**Femme Fatale at the Turn of the 20th Century**

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*Femme fatale* - the archetypal woman who both threatens and attracts the man, beautiful, erotic and sensual, so attractive and mesmerizing that she weakens the man, causing him to lose his abilities, his talents, his intellectual faculties, even his life. Each period paints the *femme fatale* in different hues, stressing a different set of characteristics.

The image of the *femme fatale* originated in ancient times and already existed in Jewish-Christian culture, where it was revealed in portrayals of Eve and Lilith. Eve seduces Adam and brings disaster upon them – expelled from Eden, they become ordinary mortals. Yet her seduction also brings about the creation of humanity: eating from the Tree of Knowledge (awarness) was what caused Adam and Eve to perceive their sexual differences, awareness that aroused their sexual desire. The punishment for the crime stemmed directly from the sexual desire – “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children”. Ever since then the image of the *femme fatale* has been tied to an ambiguous and ambivalent attitude, with her being the link between sex (fertility) and death. The Christian view, that the original sin is the sexual relationship between Adam and Eve, contributed to recoil from the sexual and enticing woman as symbolizing sin and even death, but was at the same time an admission of her powerful attraction and her ability to create life.

Jewish tradition holds that Eve was not Adam’s first wife, but rather Lilith, a name derived from the Hebrew word for night – *layil*. Her image, as portrayed in Sumerian and Canaanite myths, is linked to Satan, to temptation (snake) as well as to harlotry. According to legend, Lilith was not created from Adam’s rib, but rather from dust, like Adam, and therefore equal to him in her sexuality and desires. As such, she refused to bow to his authority and ran away, and thus Adam received Eve who was born from his flesh, “so that the woman would not demand equal rights with the man”1. But Adam jumped from the frying pan into the fire as it ultimately turned out that Eve too was a *femme fatale*.

In the 19th century, Lilith’s image was used to represent the sensual, desired and attractive woman that threatens the family unity. In the 1868 painting by Dante Gabriel Rosetti, *Lady Lilith*, (Fig. 1), she is portrayed as a beauty preening before a mirror and combing her golden tresses – an action linked in Western tradition to paintings dealing with

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vanitas – vanity, which represent life as transient, fragile and on the verge of death. (See another version of Rosetti’s Lady Lilith [1865] in the exhibition - Cat. No. 9). Rosetti even accompanied his painting with a sonnet, which was subsequently named “Body's Beauty” (as distinguished from "Heavenly Beauty"):  

Of Adam's first wife, Lilith, it is told  
(The witch he loved before the gift of Eve,)  
That, ere the snake's, her sweet tongue could deceive,  
And her enchanted hair was the first gold.  
And still she sits, young while the earth is old,  
And, subtly of herself contemplative,  
Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave,  
Till heart and body and life are in its hold.  

Femme fatale has appeared throughout history in the form of different women and given names originated in assorted Biblical stories, various mythologies, literature and poetry: Eve, Lilith, Salome (beheading John the Baptist), Yael (who killed Sisra), Judith (beheading Holofernes) and many others. The femme fatale image was particularly prominent in the 19th century and at the turn of the 20th, expressed in art, literature and poetry, in the theater and opera, and later in the cinema as well. It reached its peak in surrealism art, in which the femme fatale became a castrating woman, like the female praying mantis, devouring her partner in the course of mating, starting with the head, while the rest of his body continues to function as a sex machine.  

In the 30s and 40s of the 19th century the femme fatale became known as a “vampire”. This term originated in Heinrich Marschner’s opera by that name – Vampire (1826). The main character was a male, but whenever he would sink his teeth in the neck of a woman she transformed into a vampire and threatened all men. Thus the women became the tormentor and the men the tormented. Both the painter Munch and the dramatist Strindberg, contributed to the female vampire image, together with Nietzsche who claimed that the man desires the woman precisely because she is both amusing and dangerous. It is the danger that is the cause of attraction.

Ernest Stöhr, one of the first “Secessionists” (Secession – a German-Austrian avant-garde movement that seceded from the academe) published in 1899 poems and drawings of the femme fatale. In one poem he writes:  

Why do you entice me to sweet lust  
With your red, dark mouth?  

2 www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/.../lady-Lilith.jpg  
I sink onto your hot breast
Ah! Kiss me that I may get well!
How your mouth burns as in hot fever
And blazing in wild fire!
My poor life is the price,
You drink my heart’s blood.  

