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GÉNERO Y ESTUDIOS CULTURALES

Gothic Noir Filmic Male Gaze: Gender Stereotyping in Margaret Atwood's "The Freeze-Dried Groom"

Una mirada masculina filmica del Gótico Negro: Estereotipos de género en Margaret Atwood's "The Freeze-Dried Groom"

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Abstract

Stereotyping has been crucial in artistic representations, especially cinema, for the construction of gender paradigms. Males and females have been portrayed by means of simplified unrealistic clichés with the purpose of controlling and constraining them into patriarchal roles and conventions, promoting societal normative ideologies. In "The Freeze-Dried Groom," Margaret Atwood unveils gender stereotyping through a typically Gothic film noir male gaze in three of its stock characters: the *femme attrapée*, the "private eye" and the femme fatale. Hence, she discloses how, in a society where gender identities are changing, masculinity is in deep crisis, and men need to reassert their manhood. From a Gothic and feminist perspective, Atwood also depicts a *femme attrapée* and a femme fatale to reflect on female identity and gender dynamics. Gothic noir women are projections of male anxieties about female sexuality and female independence. Atwood exposes and questions the marriage-family institution, and the patriarchal society as a whole.

Key words: Gothic film noir; gender stereotyping; male patriarchal gaze; *femme attrapée*; private eye; femme fatale

Resumen

Los estereotipos han sido cruciales en las representaciones artísticas, especialmente en el cine, para la construcción de paradigmas de género.

Los hombres y las mujeres han sido retratados mediante clichés simplificados y poco realistas con el propósito de controlarlos y constreñirlos a roles y convenciones patriarcales promoviendo ideologías sociales normativas. En “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” Margaret Atwood revela los estereotipos de género a través de una mirada masculina típica del cine negro gótico en tres de sus personajes: la mujer atrapada, el detective y la mujer fatal. Así, Atwood muestra cómo, en una sociedad donde las identidades de género están cambiando, la virilidad está en una profunda crisis, y los hombres necesitan reafirmar su masculinidad. Desde una perspectiva gótica y feminista, Atwood también describe a una mujer atrapada y a una mujer fatal para reflexionar sobre la identidad femenina y la dinámica de género. Las mujeres del cine negro gótico son proyecciones de la ansiedad masculina acerca de la sexualidad e independencia femeninas. Atwood denuncia y critica la institución matrimonio-familia y la sociedad patriarcal en su conjunto.

Palabras clave: cine negro gótico; estereotipos de género; mirada patriarcal; *mujer atrapada*; investigador privado; mujer fatal

1. Introduction

Margaret Atwood recreates a patriarchal male gaze in her tale “The Freeze-Dried Groom” in the Gothic story collection *Stone Mattress*, which revolves around the sexual and gender politics that prevails in the narrative. Through a Gothic noir lens and a feminist perspective, her tale uncovers how the patriarchal view lays bare the gender stereotyping of men and women. David Schneider postulates that “[s]tereotypes can be thought of as schemas—preexisting theories and frameworks that help us understand our raw experiences” (2004: 170). Some stereotypes can be deeply embedded into our culture and it might be difficult for us to change them in accordance with our experiences.

Atwood resorts to Gothic machinations to unveil dark aspects of our contemporary culture through a sort of Gothic noir. The crime genre, especially the film noir, has a Gothic ancestry, sharing conventions with the Gothic tradition (Cashell, 2007). Actually, “The Freeze-Dried Groom” is dominated by a male-oriented Gothic noir “filmic” gaze, which relies on patriarchal constructions of gender roles, creating specific male and female archetypes. This cinema genre has traditionally given life to men’s fantasies and obsessions. The Gothic noir gaze exposes a way of controlling women, thus making plain the subjacent male supremacy. As Laura Mulvey claims, the noir patriarchal gaze “takes as starting point the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle” (1999: 833).

According to Mulvey, “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (1999: 833), hence shaping our perception of the world and the construction of our own identities. Douglas Kellner writes: “Radio,

television, film and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which we forge our very identities, our sense of selfhood; our notion of what it means to be male or female” (2009: 5). Film noir and the Gothic romance have specially represented women, but also men, through sexist patriarchal stereotypes, among them one-dimensional extremely sexualized female character, the *femme fatale*: “‘Stone Mattress’ and ‘The Freeze-Dried Groom’ closely resemble noir tales, their female characters taking on the mien of *femme fatales*, albeit given an explicitly feminist spin” (“Shortcuts”).

“The Freeze-Dried Groom” starts out with Sam, the protagonist, on a bad day. His wife, Gwyneth, tells him their marriage is over. What we expect to be a simple story of a loveless marriage gets entangled, each turn making it into more of a Gothic noir narrative. Sam is a shady furniture dealer, whose partner, Ned, is an expert at faking antiques. He transforms new cheap furniture into older and more valuable one. Sam finds furniture in storage unit auctions as a front for smuggling drugs. He plays the role of an intermediary. On this day, he bids on five units and one of them contains the most unexpected surprise.

