

'LA TRAVIATA': MORALITY, FREUD AND FEMALE MASOCHISM

By Sara Collins

The real La Traviata

Based on the true story of Rose Alphonsine Plessis, a French country girl turned courtesan, Verdi's opera *La Traviata* charts the short life and turbulent emotional arc of a 19th century woman. In continental Europe, this was a time when some young women were serial mistresses of powerful men who provided them with shelter, luxuries and a shadowy place in society. In Parisian demi-monde of the 19th century this was quite the norm. But English life was steeped in hypocrisy typical of the Victorian age, as was the case in Freud's Vienna.

We know of the beautiful Rose Alphonsine that she suffered a neglectful, abusive childhood. A few years after the death of her mother, her father sold her, aged 13, to a seventy-year-old wealthy bachelor who kept her for a year. Then she was sent away to fend for herself. If this sounds Dickensian, it was. She arrived in Paris aged 16, alone. By then she had learned from her harsh early life what other girls in her position had known, that at the very least there was power in their beauty and youthful femininity, and that these were assets on which they could trade. Compliance to men already an established pattern in Miss Plessis' life, being paid for it in material comforts had an attractive twist. Submission and a phantasy of protection, it seemed, went hand in hand. She gave up working in a dress shop for little money and refashioned herself as a courtesan, re-named Marie Duplessis. In her short life as a mistress she knew a string of influential figures in the European art world, including the young Alexandre Dumas. She died of consumption aged 23, alone. After her death, Dickens is said to have been present at the public auctioning of her belongings, where he took notes.

Life transforms into art

This short and tragic life, a disturbing and disturbed individual tale, held a mirror to an age of crushing moral duplicity. A poignant narrative, shot through with threads of glamour, this was an irresistible story that had to be communicated. It was as well a plot about how beauty, femininity and sheer survival instincts assert themselves. This, in a way, is also what art does. Novelists, composers and choreographers have repeatedly fictionalised the biographical facts of Miss Plessis. By means of aesthetic forms they re-shaped its raw ugliness to make the underlying truths palatable. But it started with an artist who was himself part of the intricate narrative.

Alexandre Duma the younger's novel, 'The Lady of the Camellias' was a thinly veiled account of his liaison with Marie Duplessis. His book was quickly turned into a stage play. A while later, the Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi came upon the story while visiting Montmartre Cemetery in Paris, where Marie Duplessis was buried. His inspiration came from the inscription on the tombstone, which he read it in the company of his fellow musician and mistress, soprano Josepina Straponi. Immediately he set about putting the intriguing yarn to music. The work was entitled *La Traviata*, 'the fallen woman' in Italian. Marie Duplessis became Violetta Valery, and now this opera is said to be the most performed opera of all times. Here too was a case of art echoing life; in this instance it was that of the composer's private affairs. Verdi met Josepina after the death of his wife and two children in a short space of time. A celebrated prima donna, Josepina was of humble beginnings and had had illegitimate children from different lovers. She first fell in love with Verdi's work, then she

fell in love with him. He withstood the moral indignations levelled at his liaison with Josepina and became particularly irritated by hypocrisy. Thus he peopled his operas with anti-heroes and outcasts, and what better a complex outsider than a fallen woman, whose transgressions are sexual. But, unlike the lone castaway, a high class prostitute acts in a couple. *Her* indiscretions can be accomplished only with the intimate complicity of another person.

The 'fallen woman'

La Traviata 'the fallen woman' echoes the Biblical notion of the 'fall from Eden' a metaphor for loss of innocence and moral failure. The 'fallen woman' is a particular notion too. In both cases the woman, being feeble in the ethical sense, is being tasked with receiving the projections of moral weakness. In European Christian culture it takes its place through the story of woman Mary Magdalena. Interestingly, her very name implies a high place, not the reverse. The word 'Magdalena' derives from the Arameic 'Magdala', Arameic being the spoken language at the time of Christ. The Hebrew equivalent would be 'Migdal', meaning an elevated space, a tower. So that her very name is an allusion to a higher status, from which she had first fallen, then been re-instated through a specific encounter that saved her.