The bloodthirsty woman appears in 1894 in the play Salome by Oscar Wilde, on which Richard Strauss based his opera Salome (first performed in Dresden, 1905). Salome was the stepdaughter of Herod, king of the Jews, who asked him for the head of John the Baptist, and received it. Oscar Wilde’s text was illustrated by the British artist Beardsley, whose works strongly influenced the French Art Nouveau style. In his illustration, Salome (circa 1896, Cat. No. 31), Beardsley portrays Salome as a witch with black hair, two locks of which looks like the devil’s horns. She grasps in both hands the severed head of John the Baptist, still dripping blood. The blood irrigates the white lily, which symbolizes purity and virginity and always appears in the iconography of “The Annunciation to Holy Mary”.

In the 19th century, Salome became one of the principal images representing femme fatale and was painted by many artists, many of whom belonged to the Symbolist movement, such as Gustave Moreau. In his Salome Dances Before Herod (1876), Moreau portrays the famous scene in which Salome dances for Herod to entice him to fulfill her request for the head of John the Baptist. And yet in this painting she doesn’t really dance, but rather stands with one hand raised as if commanding and the other grasping the lotus flower that represents fertility in Indian tradition. In another version, The Apparition (1876, Fig. 2) Salome is seen in a similar but more seductive pose, pointing to the head of John the Baptist revealed to her and Herod as a vision.

A contribution to the bloodthirsty woman image was also made by Oskar Kokoschka who in 1908 wrote and produced a play named Murder, Hope of Women, published with illustrations in 1910 in Der Sturm. The two principal characters, “man” and “woman”, fight, and the woman, atop the man, exclaims:

With my breath I fan the blood disc of the sun.
My eye collects the exultation of men.
Their stammering lust prowls around me like a beast
I shall not let you live. You! You weaken me –
I shall kill you. You fetter me.  

5  Ibid.
6  Comini, “Vampires, Virgins and Voyeurs in Imperial Vienna”, p. 211.
This "vampiric" atmosphere produced the image of Lulu, who first appeared in two plays by Wedekind, Earth Spirit (1898) and Pandora's Box (1904). Wedekind made Lulu a name most identified with the modern femme fatale—a woman who embodies primitive sexuality while unaware of the evil lurking within her—"for her world lies beyond good and evil. Ultimately she was murdered by Jack the Ripper. Inspired by these plays, Alban Berg wrote his opera Lulu in 1929. Lulu continued to fascinate Germany in expressionist films, such as Pandora's Box (1928), directed by the filmmaker Pabst. The expressionist Lulu is an anti-bourgeois figure and the men she destroys represent the German high society, reflecting its corruption and social decadence, such as a press magnate, medical consultant, count, etc. Lulu was portrayed in the film by the American actress Louise Brooks (Fig. 3). Brooks even created a visual image identified with femme fatale—short black hair "bob cut", later copied by Catherine Zeta-Jones for the image of Velma Kelly in the musical Chicago. It should be noted that this haircut was very fashionable at the time and in fact represented the "new woman" image.

Yet another image of femme fatale is La Garçonne. No such word exists in French, but it was created as the feminine form of the masculine Garçon—boy. This image first appeared in France in 1922, in a provocative book under that name, by feminist author Victor Margueritte, which was also dramatized and staged in 1926. It aroused one of the greatest scandals in the French literary establishment, the outrage possibly fueled by the fact that a respected and famous author had written an erotic book, seemingly "pornographic". The book portrayed a process of change undergone by Monique Lerbier, a girl from a respectable background. Disgusted with the bourgeois establishment that glorifies money and turned women into property, she opts for independence and freedom in her work, body and pleasures. Due to the scandal, the author was asked to surrender his Legion d'honneur award.

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7 It should be noted that the opera was first performed only in 1979, due to objections of his wife.

8 The "new woman" (appeared mainly in the Twenties and Thirties of the 20th century) expressed the independence and equal rights that she demanded. She is represented as a boyish image with a flat chest, low slung hips and short hair; at times wearing a masculine suit. It is noteworthy that the term was created already in the 19th century, with a negative connotation of a career woman who neglects her home. But in the Twenties it was appropriated by women and acquired positive connotations.

Kingsbury characterizes in her research the visual image of *femme fatale* at the turn of the 20th century: erect in a frontal view, but with her shoulders pulled back, head sometimes tilted back or to the side, eyes half-closed, her clothes often parted and exposing her body. The image is accompanied by decorative forms enveloping her in a wavy or whirlpool motion. At times arabesque shapes are formed by her hair (common in Art-Nouveau works). According to Kingsbury, the erect and frontal stance represents control, but tilting the head to the back and lowering the gaze testifies to licentiousness and promiscuity, particularly if the movement is accompanied by loose hair and raised arms. Lowering the gaze represents an ecstatic situation within which the *femme fatale* is also subdued and imprisoned: she is drawn into her role and experiences the force of her lust. And so the image of *femme fatale* transmits added ambiguity: although she controls, she herself is controlled by her desires.