Atwood’s “sociological gothic,” Margot Northey’s term (1976: 62), blends social realism and gothic fantasy. Accordingly, the tale moves between the main plotline and “hypothetical text-worlds” (Gavins, 2007), in which Sam fantasizes with what will happen after his death. Thus, he transforms an ordinary world into a gothic noir one through the power of his imagination. As in the Gothic, known for blurring boundaries between fantasy and real life, these two parallel narratives collide and make the reader doubt about the reality of the events.

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” Atwood puts the spotlight on social patriarchal gender constructs from a Gothic noir male gaze perspective. She emphasizes conventional sexist renditions: the oppression and subordination of women and the leading but limiting roles of men. The Gothic undercurrent in this story is connected to the stereotypes of the *femme attrapée*, the “private eye” and the *femme fatale*, through which Atwood uncovers and contests gender roles, especially women’s, as well as the marriage-family institution and the patriarchal society on the whole.

2. The “Femme Attrapée”: The Dull Housewife

Females have been categorized and stereotyped in patriarchal societies. Sarah Kühl (2016) asserts that the two conventional labels for women in Victorian times were the Angel in the House and the Fallen Woman, which are present in Western Christian cultures in examples such as the Virgin Mary and Eve:

The holy Virgin, pure and good, willing to sacrifice and to be made an instrument of God versus the temptress, herself seduced by the Devil, carnal in her sinfulness, who defies the rules laid down to her and thereby causes not just her own fall but the fall of man, the expulsion from Paradise (171).

The phrase “Angel in the House” comes from a very popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he depicts his angel-wife as a female model. Patmore expresses his ideas about the ideal woman and male-female relationships. The Angel in the House trope “represents the perfect housewife, the domestic goddess of the middle class that we nowadays strongly associate with the 19th century and that in some ways haunts us to this day” (Kühl, 2016: 171). As Andrew Spicer argues, the Angel in the House is “[t]he antithesis of the femme fatale [...] the figure of the innocent almost asexual homebuilder, the wife or sweetheart who sees her role as support and solace for the man” (2014: 1). This stereotype coincides, in some relevant aspects, with a classic film noir character type, the *femme attrapée* / ‘trapped woman’ (or domestic drudge), Jans Wager’s term (2005), which portrays the wife referring to her imprisonment in the patriarchal system.

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” Atwood’s Gothic noir is associated with the fears and anxieties regarding female experience and female cultural identities. The ‘trapped woman,’ as a housewife, does not resist patriarchy” (Wager, 1999: 15). She is linked to the family institution, an ideological cornerstone that materializes socially-sanctioned patriarchal principles and beliefs. Marriage, premised on the model of the male breadwinner and male-headed household, legitimizes reproduction and sexuality, and determines male and female roles. The artistic expression of the family in the Gothic noir endorses patriarchal social paradigms and gender conceptions.

In the very first scene, the family home is identified as the female domain, where woman must “tend to her household duties industriously” (Dunn, 1977: 17). Gwyneth is presented as a housewife, exemplifying the key traditional qualities of the Angel in the House/*femme attrapée*. Her domestic skills, such as her ability to make great coffee, are stressed. Besides, in the patriarchal system, married females, who face inequitable power relations, are subordinated to their husbands’ desires: “[T]he wife must obey the husband. This obedience or submission extends not only to the performance of duties required by the husband, but also to the abstinence from those activities which are displeasing to him” (Camden, 1975: 121). Thus, Gwyneth’s tough scrambled eggs at breakfast prove a point, “[s]he no longer wishes to please him [Sam]: quite the reverse” (136).¹

In Atwood’s tale, Gwyneth, beautiful “in a cameo kind of way” (143), is contrasted with the fatal woman, a “hot babe.” Her present lack of sexual appeal is mentioned several times: “[H]er once-inviting breasts” (137), or their once “charged with sexual electricity” (138) bedroom. Gwyneth is defined by her personality traits rather than by her physical complexion. Housewives, as Gothic heroines, are construed as passive and submissive, endowed with Christian virtues, such as patience and self-abnegation, which can be likened to the Virgin Mary’s attributes and Christ’s self-sacrifice. Wives must submit patiently to their husbands’ wishes and accept

¹ Margaret Atwood (2014). *Stone Mattress*. London: Virago (all subsequent quotations from this edition will be identified by the page number included in parentheses in the text).

their flaws, offering “forgiveness and the promise of a stable world of loyalty, faithfulness and loving security” (Spicer, 2014: 91).

