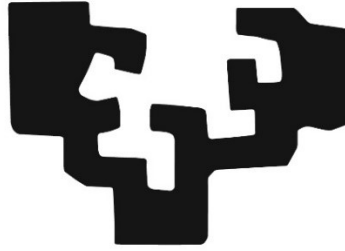


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HOMMES FATALS: MASCULINE DESTRUCTIVENESS IN ALFRED HITCHCOK'S REBECCA (1940) AND SAM TAYLOR-JOHNSON'S FIFTY SHADES OF GREY (2015)

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Abstract

Femmes fatales have been and are still nowadays represented and labelled as inherently or innately evil figures who, by means of their beauty, lure and seduce men in order to deliberately destroy them. Female deadly figures were treated even in ancient times and in the Bible; even nowadays, after the *film noir* genre catapulted *femmes fatales* to fame, different representations of these characters can be seen on screen. Nevertheless, this present dissertation attempts to analyse and debate the possible existence of a male counterpart to these historically dangerous creatures, that is to say, the *homme fatal*. More precisely, two *hommes fatals* instances will be the object of this study: Maxim de Winter in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and Christian Grey in Sam Taylor-Johnson's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015). I contend that these two characters share five common features, most of which contribute to the romanticisation of their 'fatality'. Destructiveness appears to be essential when describing their behaviour towards their carefully selected victims, but also towards themselves. Their destructive attitudes, however, seem to be recreations of what the *hommes fatals* experienced in previous encounters with one or more *femmes fatales*. Said experiences maim Maxim's and Christian's emotional and mental dimensions to the point that they simply cannot stop themselves and have to engage in the same abusive behavioural patterns, as their impulses become compulsions. Both characters tend to choose a very specific type of woman as their victim, who is then subjected to different forms of control by the *hommes fatals*. The final stage of the gradual process of manipulation is to rip up the victim's very identity. These respected, affluent men find a perfect alibi in their social status: they go unpunished and no one ever suspects their 'fatality'. Finally, the role of consensual victims played by Mrs. De Winter and Anastasia Steele, in love with their tormentors, is vital to understand the obvious romanticisation of these particular version of *hommes fatals*. I conclude by arguing that the *homme fatal's* behaviour is glamorised as it participates of the patriarchal discourse which believes these types of men are appealing to women.

Keywords: *femme fatale*, *homme fatal*, romanticisation, *Rebecca*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, gender.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, *femmes fatales* have been portrayed in many different media, such as journals, literary pieces, paintings, films or advertisements. Although the concept behind the term *femme fatale* has even been traced back to ancient times, it was not until the 19th century that the notion emerged in France (Menon 7). It is, however, in 20th century Hollywood that the archetype emerges, defining the contemporary iconic representation of a glamorous, dangerously manipulative and lethally seductive woman. The purpose of the present dissertation is to explore the possibility of the existence of a male counterpart to such deadly female beauties: the *homme fatal*. In particular, I intend to focus on the characters of Maxim De Winter and Christian Grey, respectively the leading roles in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and Sam Taylor-Johnson's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), as the embodiment of what I contend constitutes an *homme fatal*.

Despite the term being sometimes mentioned online and by the media in general, I have not been able to find an established paradigm or definition of *homme fatal* from a strictly academic point of view. In the few articles that I have found, there is no attempt to outline or describe the way in which a prototypical *homme fatal* would behave or what his motivations might be. Yet, an article in The Guardian entitled "Handsome devils: The Birth of the Homme Fatal" interestingly discusses a hypothetical destructive male character whose insecurities start to rise to the surface as he victimises women. Indeed, as I shall attempt to demonstrate throughout my analysis of *Rebecca* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, destructiveness is the consequence of insecurity in the two instances of *hommes fatals* in question: Maxim and Christian. Both attractive male figures base their fatality on wealth, social status, promise of love and control over women. Nevertheless, while Christian Grey seems to be overtly destructive, as he literally and sadistically flogs his submissive female partners, Maxim de Winter would psychologically torture his new wife in a subtler, but equally destructive way. In short, both characters share personality traits and personal circumstances which contribute to the construction of a *homme fatal*.