An example of such iconography can be seen in *Judith* (1901, Fig. 4), painted by Gustav Klimt, in which the *femme fatale* archetype is represented by Judith who beheaded Holofernes. (After the example of Salome and Judith, it is not surprising that the Surrealists were so fascinated by the female praying mantis devouring the head of its mate). Klimt’s Judith does not appear as a Biblical figure, but rather as a Viennese contemporary of Klimt, her clothes partly revealing her breast and belly button (Klimt preferred to paint his women naked prior to “dressing” them). The fabric is decorated with a gold pattern, likely influenced by Japanese textile designs. In the background are trees modeled on an Assyrian relief, also in gold. Judith’s necklace looks like a gilded collar studded with precious stones (very fashionable jewelry at the time, thus stressing Judith’s contemporariness and her connection to the Viennese society women). With gaping mouth, half-shut eyes, her head slightly tilted back and her hair wild and bountiful. The work is set in a golden frame designed by Gustav Klimt’s jeweler brother Georg, giving it the

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11 Some believe that the model for this painting was indeed a well-known Viennese society woman, Adele Bloch-Bauer, wife of the Jewish industrialist and sugar merchant Ferdinand Bloch-Bauer. It is claimed by some that when Klimt painted her portrait in 1907, Adele was his secret lover, while her second portrait (1912) he painted after their relationship ended. Both portraits were confiscated by the Nazis and just recently returned to her heiress, Maria Altman, after a prolonged legal struggle. In my opinion, comparison of the paintings does not show any clear similarity between Judith and Adele, but in comparing Judith to the study of Adele drawn by Klimt in 1903, one can discern some semblance in the tilt of the head, the shut eyes and square chin. However, it should be noted that Klimt’s linking the Biblical heroine Judith with the *femme fatale* image did not please the Jewish community, and I find it difficult to believe that Bloch-Bauer would have commissioned his wife’s portrait from a painter who previously painted her in an unflattering manner.
appearance of a Byzantine icon. According to Néret, not only Klimt and Freud were enthralled by the link between sex and death, Eros and Thanatos, but all of Europe was fascinated as well. Here the interest in the image of Judith as well as the image of Klytemnestra in the Richard Strauss opera Elektra (1909).

Kingsbury notes that every woman represented by the iconography as described above, must be suspected of being a clandestine femme fatale, even if she appears to be a respectable society woman. With Munch, for example, this iconography crossed all boundaries – with the image of Holy Mary portrayed as femme fatale. In the lithograph Madonna (1985-1902, Cat. No. 66), Maria is portrayed nude, wrapped in flowing waves of cascading hair, surrounded with a bloody red frame within which spermatozoa swimming and an embryo is seen in the lower left corner.

Notwithstanding Kingsbury’s contention that the femme fatale is somewhat submissive and a captive of her desire, she is nevertheless not weak, since her behavior can be perceived as masculine – she is changing partners, shows no devotion, unfaithful and does not surrender to love. She may in certain cases surrender to her passion, but not for long. In fact these characteristics may have caused the blurring that occurred in the Twenties between the image of femme fatale and the image of the independent and modern “new woman” and La Garçonne. Or could it be that femme fatale simply changed tacks and became the new independent woman? Such blurring can be seen in the figure of Marlene Dietrich, who, in the 1929 film The Blue Angel, already portrayed a femme fatale named Lola (reminiscent of Lulu) and continued to do so in Hollywood, in films like Morocco (1930), where she appears in a cabaret dressed in a masculine tuxedo, seduces and kisses (on the mouth) one of the women present, and yet flirts with the men. Ultimately she becomes a victim of her lust and love for the character played by Gary Cooper (how not?). In Hollywood, at least, femmes fatales were always punished in the end.

Why did the femme fatale of the 19th century become so popular and at the same time so menacing? I believe that one of the reasons was the terrible risk of venereal disease transmitted by the indecent woman, who engages in promiscuous sexual relations with a number of men. In the 19th century, all of Europe was terribly alarmed about venereal diseases, notably syphilis. A concretization of such fears can be seen in Alsen’s painting Mamzelle Syphilis (Cat. No. 56). In Paris alone, in the “Second Empire” of Napoleon III, there some 50,000(!) cases of venereal disease were reported with no effective cures in sight. And still prostitution was tolerated.

