva, Salome, Lilith, Judith and Jezebel, Delilah and other mythological figures like Medea, Circe, Clytemnestra and Medusa.

To back to the 1890s in Europe, we find that they present the femme fatale figure usually as an ugly, sinister and pathetic one, whom we usually find in demi-monde of the Cafés and cabarets.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Alfonse Mucha share their ideas with the cynical spirit¹ of the 1890s. Also, just like in Europe, the same thing emerged in America. Virginia Allen says that, "the phrase "femme fatale" has appeared since 1900, while many of the images to which authors refer when they use it appeared before 1900".

Both mythology and literature reflect the real life in an imaginative way.

In mythology the archetype of the femme fatale is of a woman who is not human, but an enchantress, a goddess or a siren.

This particular woman is a source of inspiration to many writers all over the world.

While in real life she is always presented as a cruel and arrogant woman.

The Femme Fatale Through History

The femme fatale has many features; she has a timeless beauty, attractiveness and is irresistible: the beauty is not associated with her body or her shape only, but something deeper, it is her essence and power.

¹Cynical Spirit= is the belief that everyone is in it for their own self-interest, there is always an ulterior motive, and therefore no one can be trusted.

To speak about her look, she usually can be depicted as a woman with long loose red hair (which is not a colour that society can accept for this particular colour is against the social standards and usually associated with unrespected women like whores).

Her freeing sort of beauty is considered as a threat to what was expected of women. Her charm and seducing behaviour which is used to enchant the victims is another feature of hers. She is like the siren who uses her voice to spell others.

The femme fatale woman is able to have what she wants, for she has powerful and talented methods; she is no longer the passive female or the silent woman of the nineteenth century anymore, but she becomes the symbol for women. The femme fatale succeeds to give solution to what was and to who is woman in general face through decades.

It is important to differentiate between the femme fatale archetype and the fallen woman because they are completely different. The fallen woman has no choice to redempt and she is considered as an evil and powerful one, while the femme fatale has a chance to redeem.

To talk about the myth and its importance we should give a definition to the word "myth", in the Oxford English Dictionary myth is defined as a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events.

To go back in history we see that the creation of the myths was because people were in need to give explanations and answers to many existential human questions and so to provide ancient civilizations with possible answers about the creation of the world.

In modern days this significance is different because of the development in all aspects of life especially in science.

The importance of myths is because people consider the myth as a comforting thing; they supply it with the sense of faith. That is why we find many who believe in myths, in stories about gods and magical creatures. This truth includes all cultures without any exception.

When we say the word (Mythological creatures), what comes immediately to our minds are fairies, vampires, witches and sirens. Their roots go back to the Greek and Egyptian the goddesses like: Herd, Zeus, Hades, Poseidon, Iris,... etc.

Those creatures often represent virtues or vices of their belonging countries and cultures.

Their appearance can be a combination of two animals or more or even half human and half animal.

In the 19th century, the "New women" left their houses and families in order to have education and job. Men, in the other side, regarded that as "unnatural".

The femme fatale is a reflection of the male's anxiety about women's changing roles in community. To have a woman with a job is a type of a femme fatale one.

The importance of mythology lies in universal language that can suit all cultures with numerous archetypes and symbolism.

The mythmaking is created by the author through a supernatural being not human, so we have an interaction between the real world and previous world.

The mythmaking stands as a reminder, so people will remember their past cultures, traditions and heritage. Furthermore, the mythmaking is important to recognize religious practices and beliefs. The ancient tales have valuable lessons and the role of the mythmaking is to spot light on these values in both ancient myths and legends in literature.

In the neoteric years, there has been a rise in the number of books that retell Greek mythology that give life and allow others to reimagine them from modern perspectives; it is not a matter of retelling. These books are not a transient trend; they are a recommendation of the timeless nature of the mythical stories.

The cornerstone of ancient Greek culture is the Greek mythology that includes myths, legends and folktales about a pantheon of gods, goddesses, heroes and mythological creatures.

The first emergence of the mythical stories is in early 8th BCE with Hesiod's Theogony and Homer's Iliad and Odyssey in which there is a framework for understanding the world and the human experiences. The topics are of the lives of divine beings, the adventures of heroes and the foundations their cities and rituals. The myths are sources of inspiration for many aspects in life and literature.

The Gods and goddesses, like Zeus Hera, Athena and Apollo are not only to be worshipped, but they represent many aspects of life and nature. These myths being able to survive through days passage, show that they are really testaments passed down orally then immortalised in written forms by scholars and poets. The movement from oral to written forms is crucial in allowing the coming generations to know everything about these myths.

The ancient Greek myths were often linear and focus on heroic deeds and divine intentions. Also, they were usually concerned with learning moral lessons or to explain natural phenomena.

In modern writings they deal mostly with the psychology of the characters and to reveal their inner lives and emotional journeys.