The difference between the *homme fatal* and the *femme fatale* figures seems to be related to a contrastiveness in the approaches and creation of both characters. While destructive women are 'bad', innately, and their monstrosity is eventually revealed, the *homme fatal* often appears to have been sublimated and romanticised. By the latter term I mean to say that there will always

be a justification for their fatal behaviour, which, far from diminishing the *homme fatal*'s appeal to women, glamorises him even further.

Even though both Hitchcock's and Taylor-Johnson's films are adaptations of two novels—Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) and E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2011)—this dissertation will mainly focus on the filmic texts rather than the novels, due to formal limitations. *Rebecca*, the film, won several Oscars in 1941, including 'Best film award' and 'Best Protagonists award'. This is not the case with *Fifty Shades of Grey* which, notable for the negative criticism it has received, became first a best-seller by 2015 and then released a controversial filmic adaptation within the same year. One of those critics who negatively reviewed the film is Susan Wloszczyna who stated that "if anyone is punished by *Fifty Shades of Grey* it is the audience" (Rogerebert).

With the aim of contextualising my definition of the *homme fatal* in opposition to the traditional understanding of the *femme fatale*, I shall refer to various films in which instances of the latter are particularly well represented, as well as to several academic articles on the subject of lethal seductresses. In particular, I shall base my definition of the latter on Elizabeth K. Menon's book on the creation and marketing of the *femme fatale*.

2. FEMMES FATALES: FROM LES FILLES D'ÈVE¹ TO HOLLYWOOD DEADLY FEMALE FIGURES

Given that the primary feature that distinguishes a *femme fatale* from a *homme fatal* is sexual difference, and given, as well, that socio-cultural conceptions of sexual difference tend to conflate the notions of female/male with femininity/masculinity, a basic definition of sex and gender² is in order. In Gerda Siann's view:

Sex is defined by biological differences between males and females and gender is the manner in which culture defines and constrains these differences; not only differences in which women, in general, live their lives compared to men in general, but also differences in the manner in which individuals view both themselves and others, in terms of the female/male dichotomy. (3)

In Western cultures, femininity is a stereotypical, desirable, 'socially constructed' characteristic of women. Being feminine implies, among other things, being passive, cooperative, expressive,

¹ "*Les Filles D'Ève*" is a French origin term that, according to Menon was used to name any woman who did not act based on the gender roles assigned (18).

² For a better understanding of gender as an imposed social construction, it is also interesting to read Judith Butler's explanation on gender performativity in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

warm and submissive (Stets and Burke 2-3). Thus, we can conclude that the classic *femme fatale*, with her unrestrained sexual impulses and her aggressiveness, does not suit this description of femininity. By the term *femme fatale* I understand a deadly female character, who, by taking advantage of her beauty, lures and manipulates men. There are, however, many types of *femmes fatales*. According to Mary Ann Doane, one of the most prominent and transcendental versions of this character is to be found in the *film noir* genre (2). These women are presented as the “antithesis of the maternal -sterile or barren- [they] produce nothing in a society which fetishizes production” (2). One example of this fatal type could be Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity* (1944). Her goal is to design a plan to kill her wealthy husband and inherit his assets. Lola, the victim’s daughter, suspects Phyllis’ involvement and is convinced that Phyllis intentionally planned her father’s murder. In the end, the *femme fatale* does not achieve her goal: the truth is revealed and her affair with the insurance man is seemingly unprofitable. Yet, the archetypal lethal seductress has been scripted into other genres and her presence is certainly not restricted to mid-20th century *films noirs*. As a more recent film such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) illustrates, there still exists nowadays a fascination with the lethal female figure who “is situated as evil” (2).