Gwyneth is depicted as a virginal Gothic redeemer who believes she can change her husband for the better: “Hauling him out of scrapes, dusting him off, polishing him so he shone like new—that kind of thing was once her cherished avocation. If anyone could fix him, she could” (142). Trying to change your spouse is deemed to be specially a female thing. Women, “natural nurturers,” are assumed to enjoy looking after others, a way to express their love and, at the same time, it allows them to exert the control that otherwise is denied to them. In the Gothic romance, the lady’s love has a great impact on the male hero. It can heal the wounds of the past and make him a virtuous man: “[The Angel in the House] remains passive, nurturing, and nonthreatening—a redeeming angel for a hero hopelessly tempted by the active, independent, and dangerous femme fatale” (Blaser & Blaser, 2008). Nevertheless, Gwyneth fails at redeeming Sam.

Sam and Gwyneth’s relationship seems to respond to the common pattern that therapists call a “parent-child marriage,” in which one partner, generally the female, takes on the household responsibilities, while the other partner, usually the male, plays the role of the child. Some females tend to see their husbands as in need of being taken care of because they are irresponsible, or helpless at home. This dynamics can go well in the first years of wedlock. Notwithstanding, the parent-child relationship can become toxic and lead to discontent and resentment in one or both spouses. Gwyneth has come to feel that Sam is worthless. When his car does not start, she thinks that this is just one more item on “the endlessly unfurling scroll of his fecklessness” (142).

Moreover, women may have unrealistic romantic expectations of men and may feel allured by Gothic villainous powerful males. According to Sam, before marrying him, Gwyneth wished for an “exciting man of action” (143), an overbearing and strong man, with whom she could escape from her dull life. She also wanted to be swift off her feet with sexual passion, “a sexual magician” (143), a seductive Gothic “vampire”:

They were Gwyneth’s image of him just after they started dating: the king of beasts, the forceful predator who’s fling her around a bit, do some toothwork on her. Hold her down, writhing with desire, one paw on her neck. (139)

Gwyneth finally backs out of her intention to break up with her husband, and tells him to return and talk it through. Married women might accept a settled relationship that does not work because they do not want to feel alone. In turn, men, like Sam, want a good wife that looks after them and with whom they can feel safe, as in contrast to the thrill of being by yourself or with a sensual femme fatale. In “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” Atwood depicts a Gothic heroine, Gwyneth, who undergoes female victimization and is complicit in her own predicament. Home (marriage and family) is portrayed as a site of fear, conflict and anxiety.

3. The “Private Eye”: The Seductive Swindler

The Byronic hero, a Romantic literary figure named after the English poet Lord Byron, is the precursor of the antihero, or the classic “bad boy,” as well as the noir “private eye.” John Milton’s Lucifer from *Paradise Lost* may have served as an inspiration for Byron. Scholars consider Byron’s Childe Harold, the semi-autobiographical protagonist of his epic poem “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage,” the first literary Byronic hero. Byronic heroes still play an important role in modern literature, especially in Gothic novels, cinema and pop culture. These villains usually have several distinct traits: angry, rebellious, seductive, and vicious. They have been seen as desirable men in their mystery, strength and dominance, attributes associated with traditional masculinity.

The film noir is traditionally a male narrative, in spite of the conspicuous presence of the femme fatale. Indeed, noir films “reveal an obsession with male figures who are both internally divided and alienated from the culturally permissible (or ideal) parameters of masculine identity desire and achievement” (Krutnik, 2006: xiii). The central male character, the private eye, is a “tough guy” famed for his physical endurance and desire for beautiful women (Cohan, 1997: 42). “The Freeze-Dried Groom” is “almost a spoof of the detective novel” (Maciek, 2014), and Sam fits the private eye paradigm, particularly in his relationship with the predacious fatal woman.

Sam, as a private eye, is characterized by his physical attractiveness and powers of seduction. When Gwyneth first encounters him, she finds him almost irresistible. Despite their charm, classic noir sleuths are not often good partners or husbands. Sam has always been a lousy husband. He has been given second chances before, and knows that whatever has triggered his wife’s current behaviour is “[n]othing in the way of mislaid cask and illicit lipstick besmearing” (136). Sam is depicted as a misogynistic womanizer with “[r]ound, candid eyes. Con-man’s eyes” (144), who can “do the blue-eyed thing” (144) to trick women. Gazing into his eyes, “what woman could find it in her heart to disbelieve whatever excuse he was laying out before her” (144). Sam entices Gwyneth by making her feel special “as if she was a valuable teacup” (142), and showing her “appreciative lechery” (143).

Private eyes, like Gothic villains, lead a troubled life covered by a veil of mystery. They are generally haunted by secret dark crimes or tragedies in their past, which add suspense to their stories and shape their present. Sam lies to his wife about his mother. He tells her that she is dead so Gwyneth does not have to choose between his mother’s account of his life and his own. As dark Gothic heroes, film noir private investigators do not hesitate to do immoral or even violent work. Sam, a drug dealer, is compared to “[s]ome loveable comic gangster, naughty but trustworthy at heart” (142).