What Mary Magdalene's character achieved by means of theology, her name sake, Marie Duplessis, many centuries later, achieved through art. In her case it was a transformation through insight and understanding, rather than moral judgement, realized by means of artistic expression. Following its premiere in La Fenice in Venice, the London performance of La Traviata took place in 1856, less than 10 years after the 'true life' courtesan died. It caused a great stir when first put on the London stage, but it was the London performance that gave it worldwide acclaim. However, at the time there was indignation. Reviewers dubbed it "a show of harlotry upon the London stage", voicing the very hypocrisy that Verdi was exposing in his art. Aspects of Victorian life, steeped as it was in duplicity, were shown in the theatre, and the people flocked to see it. There, they were shown some truths that could not otherwise be told.

Morality in Freud's time

Freud was born in the same year as La Traviata was first performed in London. During his time Austrian society could suitably be described as Victorian. While England's duplicitous moral standards were constantly caricatured and sent off, the Viennese bourgeoisie were serious about theirs. There were rigorous attempts to regulate the sexual behaviour of women and children, such as suppressing masturbation. Aware of the dangers of syphilis, they associated it with the promiscuity of women. Freud understood this toxic mix of conflicted morality, repression and sexuality. Whilst Freud's theories were aimed at the universal, transcending specificity of time and place, it would be interesting to link his social background to his thinking.

Perhaps it was because of that specific social backdrop that Freud's ideas felt as radical as they did to the Europeans of his time. When in 1905 'Three Essays on Sexuality' was published what seemed perverse and unthinkable became normative developmental processes. For example, component instincts governed early stages, and appeared as perverse aspects in neurosis. The sexual drive was the crucial element in early psychic life, but it was repressed. Disowned erotic desire lead to conflict, especially to a clash with guilt associated with morality, and symptomatology ensued. Thus Freud (1910) argued for the liberalization of education, and for the diminution of the power of the super

ego. In fact, he described talking to patients and telling them, in so many words, to accept the rejected wish, and to not feel as guilty as they did. And, indeed, in his Fifth lecture Freud (1910) equates the necessity to satisfy sexual needs to that of a horse having to eat oats in order to carry out its work.

The Oedipus complex was the arena in which infantile sexuality determined the content of repressed memories and desires, that of the child's inexorable sexual wish for the parent of the opposite sex. Hence his/her rivalrous aggression toward the parent of the same sex. This too was deemed outrageous.

In a later phase of his thinking, guided by new theoretical discoveries and evidence gathered from his case studies, Freud's theories progressed. When *Civilization and its Discontents* was published in 1930 Freud developed the second topology, the structural theory of the mind, in which the superego became a clearly delineated agency.

In this seminal publication, Freud placed the origins of the superego in human civilization. It is aggression (linked to the Oedipus complex) that the superego controls, but it also employs aggression in the service of control. Hostility breeds violence and vice versa. Thus the human being is an unhappy animal. That is so, not only because sexuality is unconscious and repressed, but also because unfulfilled Oedipal wishes are at the very core of its state of evolution, and are vital to its civility.

Oedipal triangles in *La Traviata*

Three main characters occupy this opera: Violetta the courtesan, Alfredo, the man with whom she falls in love, and his father Germont. It takes place in the French demi-monde. Unlike London or Vienna, in Paris at the time, the mistress and her patron were part of the fabric of Bohemian society. Frequented by writers and painters, these French women provided a link between art and transgression.

The opera opens with a party scene in a 19th century Paris salon, and Violetta is in a state manic gaiety. She hides her chronic illness from the guests and in the famous 'drinking song', she celebrates partying and fleeting pleasures. Idealizing her state of so called freedom, Violetta denounces love, of which, she says, she knows nothing. This musing on life as 'free' is interrupted by Alfredo's pursuit of a different take on matters, in a moving duet/discourse on love and frivolity. Because Alfredo has fallen in love with Violetta. He persists in telling/singing to her his version of things, namely, that life is essentially all about love. And he wins her over. Now she allows herself to experience love for the first time in her life, she leaves her 'glamorous' lifestyle behind, and the couple establish a household in a quiet rural part of France. Then enters Germont, Alfredo's father. His task, essentially, is to break up the couple. His reason is a moral one: Alfredo's sinful life with Violetta, a union not blessed by the church, will bring ruin on his family's name. It will spoil the marriage prospects of his chaste daughter, Alfredo's sister. Violetta resists for a while, imploring that it is only with Alfredo she ever found love, but then she relents under the parental moral pressure. She promises to leave Alfredo, who, about to be deserted, is left out of the discussion.