Since I approach both *Rebecca* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* from a gender perspective, I have chosen to construct my interpretation of the *femme fatale* around Elizabeth K. Menon’s view of this character as a figure created to boycott several women’s movements. In *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale*, Elizabeth K. Menon contends that, unless women behaved as expected—staying at home, silenced and submitted to men—they were considered ‘dangerous’. Etymologically, the fatality of which these women are invested can, in fact, be reduced to that unavoidable deadliness which is what *fate* stands for, as the ultimate destiny of mortals is to die. However, for the purpose of this dissertation, I shall define fatality as the sum of negative traits both *femmes* and *hommes* share and deploy in order to (un)willingly harm their respective victims. Despite the obvious similarities, fatality is addressed, described and treated differently if its carrier is a *femme* rather than an *homme*. The general tendency in literature and films so far has been to kill or punish *femmes fatales*, whereas, as we shall see, their male counterparts are justified and even forgiven.

In Greek and Roman classical traditions, two mythological female figures, among others, can be easily labelled as *fatales*: Circe and the Sirens. In Homer’s epic poem *The Odyssey*, Circe, known for her abilities in witchcraft, seductively invites Odysseus’s crew to attend a feast at her mansion. Once the men’s hunger and thirst were quenched with poisoned food and drinks, their bodies instantly reshaped into swine. Afterwards in that same tale,

sirens—hybrid Others, whose bodies visibly bear the mark of monstrosity—do not possess the natural beauty of Helen of Troy, yet their singing does, and it lures sailors to a watery tomb with a malice that seems to be in accordance with romantic and contemporary representations of the *femme fatale*.

In the Judaic tradition, the archetypal *femme fatale* is Lilith. According to Menon, theologians actually based their description of Eve on her doppelgänger Lilith. Judaic tradition sustains Adam and his wife Lilith were created on equal terms, but when Lilith refused to submit to Adam as the dominant figure in their relationship, she was expelled from the Garden of Eden (18-19). The creation of the *femme fatale* figure is, thus, closely tied to the book of Genesis and its subsequent interpretations. Menon endorses the idea that, throughout history, (mostly) male writers and painters have continuously reinterpreted the dichotomist relationship existing between the Virgin Mary, the embodiment of sainted womanhood, and Eve, the personification of ‘fallen’ womanhood (5-6). The first *femme fatale* being Eve, ‘Les Filles D’Eve’, that is to say all women descended from her, would be consequently defined as *fatales* themselves. Later interpretations of the Bible started to symbolically delimit women’s behaviour through opposite pairs: ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’, ‘virtue’ vs. ‘vice’, or ‘mother’ vs. ‘prostitute’, for example (Menon 18). This a classic example of the Cartesian dichotomisation of the world according to Modern western tradition, which assigns ‘otherness’ to femininity and femininity to the female sex. Schlack de la Faverie, cited in Menon, stated that, by the 19th century, Eve was already socially identified with fatality (20).

From 1854 onwards, the term *femme fatale* became fashionable in French literature as an alternative name to ‘Filles D’Eve’, and later on, in 1860, *femmes fatales* started to be visually represented in magazines (Menon 3) as sensual, snake-like women, half way between Eve and Salome, as it can be seen in the following picture from a *Le Journal Amusant* (1979).



“Filles d’Eve” from *Le Journal Amusant*³ (Menon 246)

Menon quotes many scholars—Virginia Allen and Bram Dijkstra, among others—who argue that the popularisation of the *femme fatale* was linked to the awakening of the feminist movements in France (4). Boozer also claims that the creation and expansion of the concept took place in a period in which women were starting to work outside the home, while men were fighting in wars (20). As men feared losing control and power, illustrations and journals spread the concept of the *femme fatale*, satirically reversing the power roles. These publications did mainly function to inform on current issues, but they also provided their audience with visual material about how to behave according to established gender rules (Menon 8).

Even if we know women have always been the object of the gaze of hegemonic socio-cultural discourses, Boozer (20-22) and Menon (11) both agree that women were especially scrutinised and exposed in the 19th and 20th centuries. This was probably owed to mass production of magazines, and access to cinema. Advertisements and journal images, such as the one above, contributed to the fixing of society as a patriarchal system, as they imposed behavioural patterns according to one’s sex, severely restricting the opportunities of self-

³ Alfred Grévin, “Filles d’Eve”, from the series “Fantasies parisiennes.” *Le Journal Amusant*, June 14, 1879, cover. University of Minnesota Libraries. Photographer, Tim Fuller (Menon 246).

assertion for the 'fair' sex. Any behaviour other than staying home and raising children, was deemed to be 'inappropriate' for women. In order to standardise the role that women were expected to embrace:

the image of Eve was secularized and generalized to support and justify attitudes, institutions, practices and expectations. Woman's nature was given specific definition and purpose, involving both her appearance and submissive behaviour (Menon 18).