Sam marries his wife primarily for her money. When Gwyneth first meets him, she had been looking after her family and did not have much dating experience. With the innocence of the traditional gothic maiden, she tells him about her dead parents and her inheritance. Sam makes her believe he is well-off and beguiles her into marrying him. Marrying has been

viewed as women's main goal in life. Conversely, for men, it has been considered to be a way of giving up on their desires or lowering their standards. Sam, who is getting older, wants to settle down to lead a more comfortable life with someone who takes care of him: "[H]e saw in her [...] a respectable facade behind which he could hunker down for a while" (143).

Private eyes have troubled family histories. In the face of his marriage breakup, Sam, who knows they are experiencing marital problems, does not show any emotions. He just wishes Gwyneth would look upset, and that he would have dumped her first. Sam is hurt that she has beaten him to it, and he cannot make a dramatic exit, as his car will not start that morning:

He doesn't even get to roar off around the corner, va-voom and good riddance, the sailor hitting the high seas, and who needs the ladies dragging you down like cement blocks tied to your ankles? A wave of the hand and away he'd go, cruising to ever-new adventures. (141)

Sam envisions himself as a happy man once he is divorced: "He'll be wandering the world like a snail, house on his back, which is possibly how he feels most comfortable. He'll whistle a merry tune. He'll ramble. He'll smell like himself again" (145). Stereotypically, singlehood is believed to give men freedom, while single women have been stigmatized as career-driven females or as ugly females incapable of being in a relationship.

Hardboiled detectives are anti-social "lone wolves," who work on their own. Their loneliness and alienation (part of their essence as Gothic heroes) make them wander restlessly. Because of his work, Sam, a sort of adventure-seeker, travels a lot and lives in motels or even camps out in the back of a shop. Searching for furniture in storage-unit auctions appears as a treasure-hunt. Sam talks about the thrill of winning an auction and how he expects to find a treasure. In his third unit, Sam wonders: "Third time luck: what if it's a treasure trove? He can still get excited over the possibility even though he knows it's like believing in the tooth fairy" (152).

The femme fatale is at the core of Sam's constant Gothic erotic fantasies, in which he "foresees" his future. In his mind-game, he spins a plot-thread that narrates the steps on a murder investigation, envisioning the interviews to potential witnesses. Chloe Harrison and Louise Nuttall (2019) argue that "the whole story may be reframed as a police report [...] this report-style account suggests [...] a detective outlining Sam's movements." Sam imagines himself lying on a mortuary lab. The forensic analyst is invariably a hot blonde with a lab coat that covers her firm lady-doctor breasts. While she examines him expertly, she envisages his life and the adverse circumstances leading to his tragic end. In his daydreams, Sam awakes and engages in sexual activities with her. His reveries come true when he, apparently, becomes an actual murder victim. According to Kieran Cashell (2007), "like the vampire in gothic fiction, the femme fatale persona signifies the reflection of the protagonist's own impulse to self-destruction, and embodies thus his own threatening desire."

The private eye unveils a crisis in masculine identity that could be explained as the result of the exponential growth in female labour during World War II, which triggered a shift in gender roles. Accordingly, Gothic

noir reveals deep anxiety about gender and the need to reassert masculinity. Males, who in patriarchal societies usually adopt a commanding role, have to prove their manhood. And yet, they may have an inner conflict and might be weary of conforming to this conventional patriarchal stereotype. Sam dreams about being subdued and surrendering control. In his main fantasy, he plays the ultimate passive part, that of a dead man, who totally submits to the sexualized woman. Hence, as in classic Gothic novels, traditional roles are reversed, and Sam has the opportunity to get relieved from the burden of always being in charge.

In the Gothic noir, both men and women keep their traditional places in a society with a rigid patriarchal gender dynamics. The hardboiled detective's life is contrasted with that of the family man, who is doomed to a boring domestic life with a dreary wife. The last part of Atwood's tale focuses on the private eye-femme fatale relationship, a battle of will that illustrates Gothic noir sexual politics. The tough sleuth, a philanderer, becomes fascinated and obsessed with the fatal woman. Atwood exposes Sam's scopophilic instinct that Mulvey (1999) defines as the sexual pleasure that is involved in looking: The femme fatale is an erotic object the male enjoys subjecting to his inquisitive domineering gaze, and with whom he generally has casual sexual.

As a modern Gothic archetype of masculine "heroism," Sam is set on discovering the mystery, the reason why the bride may have killed her soon-to-be husband. He pursues to break her down and make her confess. His interest to solve the riddle is interweaved with his desire for sex. Mulvey contends that the male unconscious has two avenues of escape from the castration anxiety the male gaze causes. In the film noir, it is often the preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma: the investigation of the woman and demystification of her mystery, counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or the salvation of the guilty object. This avenue consists of "forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat" (1999: 40).

In "The Freeze-Dried Groom," Sam is truly placed within the symbolic order, playing the role of the patriarchal super-ego, epitomizing manhood. He uses his power, the knowledge about the contents of storage unit three, in an attempt to subjugate the woman killer, engaging in a dangerous game. Both 'private eye' and femme fatale lie. Sam says that he has still not opened the unit to see what she will make up. The enigmatic woman tells him a story of how she could not prevent the sale of the storage room, and tries to buy it back from him. Sam appears as a confident and powerful male, and yet, his position is indeed precarious, symbolizing that the traditional male identity is in the throes of crisis. He challenges a woman who seems to have already murdered and may do it again. Notwithstanding, Sam is determined to solve the intriguing crime.