Is this a simple case of 'the tart with a heart'? Not so. This, second act of the opera, gives us a brilliant display of deep emotional change. In it the protagonist's internal psychic alteration is put under artistic examination. An unexpected shift takes place. It starts as a bitterly antagonistic dialogue/duet between Violetta and her lover's father; this argument represents two opposing sides

of a conflict between love and social norm. But then it turns into a tenderly sad duet between a paternal figure and his daughter. Violetta comes down on the side of social decency, as voiced by the moralizing father. She must suffer for her impropriety and accept the punishment, which is giving up her life with Alfredo, and she leaves her distraught lover. Here is where the Oedipal constellation dramatically alters. Whoever is part of the pair and who is kept out gets re-formed. It begins with the outsider being the father, who comes to interrupt the sexual couple. But when Violetta accepts the father's offer 'to cry on his shoulder' and suggests she is like a daughter to him, the pair becomes that of the (pseudo) union between father and daughter, and the lover, Alfredo, is left out.

When the father softens, acknowledging her plight, and displays tenderness towards her, in fact another seduction takes place to which she succumbs. This, and her response to guilt prompted by Germont, result in Violetta's decision. It is an expression of regression to a more infantile state, in which a fantasy of a dyadic union accompanied by seeming relief from culpability, dominate. Her longing for parental love having overwhelmed her, Violetta succumbs to the powerful pre-Oedipal longings, which, given her appalling early life, is not surprising. Combined with the internal dynamics of masochism, in which unresolved guilt over aggression turns against herself, the balance is irrevocably tipped towards regression. She moves away from adult sexual love, and gives up the one good thing she has achieved - her life with Alfredo. The fate of Violetta, then, represents female capitulation to super-ego pressure, voiced by the father Germont, and her own anxiety about aggression. Crushed, she masochistically yields to the view of herself as the 'fallen woman' and re-enacts both the guilt and the punishment. The opera ends with Violetta's ultimate sacrifice. She dies of the illness she had battled all along, leaving the two men grieving.

Freud and female masochism

While Freud's (1924) writing on 'feminine masochism' arguably was gender specific to men, and related to his views on the sexual development of boys, it can also be used as a paradigm for masochism in general. Steyn (2009) noted that the recourse to masochism in the clinical situation can be an escape from conflicts associated with the Oedipal situation in general, and a lapse into concerns with pre-Oedipal issues. At its core, masochism is aggressive sadism, an aspect of the ambivalence towards the mother, turned against the self as a result of anxiety and guilt. Therefore, seen in a broader sense, masochism is a regressive pull towards a more primitive level of integration, at which anxiety and guilt prevail.

In *La Traviata*, we can view Violetta in her initial merriment and idealization of the lifestyle she calls 'free' (when it is anything but 'free') as a desperate manic attempt to 'big herself up' into a grown up independent woman. We can wonder whether she needs to insist on that, in order to avoid mental disintegration were she to get in touch with the psychic pain connected with the reality of her situation as a courtesan, and, importantly, with her childhood. Falling in love with Alfredo and the short spell of living with him, while severing ties with her previous life, is Violetta's one short lived attempt at a mature relationship. But the arrival of the father Germont triggers the onset of pre-Oedipal conflicts featuring guilt, that she is not equipped to deal with. She collapses under the pressure of paternal moralizing beatings and no doubt much internal blame. And so she ends up inflicting pain on herself, yet again, dragging down Alfredo with her.

In Verdi's *La Traviata*, the emotional arc of the fictional Violetta in many respects echoes that of the real life Marie, whose life and death inspired the composer. However, it is through art that the

story of these women is given center stage, so that their powerful inner drama, as well as their place and function in society is seen and heard.

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