From the 1930s on, with the invention of the cinema, a specific type of *femme fatale* would become canonical. Within the *film noir* genre, the character of Laura Jesson in *Brief Encounter* (1945), starts an affair with a man she meets at the train station every Thursday, despite her apparently happy marriage. However, their sporadic or occasional relationship will not last long since they are both aware of the impossibility of sustaining it. Laura permanently blames herself for hiding her infidelity, and consequently drowned in sorrow, contemplates the possibility of confessing her sin to her husband. *The Graduate* (1967) is an example of a respectable middle-aged woman, Mrs. Robinson, who seduces a recently graduated boy, gradually smothering and alienating him. In spite of Mrs. Robinson's warning not to, Benjamin Braddock simultaneously starts dating Mrs. Robinson's daughter. Despite Mrs. Robinson opposition and after several turning points in their relationship, the young couple flees together. More contemporary *femmes fatales* characters are Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction* and Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct* (1992), their fate is slightly different though. The former features a woman who, after some sexual encounters with Dan Gallagher, harasses him and his family. Alex will not accept Dan's apparent lack of interest in her and indefatigably hounds his family down until she is eventually shot dead by Dan's wife. Catherine Tramell, on the other hand, is an attractive serial killer of men, who turns her novels into real murders. When she is being investigated after her boyfriend's death, she seduces the chief inspector, convincing him of her 'innocence'. This last film constitutes one of the view instances in which the *femme fatale* goes unpunished and is apparently victorious.

At the heart of the *femme fatale* portrayed in the aforementioned films are an active sexuality, greed and the urge to be in control, all of which are instances behaviours tabooed by patriarchal societies. These female characters are also extremely physically attractive and elegant, which beauty and elegance they cunningly use to seduce men and accomplish their purposes. In fact, the bait they use is always sexual gratification and flattering their victims' egos by stroking their masculinity. These women seem to dominate men emotionally, as well as sexually, to the point that they achieve a complete inversion of patriarchal roles. The films in which there exists a *femme fatale* are structured around the subversion of Cartesian

dichotomies, fear of castration and the anxiety induced by sexual repression in patriarchal societies. Yet, *femmes fatales*—except for Catherine Tramell in *Basic Instinct*—always pay for their non-normative behaviour. They will be either socially or self-stigmatised; they will be punished as they will not be able to accomplish their aims or they will be eventually killed.

3. THE ROMANTICISATION OF MALE ‘FATAL’ FIGURES IN FILMS

For the purpose of this dissertation, the term *homme fatal* will indicate the embodiment of three main qualities: wealth, power and the promise of love. As is the case with *femmes fatales*, it is their appetite and/or capability for destroying their partner’s lives that truly makes these men *fatals*. However, and unlike their female counterparts, destructive male lovers have been and still are romanticised in mainstream cinema, as I shall attempt to prove later on.

Masculinity is a composite, socially constructed label assigned to males in patriarchal, heteronormative cultures. According to Stets and Broke, within the western tradition masculinity is fundamentally articulated across the following qualities: aggressiveness, competitiveness, rationality, and dominance (2-3). *Hommes fatals* make use of their masculine characteristics in order to achieve the same goal *femmes fatales* reach via their ‘feminine arts’. However, whereas *femmes fatales* were and are considered to be a threat to society in general and to men in particular, *hommes fatals* are not socially stigmatised. In fact, as we shall see in the following sections, their *fatal* behaviour will not be punished, but rather forgiven by their victims. Two literary instances of this very notion are Rochester in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Heathcliff in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Both happen to be Romantic heroes who emotionally torture their female partners, but whose behaviour is ultimately romanticised and justified. Some past events in the lives of these characters are explained so as to provide with a plausible reason for their tormenting of their wives and lovers.