4. The "Femme Fatale": The Killer Bride

The French phrase *femme fatale*, "deadly woman," first appeared in the mid 1800s, depicted in Jules Claretie's *La Vie a Paris* (1896). The *femme fatale* is one of the fallen woman stereotypes. The archaic 19th-

century term “Fallen Woman” was used to signify a promiscuous female or a female who has sex out of wedlock and, consequently, sins against God, deviating from the conventional construction of the ideal womanhood. The “Fallen Woman,” the counterpart of the respectable woman, is a middle class concept based on the transgression of middle class values, sexual purity and female submissiveness. Hence, Victorian female identity was intertwined with sexuality: A woman was either an innocent chaste maiden/the Angel in the House (wife or mother), a spinster, or even a fallen woman (an adulteress or a whore), whose nonconformist sexuality banishes her from femininity and from society.

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” Atwood uses the Gothic mode to explore the nature of female evil, unveiling an ancient dichotomy, the good woman-bad woman. She exposes the demonization, monsterization, and subversive nature of the Gothic noir femme fatale, a powerful irresistible temptress, a perverse female, who is portrayed as imperturbable, calculating, insensitive, determined and defiant. She is also called fatal woman or spider woman, and sometimes man-eater or vamp. In the 1940’s movies, these beautiful females were equated with “vampiresses,” bloodsuckers who drain men of life. Virginia Allen states, “[t]here is a dimension to the meaning of the femme fatale suggesting that even though she might die, she will not be obliterated. She will rise to claim another victim, perhaps as one of the living dead, a vampire” (1983: 2).

Historically, the femme fatale stereotype took hold after the World War II in America with the massive entrance of women in the workforce to occupy men’s jobs, which fostered female emancipation. When the war was over, they did not want to go back to their domestic duties or withdraw their newfound independence and power. The fatal woman often looks for economic independence, freedom, or power:

The imagery of the femme fatale was associated with the nineteenth century growth of feminism. The years during which the femme fatale acquired her essential attributes were the years during which the female emancipation movement gathered strength. The femme fatale, independent of male control, and threatening men, reflects the fears of generations of social thinkers. She was produced by men who felt threatened by the escape of some actual women from male dominance. (Allen, 1983: 191)

The femme fatale is rendered as a Gothic over-sexualized monster, who captivates her prey, men, and leads them to death: “She is insane, violent, predatory, and finally, dead” (Sherwin, 2008: 182). She is shown as rebellious, and also intimidating or menacing. It is Spicer’s contention that

[t]he figure of the deadly female—femme fatale/spider woman/vamp—emerged as a central figure in the nineteenth century and became one of the most persistent incarnations of modern femininity, the woman who ‘never really is what she seems to be’ and is therefore, in a patriarchal culture, ungovernable and threatening. (2014: 90)

However, it is actually a society dominated by men that creates the “monster” as a result of the social constraints imposed on women:

Even when [film noir] depicts women as dangerous and worthy of destruction, [it] also shows that women are confined by the roles traditionally open to them—that their destructive struggle for independence is a response to the restrictions that men place on them. (Blaser & Blaser, 2008)

The dark, sexual and active spider woman, whose sexuality is linked to monstrosity, is imperative in the renditions of women in the American Gothic noir. Mulvey asserts how, in film noir, the erotic pleasure is interlaced with the image of the woman, specifically the femme fatale, hence the “[u]nchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order” (1999: 835). The noir male gaze turns the woman into a sexual object, the leit-motiff of erotic spectacle, which plays to and signifies male desire (1999: 837). In a world as ours characterized by sexual imbalance, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (1999: 837).

The man, as the representative of power/the “bearer of the look,” is in control of the filmic phantasy, which is structured around his commanding figure. Mulvey highlights how the male gaze rests upon “[t]he woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look” (1999: 840). Females exist in terms of what they mean to male characters, and their feelings, thoughts, sexual desires are not relevant. In their traditional exhibitionist role, women “are simultaneously looked at and displayed” and “their appearance [is] coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (1999: 837).

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” at the auction, Sam discovers that the mystery of storage unit three is a sort of Miss Havisham’s “big-ticket wedding” (154), as in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. Nevertheless, there is a big difference with Miss Havisham’s rotting feast sitting on the table, among all the stuff stored, in a dark corner is the frozen mummified groom himself. In his association with the ice storm and other references to cold, he possibly symbolizes the couple’s failed relationship and Sam’s foretold death (Harrison & Nuttall, 2019). Only the bride is missing.