13 Ibid.
14 Femme fatale in the movies was often referred as “Vamp” – from the term Vampire.
for prostitutes were an important means of sexual relief. Masculine sexual activity was considered then to be an essential therapeutic practice; some physicians claiming that sexual release is important for health (man’s only) and that coitus interruptus or unsatisfactory sexual relations may cause cancer and cardiac disease. Therefore satisfactory sexual relations were perceived to be essential (for the men, of course). Since according to the double standards of 19th century European society the wife was supposed to give birth and not please the man (a decent man would find it inconceivable to humiliate his wife by such immoral demands), the prostitute or mistress were available for this duty. But there was another objective at that time: to encourage sexual relations for procreation purposes, particularly in France, which at the time suffered from a negative population growth. Masturbation was, therefore, negated as a means of relief, due to the belief that sperm was produced in limited quantities and should not be wasted.

How then to resolve contradiction between sexual relations for purposes of procreation – an essential an important function of the lawful wife, and sex for pleasure – the essential and important function of the prostitute or mistress, even if it involved wasting the sperm? Moreover, how to resolve the contradiction between the essential satisfaction of sexual needs (for medical reasons only, of course) and the danger of death as a result of extramarital sex? This ambivalent attitude is expressed in the image of *femme fatale*.

Naturally, not all women were perceived as *femmes fatales*. There were also virgins. The image of the virgin appears, for example, in the paintings by Klimt, but always in a temporary state of expectation, for virginity was perceived to be the stage preceding fulfillment of the woman’s natural function – mating with the man and giving birth to children (mating is perceived by Klimt as a matrimonial act and symbolized as an embrace). It should be noted that since social conventions of the time viewed marriage as a sort of formal agreement that demanded the woman to bear children for her husband, women who rebelled against this convention simply refused to get married. When such women were also beautiful and attractive and sexual – they were perceived as *femmes fatales*. And yet, not every *femme fatale* was single. For example, Alma Mahler, who was linked to four lovers and married to three of them – each accomplished in his field – became renowned in her latter days as the “widow of four muses”. Another famous female figure, with the aura of *femme fatale* was Lou Andreas-Salomé, Nietzsche’s unrequited love and lover of poet Rainer Maria Rilke, all while married to another.

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16 It did not occur to anyone that sexual satisfaction may be important to the woman, although there was some discussion of the female orgasm as an essential precondition for becoming pregnant.

17 Some claim that the obligatory link between marriage and procreation was broken only in the second feminist wave, in the Sixties of the 20th century, due in part to the contraceptive pill.

18 Mahler the composer, Gropius the architect, Werfel the author and Kokoschka the painter (the latter was her lover but not her husband). See: F. Giroud, Alma Mahler, ou, L’art d’être aimée (Tel-Aviv: Keter, 1988) (Hebrew ed.)
man. She was born Louise von Salomé, and the link between her family name and that of the image of Salome-Shulamit, while strictly coincidental, illustrates the vagaries of fate.

Each of these two women was the muse of several creative men – yet another facet of the femme fatale. Muses have been always portrayed as women, but it is remarkable that in the 19th century they were femmes fatales. The link between creativity and femininity could already be discerned in Gauguin, who viewed his own creativity to be his feminine component. Yet he linked woman and primordial drives, without relating to her intellectual abilities. But Gauguin was far from being the first: the link between femininity, creativity and fertility is primeval, whether expressed in fertility of the woman or artistic creation, or, as in ancient times, in the fertility of the earth. This link reached its peak in the surrealist concept, which viewed the woman as a channel of sorts that links man to nature. By her proximity to nature and earth, the woman serves as an intermediary between the man and the unknown (what lies beyond nature) – and this link is therefore vital to creativity. André Breton sees in ‘insane love’ (l’amour fou) for a woman the means to arouse the man from his slumber and connect him to nature and mystery. However, Simone de Beauvoir argues that Breton does not view the woman as the subject – since she does not interest him except in her function as an essential intermediary. In any case, Breton’s idea may clarify why femmes fatales in particular have become the muses – for only they could be an object of the “insane love”.