Margaret Cohen believes that while *femmes fatales* are disconnected from maternity or feel detached from children, many *hommes fatals* do fulfil their role as fathers (118), which is consistent with a patriarchal understanding of masculinity. *Fatal Attraction*, which I cited in the previous section perfectly illustrates this idea. In *Internal Affairs* (1990), Cohen also highlights the contradictory duality of men’s approach to gender equality, as men apparently accept the women working with them, but at home feel the need to impose their unchallenged rule and “macho jealousy” (129). Two other instances of *homme fatal* could be Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan in Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). While the former uses his power

and money to attract his teenage crush Daisy back to him with self-destructive results, Tom uses his sex appeal and social status to conquer and objectify his lover.

Another sort of *homme fatal* is the one popularly known as a ‘womaniser’. Having positive social connotations, as it usually denotes a successful man, the term ‘womaniser’ refers to men who serially seduce women and then discard them. *American Psycho* (2000) presents Patrick Bateman as a serial killer who suffers from severe psychopathy, although his condition is unknown to the rest of his friends and to his girlfriend. Patrick does care very much about his physical appearance and is extraordinarily successful with women and at work. Nonetheless, he loathes men to be superior to him and kills anyone who is more successful than he is, so we can assert he is a deeply insecure man. “I want my pain to be inflicted on others, I want no one to scape” (01:36:33-01:36:39) is how Patrick defines his feelings. This, together with the way in which he objectifies his female conquests and expresses his misogynist views— “you are a fucking ugly bitch, I wanna stab you to death and play around with your blood” (00:04:31-00:04:38)—turns him into the ultimate *homme fatal*, one who is destructive to both genders. However, women paid and drugged by Patrick in order to completely sexually submit to him, are discarded or killed soon afterwards. In the end, despite confessing all his crimes and murders to his lawyer, and narrating the indifference he feels for the rest of humanity, Patrick receives no punishment. Due to Patrick’s social status, his lawyer dismisses Patrick’s confession saying that it “has meant nothing” (01:36:58).

Carter Duncan in *The Perfect Guy* (2015) cannot be perceived an explicit ‘womaniser’ as such, but he is an attractive, mysterious man who seduces Leah Vaughn although she is already dating a man. Leah is an emancipated independent woman who works as a businesswoman, whereas Carter’s job is to protect and spy networks. Their apparently idyllic relationship soon expires when Carter’s *fatal* behaviour becomes obvious, as he starts to stalk and boycott Leah’s personal and professional life. According to the police, his *modus operandi* curiously seems to have been the same with all his former conquests. At the beginning Carter’s destructiveness is justified by the police: “it’s not a crime to buy coffee to a girl, or to call someone a hundred times” (00:38:38-00:38:41). Finally, the spectator discovers that Carter’s stalking derives from the resentment he feels for his biological parents due to the fact that he was adopted at a very early age.

Despite there being a few remarkably handsome men among the *hommes fatals* discussed so far, most rely mainly on their social status and economic success to attract their victims. This is a way to perpetuate the rigidity of Cartesian dichotomies and contribute to the fixing of patriarchal rules based on the superiority of the masculine gender over the feminine

Other. Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, or Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* depict this type of *homme fatal*. Often male characters in films are involved in violent scenes in which their aggressiveness is manifested as a method to solve specific situations. Dennis Peck in *Internal Affairs* is a very aggressive and violent police officer who murders people, and so does Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. Carter's aggressiveness in *The Perfect Guy* surfaces whenever men try to interact with Leah: Carter invariably ends up threatening or beating those men. The difference in relation to *femmes fatales* basically lies in the explanation with which these fatal male characters are provided as a justification for their 'fatality'. Their fatality can be triggered by traumatic past experiences as in *The Perfect Guy*, by alcohol, or even by uncontrollable mental illnesses, as in the case of *American Psycho*. Often the role their mostly female victims embrace also contributes to the romanticisation of their destroyers. Two examples that support this argument can be found precisely in the aforesaid film, *American Psycho*, in which Patrick's official girlfriend is desperate to marry him, even though he mistreats her. Another example is the scene in which a prostitute consents having sexual relationships with Patrick for the second time, irrespective of their first intercourse, during which she had been physically attacked by him. Western masculine destructiveness does not seem to be punishable; on the contrary, it is praised or exalted as positive.