Gwyneth, like Miss Havisham, is apparently fooled by a man who conspires to swindle her out of her riches. Miss Havisham, jilted at the altar on her wedding day, locks herself away in her house, leaving intact all her wedding feast to decay. She becomes a bitter broken-hearted recluse determined to “wreak revenge on all the male sex” (Dickens, 2010: 157). She trains her ward, Estella, to be a femme fatale, who will avenge her adoptive mother. In the mysterious bride’s story, the motif hidden behind her actions may be vengeance, or just money. Unlike Miss Havisham, the killer bride may have murdered the groom to “right” the wrongs inflicted on her, or just to get rid of him.

Like Gothic romances, noir films of postwar America convey a critical and ambivalent view of marriage and family life; in part, an attack on traditional family/marriage structures and the socially-sanctioned values

they incarnate (Kaplan, 1983: 60). The spider woman, the antithesis of what the conventional housewife epitomizes, is assimilated with the marriage/family absence or failure. Family relations are frequently broken up or perverted and marriages are pictured as boring and confining. As Blaser and Blaser (2008) write, “[a]nother sign of the sterility of Film Noir marriages is the absence of children produced by these marriages. Childless couples are far more common in Film Noir than the traditional father-mother-children nuclear family.” Noir males’ life comes to be an escapade from the frustrating routine of this institution. When seeking pleasure, men must renounce patriarchal values and face the tragic consequences. Film noirs seem to state that death waits outside the family.

The Gothic noir fatal woman, indecipherable and dangerous, seduces and hypnotizes men, who cannot resist their attraction towards her. James Maxfield (1996) regards her as a symptom of male anxieties about women, as she threatens to “castrate and devour” her male victim. When first introduced in “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” the mysterious woman makes an alluring appearance in the dark and freezing night with a hood covering her blond hair. Sam knows immediately she must be the killer bride. Physically and in her garments, she fits the femme fatale stereotype. She wears “black, for widow, for spider. It goes well with her ash-blond hair. Her eyes are hazel, her eyelashes long” (161).

The Gothic spider woman illustrates male fears of female sexuality, as she is not only endowed with sexual power, but she also owns her sexuality, a menace to man’s authority:

[M]en and heterosexual intercourse are not necessary to fulfil female desire [...] man is dependent on another for sexual satisfaction, while woman is autoerotic and therefore needs no one. This, in addition to castration anxiety, is what woman represents for man: autoeroticism, sexual independence. (177)

The sexual tension between the flawed “detective” and the femme fatale can be felt from the very onset. They engage in a deadly seduction game that will apparently take Sam to his death. The captivating woman uses her sexual appeal (the tremulous smile, the bitten lip, the magnetic looks) to ensnare Sam into accepting her money offers. The private eye also employs his most effective flirtatious strategy, his sensual blue-eyed gaze.

The femme fatale as a figure of female power is contrasted to other Gothic female figures, such as the *femme attrapée*, which appear as defenseless victims. She also evinces male anxieties about female agency and power. The fatal woman shares some of the features that patriarchy has assigned to men. She exhibits ambitions that have been presumed to be intrinsic to the male world:

The quintessential femme fatale of Film Noir uses her sexual attractiveness and ruthless cunning to manipulate men in order to gain power, independence, money, or all three at once. She rejects the conventional roles of devoted wife and loving mother that mainstream society prescribes for women, and in the end her transgression of social norms leads to her own destruction

and the destruction of the men who are attracted to her. (Blaser & Blaser, 2008)

In her relationship to men, the spider woman is seen as a kind of competitor. She has been deemed as the female version of the classic Don Juan. The fatal woman does not hesitate to use her beauty and sexual allure to seduce and manipulate males for her own ends. Miranda Sherwin says that “a distinction made by the film between male and female sexuality [is that] for a man, sexual prowess is something to brag about; for a woman, it is a crime” (2008: 80).

The femme fatale, as a Gothic monster, is often a calculating unrepentant murderess, a destructive force. When Sam realizes that the bride is cognizant of his knowledge about the content of the storage box, he should take the money and run. Nonetheless, he is certainly enjoying himself: “A real murderess, coming on to him! It’s edgy, it’s rash, it’s erotic. He hasn’t felt this alive for some time” (159). Sam even envisions various scenarios of how she would kill him: poisoning him, cutting his throat, shooting him an overdose.

The thrill Sam feels is partially due to the fact that, in Gothic noir, danger goes hand in hand with sex. The femme fatale and the “sleuth” agree to meet at a motel to discuss her offers. The motel is called “The Silver Knight,” about which she makes a joke: Will Sam ride to her rescue? That might happen to fair ladies in romances, but not to the spider woman. Sam wishes he were in control. He tells himself that “he’s got her by the neck” (159). And yet, he knows that “[a]nything at all can happen” (161). When he sits with her at the motel, the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. In the motel room, he feels that holding her in his arms “is the most electric thing he’s ever done. She hums with danger, like a high-tension wire; she’s a raw socket [...] the minute he releases one of her hands, he might be dead” (164). The will fight/seduction game, which Sam describes as a type of competition, is definitely not just about sex, but also about males’ “need to control and repress” women (Place, 1998: 53). At the end of the story, Sam still wants to believe “[h]e’s still ahead, he’s gaining on her” (165).