They also use modern language and contextual changes to make the Greek myths more accessible and more related to our modern life. This

strengthens the idea of the timelessness of the Greek myths and that they play vital roles in our cultural heritage.

The author has to face many challenges while retelling the ancient myths. First of all, he has to make a balance between staying true to the original myth and retelling it to resonate with the modern audiences. This is a hard thing to be done, for there is always a thin line between destroying the original texts and refreshing a tale.

We have two very famous ancient works that have been retold in contemporary works in which the femme fatale figure is presented.

The first one is *The Odyssey* by Margreat Atwood, 2005; in which we have splendid modern twist of the original story.

In the original text we have, in Homer's account, Penelope (wife of Odysseus) and cousin of the beautiful wife. Penelope left alone for twenty years because Odysseus goes to fight in the Trojan War after the kidnapping of Helen. Penelope succeeds to stand against many rumors and gain the throne of Ithaca. She also brings back her rebellious son and has a hundred suitors at bay. When the king Odysseus comes back, he kills his wife, her suitors and curiously twelse of her maids.

At Atwood's retelling, the concentration is on Penelope and her twelve hanged maids.

Penelope asks "What led to hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to?".

The author's story becomes a wise story through giving Penelope a new life and reality. Atwood manages to provide an answer to an ancient mystery.

Therefore, Atwood's Penelope is realy a new way to look back at *The Odyssey*, it gives us a new perspective to the original myth because the new story is completely a new version of the original one. Atwood's main aim is to give voice to the unheard women in the original test.

Another modern example is the *Cinze* by Madeline Miller, 2018. In her work, Miller is addressing the journey of self-discovery, the power of transformation and the importance of grasping one's own identity.

Miller's book is an attempt to evoke the readers to critics the social conventions for being overly controlled by men. Miller is giving us a woman who has her own control upon her life and fate, though she is living in a world ruled by heroes and gods.

The term "femme fatale", with its French origin that means "deadly woman" or "lethal woman", who achieves her aims by taking advantage of her sexual allure, though her concentration on sexuality is usually feeble instead of depending on her beauty, she depends on using lies or compulsion. She may pretend to be a victim in cases where she can not escape.

In early 20th century American films the femme fatale character is referred to as a vamp in accordance to *The Vampire*, Philip the poem of Rudgard Kipling's in 1897. Then the play at 1909 and the film named "The Fool There Was".

Men often are pluffed for their sexual conquests while the femme fatale will be accused for being bold in matters of sex.

Women, in general, from young ages are prevented from adopting their sexuality, but the femme fatale opposes these social norms.

Sophie Adriasola who is a Davis graduate in neurobiology, physiology and behaviour wonders: "Is the femme fatale an empowering character trope who rises from the ashes of the patriarchal society, or does she" air on the side of a tragic hero?" Sophie's view of the femme fatale comes from 1950s classic noirs like the film "Gilda". She wants sex, she wants money and she wants power. These are things men are supposed to want, but here she is. She is going to ruin everything", said Adriasold

"Everything that the femme fatale does is centred around the worst nightmares of a man", she added with a smirk.

Her ability to enchant her victim with her charm gives the femme fatale a supernatural aura. Referred to as the enchantress, witch, vampire or siren, these terms have no trait in common-sex.

French for "fatal woman", the femme fatale quite literally brings out the destruction of men in her story, often times from her seductive nature.

The manhood society is creating a fact that the femme fatale concept is totally based on a sex. Women are contaminated by male's eye; they are making her sex instrument in their hands and for their own benefits.

Juan Nava says that "women understanding that males are inherently sexual creatures with one brain cell, and making advantages of that in an [empowering way], "which is in itself powerful".

In this way, we have a new picture or archetype of the femme fatale, now we can see her as an angle which is a kind of evolution. The femme fatale has been reformed by women who empower women.

Not to misunderstand that she is not switching from being a villain into an empowering woman; she has the power and at the same time, she is not a villain. This power comes from her being a human and a person not because she is a woman.

So, the new perspective of a femme fatale archetype is in fact a result of the mixture between the classical mythology and the feminist theory, which will create a new culture allowing women to write and prove themselves in the cultural history.

In choosing the ancient Greek myths by feminist writers is a right thing to do because of their paradoxical duality: the myths are products of an androcentric society, at the same time, reproducers of that society for they give excuses to the patriarchal structure which can be touched through

the men's narrative in which they exclude women and bond them to private sphere.

By writing myths again, the reader can feel happy in discovering new perspectives in the myths.

Conclusion

The femme fatale has changed from a figure of male-centred fear to a symbol of a female resistance and self-discovery. By doing so, there will be a cultural shift towards re-examining narratives.

This changing perspective shows how myths and archetypes can be reinterpreted to reveal new insight.

The femme fatale archetype developed greatly over time which shows the shift in social values, gender dynamics and cultural context.

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