4. COMMON CHARACTERISTICS OF TWO *HOMMES FATALS*: MAXIM DE WINTER AND CHRISTIAN GREY

4.1. DESTRUCTIVENESS

The first dimension on which 'fatality' is articulated in both *Rebecca* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* is, precisely, destructiveness, which, in turn, is articulated on self-destruction, as well as hetero-destruction. As far as the former is concerned, self-loathing is eventually revealed to be the force which fuels these *hommes fatales*' lives and which urges them to sabotage their chances of experiencing true love. Although they are both successful, influential and wealthy, Maxim De Winter and Christian Grey do not seem to be fully satisfied with their respective lives. Mr. De Winter and Grey both justify their 'coldness' and behaviour with events they suffered in the past and repeatedly reject the opportunity of a fresh start. Not only do both characters drag themselves into unsatisfactory relationships, but also their partners. What is more, they actually seek out relationships which are doomed from the very beginning. As we shall see later, their victims are women whom they can easily use and abuse. This facilitates

the process of hurting them emotionally, as is the case with Maxim, and physically, as is the case with Christian, but it also means that they look for women with whom they do not have to have an honest, open, truthful relationship. This counts as self-sabotaging, as they deliberately choose abusive relationships that limit every chance to true happiness for both partners.

In terms of other-oriented destructiveness, Christian Grey is a more overtly damaging character, as he inflicts physical pain on his partners through consensual sadomasochistic intercourse. In the case of Maxim de Winter in *Rebecca*, Mrs. De Winter's pain is not less real nor less excruciating, but it is less evident to external observers, such as Maxim's relatives or employees. The spectator, however, does perceive that Maxim is psychologically destroying his second wife, since the story is told from her perspective and we are explicitly told of Mrs. De Winter's permanent unhappiness. Not only does not Maxim De Winter match the classical image of a romantic man, but he also makes sure to let the future Mrs. De Winter know from the very start that she must lower her expectations of romantic love. "What do you prefer, America or Manderley?" (00:20:42): with this question Maxim proposes to his nameless future wife, thus establishing, at the same time, how very limited his future wife's choices are going to be from that moment onwards. As the question implies that Maxim takes her acceptance for granted, it is clear from the beginning that her voice, opinions and, most importantly, desires are going to go unheard. This, of course, settles the terms of their relationship as one in which the dominant partner crushes the submissive partner's will and her very identity.

Their lack of communication, as well as Mr. De Winter's apparent indifference towards his second wife will mould their marriage. In Hitchcock's film there are allusions to Maxim's distant behaviour, but they are immediately and systematically excused. Mrs. Van Hopper assumes and acknowledges Maxim is cold, distant, even blunt and rude, but she explains it to her nameless assistant as an understandable consequence of his first wife's disappearance. "He is a broken man" (00:12:39) or "he simply adored her" (00:07:22) are two instances of the way in which what is objectively destructive behaviour is reframed and turned into evidence of his loving, tender nature. Maxim, who will be physically absent throughout his marital life and who will never show affection towards his second wife, eventually admits the error of his behaviour. "Did I do a selfish thing marrying you?" (00:58:09), he asks; "I'm very difficult to live with" (00:58:31), he admits. Interestingly, though, the question is interpreted by the second Mrs. De Winter as proof of his good nature, of which everybody speaks but the narrator has never witnessed, while his admission does nothing but inflame the second wife's desire to try even harder to be by his side. Mr. De Winter's fatality is accepted, justified, and even loved.