In the classic film noir, the femme fatale sometimes converts into a “good” woman who marries the hero, thus restoring the status quo. Nevertheless, as a rebellious female, she usually receives her comeuppance for violating patriarchal restraints and her usual demise is to go to jail or be killed so that her transgression is punished and her defiant figure is neutralized: “[Film noir] depicts women as dangerous and worthy of destruction” (Blaser & Blaser, 2008). Fatal women’s portrayals in throwback noir films might be easier to understand as a critique to the patriarchal system regarding their motivation and backstory when compared to their contemporary counterparts, who do not have to die.

“The Freeze-Dried Groom,” with its interplay of Gothic and noir fiction, hints at the processes of victimization, monsterization and demonization of females in the patriarchal system. Atwood’s story “is not a tale about an actual woman, but a story about the narrator’s perception of that woman” (Duncan, 2010: 134-35). It shows how the Gothic female monster resists male interpretation. As Jeffrey Cohen argues, the femme

fatale is “the harbinger of category crisis” (1996: 6), the crisis of female gender norms. It can make you question conceptions of social gender roles, and it also makes you realize how negative patriarchal stereotypes are for both men and women.

5. Conclusion

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” Atwood discloses gender stereotyping through a typically Gothic noir filmic male gaze. Stereotyping has been crucial in gender constructions in artistic depictions, especially cinema. Mainstream films, particularly film noirs, have explicitly supported gender stereotyping. Males and females have been characterized by means of simplified unrealistic clichés so as to oppress, control and constrain them into patriarchal paradigms and conventions, promoting social normative ideologies. In Atwood’s tale, three film noir stock characters are shown: the *femme attrapée*, the “private eye” and the femme fatale. Through them, Atwood criticizes gender inequality, the marriage-family institution, and the patriarchal society as a whole.

Modern Gothic noir narratives deal with the upheaval of traditional gender roles and underscore the crisis of feminine and masculine identities. Sam, the hardboiled detective/the anti-hero, is a paramount noir stereotype, whose qualities are associated with what patriarchy construes as overwhelming masculinity, which collides with the female world. Christopher Breu contends that the film noir expresses “a crisis of masculinity [...] as an aggressive reassertion of male privilege that lends postwar noir its specific gendered charge” (2009: 201). Modern noir films depict a “decadent consumer culture” “[w]ith dramatic changes in employment patterns for men and women and increasing gender role reversals involving domesticated dads and working moms, the idea of a masculine identity crisis emerges” (Fireman, 2003). Contemporary Gothic noir exposes how masculinity can no longer be defined as the opposite of femininity. It shows how masculine identity is in deep crisis through inverted gender roles, or male depictions as domesticated or emasculated/feminized. In a society where traditional masculine traits are disputed, men are in search of a new sense of agency. They need to reassert their manhood.

In “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” the idea of murder and death is always present. The Gothic noir detective, a morally flawed loner, is fascinated and strongly drawn to a predatory and dangerous female. He cannot resist her feminine wiles, her sexual appeal or the compulsive need to uncover her mystery. Sam knows that he is playing with fire, as she may be a murderer. And yet, he cannot help himself. In the lethal seduction game between the Gothic doomed hero and the killer bride, he is obsessed with subjugating her, symbolically returning her to the female sphere, as males usually do in the film noir. However, apparently, she brings about the male’s downfall. Sam disappears, “Nobody knows where he is” (165), indicating the seemingly consummation of his fantasies, his death, which may stand for the symbolic renunciation of the patriarchal position of power.

Atwood uses the Gothic form to unveil women's roles and duties, female domestic subjection and the power politics of the family institution, conveying anxiety about female victimization and oppression. Her use of "the ambiguous nature of gothic fiction best expresses the contradiction at the centre of any search for female identity in Canadian literature" (Friesen, 1990: 13). Contemporary Gothic noir highlights the manifold incongruities of post-feminism, the new configurations of female experiences and the modern challenges to notions about femininity and womanhood. In its rearticulation of female types: "Good/bad women morph into each other in dreamlike scenarios and inexplicable shifts which suggest how insubstantial—that is, fantastical—these images are" (Tasker, 2013: 367).

Gwyneth, the *femme attrapée*, is trapped by patriarchy, which she does not defy (Wager, 1999: 15). She embodies patriarchal values and beliefs. In contrast, the *femme fatale* questions and contests the patriarchal order, refusing to play by the rules of a male-dominated society. The 'trapped woman' is pictured as "the passive, domestic antithesis to the *femme fatale*" (Wager, 2005: 4). Her worth and identity are connected with the domestic sphere and the strongholds of marriage and family. The fatal woman, on the other hand, disrupts traditional womanhood and the marriage-family institution, which imprisons women in a relationship based on restraint, subordination and abuse. In Gothic noir stories, marriage and family, as supposedly safe havens, are linked with unhappiness, routinized boredom and lack of sexual desire or romantic love.