And yet viewing femme fatale as a muse was quite problematic, since in the 19th century the femme fatale was still perceived as a creature that was all sex, desire and seduction, who enchains the man and destroys his intellectual ability. (Only an anti-intellectual world view, such as Breton’s could view

5 E. Munch, Salome (Self-portrait with Eva Mudocci), 1903

19 Born in St. Petersburg in 1891 to a German father of French Huguenot descent, joined he circle of Freud who even authorized her to practice psychotherapy, died in 1937. See: I. D. Yalom, When Nietzsche Wept (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Hapoalim, Am Oved, 1992); as well as H.F. Peters, My Sister my Spouse (Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 2000). (Both Hebrew ed.).

20 Even though his maternal grandmother was a well known feminist. See: Mario Vargas Llosa, The Way to Paradise (Boston: Faber & Faber, 2004). It should be noted that Gauguin’s admission of his feminine component, precedes the Jungian concept of the presence of a feminine component (anima) in men and a masculine component (animus) in women. See the use of the term “hermaphroditic quality” in the Jungian Erich Neumann’s book: E. Neumann, The Great Mother (New York: Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series XLVII, 1955) pp. 24-25.

21 Simone de Beauvoir, Le Deuxième Sexe [1949] (Tel-Aviv: Babel Publishers, 2001) pp. 319-327. The chapter includes citations from Breton. (Hebrew ed.).
this to be positive). The woman in Munch’s paintings, for example, arouses angst, binds him with her hair, sucks his blood, jealous and causes him to be jealous as well, cuts him off from his creative talents. For instance, in the lithograph Salome (Self-portrait with Eva Mudocci, 1903, Fig. 5), the severed head of Munch is buried in the hair of Salome (Eva). In another lithograph, Vampire, 1895 (1902) (Cat. No. 68) the woman hugs the man and kisses his neck, but actually sucks his blood. Both these subjects appear in many versions and Munch repeatedly returned to them. Gauguin too used the femme fatale image in the same context, even mixing together several images: for example, in his sculpture The Black Venus (1889, Fig. 6), Venus appears as Salome, with the head of John the Baptist in her lap. The head is actually taken from the Gauguin’s vase, Self-Portrait as a Severed Head of that same year (Fig. 7). Rising at her feet is a lotus blossom that symbolizes passion and fertility. In this Venus-Salome also symbolizes life (fertility) as well as death.

Unlike the sexual image of femme fatale in the 19th century, I believe that Lou Andreas-Salomé represented a newer and more modern facet of femme fatale: not of a woman that impairs the man’s intellectual ability, but rather a woman that invigorates this ability by her own intellectual powers. Not a woman linked only to desire, nature and fertility, but an educated rational woman, who stands as an equal in her relationship with the greatest thinkers and creators of her time. Not a woman who is satisfied with a passive role as the muse to the man, but a woman creative in her own right. In this she actually realizes the feminist ideal of an independent woman with

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22 Several editorials of that period portrayed “woman” as the antithesis of “culture”, as destroying the male intellect and weakening his power of reason. A sensational book (Geschlecht und Charakter) was published in 1903 by a young Jewish author, Otto Weininger, which compared Judaism to femininity and cultural weakness. The book became a bestseller and influenced many, among them Strindberg and De Chirico. Ultimately, Weininger took his own life.

equal rights. For all that the \textit{femme fatale} image becomes more dominant and menacing in masculine creativity at the turn of the 20th century: since she also represents the process of freeing the woman, she intensifies the men's fears of losing their male hegemony. It is no wonder that in the famous photograph of Lou Andreas-Salomé of 1882 (Fig. 8) with Nietzsche and Paul Ree (with whom she lived but never made love), she is the one holding the whip, as if paraphrasing Nietzsche's famous sentence in \textit{Zarathustra}: "Thou goest to women? Do not forget the whip."

It could be said that the \textit{femme fatale} at the turn of the 20th century served as alternative to the four traditional female stereotypes as determined by the male discourse: virgin, wife, mother and whore.\textsuperscript{24} She provided almost the sole outlet for women who were not prepared to submit to the role assigned to them by men. But by taking their fate into their own hands they were forced to utilize their power of attraction in order to control the men, ultimately suffering from the ambivalent attitude shown them not only by men but by women as well: women who submitted to the male directives viewed them to be wayward, while those who protested the male directives viewed them as women abusing their sex and sexuality, and in so doing, perpetuate the defamation of women. The solution was therefore to create an independent woman whose image strikes a balance between the feminine and the masculine, androgynous of sorts, reflected indeed in the "new woman" that emerged in the second decade of the 20th century.

\textsuperscript{24} In German speaking countries, the role of the woman was defined by the 3 Ks: Küche, Kinder, Kirche.