The *femme attrapée*, a "nurturing woman," "gives love, understanding (or at least forgiveness), asks very little in return" (Place, 1998: 60). Wager (2005) labels her as a "redeemer." Atwood unveils through Sam and Gwyneth's breakup how marriage and family fail and redemption cannot be finally acquired. The strong-minded and independent spider woman, contrarily, is willing to challenge the world of man and refuses to be defined by the male hero. Her agency is fettered to sex that she uses for pleasure, conversely to the culturally acceptable use of sex, within wedlock, for procreation, and as a weapon to seduce and manipulate men to get what she wants.

Nowadays, it is problematic to accept the paradigmatic fatal woman as a realistic model for subversive female behaviour, or as an example of how to make the patriarchal order collapse. Her noncompliance is undermined by the fact that this stereotype is heavily rooted in male fantasies (Hilmes, 1990). Her vengeance belongs to a world of fancy, just as the glamorous *femme fatale*. Female violence will not end patriarchal domination over women. True change will only be the result of a profound social transformation by female constructive agency:

Contrary to misguided notions of gender equality, women do not and will not seize power and create self-love and self-esteem through violent acts. Female violence is no more liberatory than male violence. And when violence is made to look sexy and eroticized [...] it does not serve to undercut the prevailing cultural sentiment that it is acceptable to use violence to reinforce domination (hooks, 2016).

In addition, the *femme fatale* has been frequently used as a consumerist product in pop culture. Pop feminism has often focused on a simplistic idea of transgression, promoting a vengeful, destructive and over-sexualized female, as in Taylor Swift's song "Blank Space" or Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*. This album, bell hooks says, "glamorizes a world of gendered cultural paradox and contradiction [...]. Her vision of feminism does not call for an end to patriarchal domination" (2016). Samantha Lindop believes that the postfeminist discourse, as in the figure of the *femme fatale*, sabotages the feminist project and its defiance of patriarchal power structures (2015: 11). She emphasizes that the Gothic deadly spider woman functions individualistically within patriarchy, as in contrast to the female sisterhood's insurgent political actions (2015: 51).

However, Katherine Farrimond points out that "powerful monsters [femme fatales] are not simply diagnosed and deactivated" (2017: 162). She highlights how the fatal woman trope proves to be very effective when expressing key social anxieties about patriarchal gender dynamics. The representation of her power and sexuality is remarkably resilient and malleable in its liminality, displaying a great potential to pose vital and complex questions in an accessible and popular form, and through her actions, she makes plain "the limited options for [female] empowerment and agency in contemporary American culture" (2017: 14).

Currently, women are appropriating and reformulating the mythical *femme fatale* to empower females, show their complex identities and express gender issues and anxieties from their own perspective. Even though feminist pop culture only spreads identity performances, the *femme fatale* has become an iconic figure and a representative of feminism. It is in a symbolic realm that the spider woman, who defies patriarchal values challenging male control and supremacy, has truly become a representative of modern femininity and gender equality. It is particularly in the new female approach to this problematic figure that the fatal woman may offer a progressive, feminist view of women:

In every iteration over the years, the kernel of danger at the *femme fatales* cores is that she's out for herself: she doesn't exist in service to or for men. There's something individual and hungry driving her and it makes her dangerous. But maybe one day, that'll just be how we see women on screen all the time. Separate from the danger they pose to men, separate from the anger they feel towards men. A dame in search of her own destiny. (Sutton, 2019)

As Gil Friesen claims: "Atwood's gothic revision reflects the changing emphasis of an emerging feminist movement which tends to present the female as the agent of her own destiny, including her ability to be evil" (1990: 13).

In the open ending of "The Freeze-Dried Groom," the stability of the patriarchal order seems to be contested by the empowered mysterious bride who does not accept to abide by patriarchal norms. She is not willing to put up with males' authority. She does not only allegedly murder her future-to-be husband, and the "private eye," but also symbolizes vengeance for the

wife that the male “detective” mistreats and neglects. In her tale, Atwood wants her readers to reflect and see whether they take or not on commonplace patriarchal perspectives in the denouement of the story. That is why, after the publication of the collection, she set up a fan fiction competition via the website Wattpad, so readers could answer the tantalizing questions it poses.

Atwood’s version of the Gothic noir unveils discontent about marriage and the nuclear family institutions, and the conventional values they embody, as well as shows the failure of the patriarchal system in its gender dynamics and politics. It reveals a crisis in modern masculinity, which fails to assert itself as a way to rule over women and contain them “in their place.” The Gothic noir renditions of women question gender roles and sexuality, and demand their re-valuation. We do not know for certain what happens at the end of “The Freeze-Dried Groom,” or even if everything is just a fantasy, but the captivating image of the femme fatale, the woman who defies traditional family and conventional prevailing gender roles, lingers.

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