Rather a similar admission is uttered by Christian Grey at the beginning of his relationship with Anastasia. He went so far as to suggest they should split up: “I am not a man for you, you should stay clear of me, I have to let you go” (00:19:47-00:19:50). He does not keep his word until the end, though, claiming that “[he is] incapable of leaving [her] alone” (00:28:31). Christian’s deliberate attempts to harm his partner do not stop at causing physical pain through bondage and torture. He insists that they “have to be honest with each other” (00:41:10) for their relationship to work. He expects and demands that his partner should reveal her secrets, fears and insecurities so as to be able to manipulate her better, and, ultimately, to extend his sadistic campaign to her mind and soul. This is why he makes sure that the only person communicating their feelings is his submissive partner. In fact, his most recent relationship gradually crumble down because his conquest, Anastasia Steele, demands reciprocity. Far from accepting, Christian safeguards his deepest mysteries and concerns to protect himself from being vulnerable before anyone. He goes so far as to deny his feelings completely: “some people say that I do not have a heart, they know me well” (00:07:11-00:07:16). Such denial implies, of course, an act of self-destruction, and further diminishes his chances of being happy. “Why can’t we sleep in the same bed?... I want more, I need more” (01:34:38-01:35:07): by denying Anastasia, Christian is also denying himself. Quite unexpectedly, Anastasia refuses to settle for the superficial, sex-based relationship she thinks he aims for, and her questions become more pressing, but Christian tries to avoid all sorts of intimate conversations. Every time Ana attempts to dig into his inner fears, he just ignores or answers the following: “I had a rough start in life, that’s all you need to know” (01:35:45-01:35:49). This obviously implies that there is an explanation, perhaps even a justification for Christian’s behaviour. What is more, he may be an innocent victim himself, as his words suggest some kind of childhood trauma. It is at this point that Anastasia and the spectator can start the process of romanticising Christian even further.

4.2. PRE-DESTINATION

Anchored in their respective pasts, these *hommes fatals* constantly recreate their story, permanently reliving their trauma, at the same time they project their guilt and self-loathing onto their scapegoated partners. At the origin of both Maxim’s and Christian’s fatality is the existence of a *femme fatale*. Since in both cases these *femme fatales* seem to shape their victim’s personality into the kind of men they are when both stories being, it is possible to say that Maxim’s and Christian’s experience of these women became their destiny. Thus, the term

'fatality' acquires a double meaning: it refers to these men's destructiveness, but also to the fact that such destructiveness is their *fate*. Their encounter with their respective *femme fatales* makes sure it cannot be otherwise.

Rebecca De Winter, Maxim's late wife, fits the classical role of the *femme fatale*. The fact that Rebecca is dead does not prevent the spectator from having a rather vivid experience of this woman, as she is constantly mentioned throughout the film. However, it is worth noting that the only information about Rebecca that the spectator receives are external inputs of what others can describe of her. Apparently, Mr. De Winter is the only one aware of Rebecca's real personality and of her perverse destructiveness. Again, as we can only access the narrative from the focaliser's point of view, that is to say, the current Mrs. De Winter, Rebecca appears to be quite versatile. She was the perfect wife before Maxim's relatives, friends and acquaintance, always attentive and pretending to be happily married. Yet, she used to live her life freely and independently, never considering Maxim's wishes or feelings, and actually perversely enjoying his humiliation and jealousy. During Maxim's second marriage, it is precisely he the one who does not fulfil his partner's expectations. Nevertheless, I agree with Margaret Mitchell when she argues that the way in which the story is portrayed leads the spectator to identify with Maxim and justify his murdering Rebecca (28). Maxim and Rebecca were supposedly the merriest couple in the county, but this was far from the truth: they were not really in love and their marriage was a complete fraud. Maxim confesses to his second wife that he had been miserable from the moment he married Rebecca and that she was "incapable of love, or tenderness, or decency" (01:28:22). He was forced to accept her conditions because he was "tremendously conscious of family honour" (01:29:53). "I'll make a bargain with you...I'll play the part of the devoted wife [...] people will envy us [...] what a grand joke it'll be, what a triumph it will be" (01:29:20-01:29:48). With these words, Rebecca seals her fate and Maxim's.

Every single person who established a relationship or interacted with Rebecca felt a profound admiration towards her. Only positive traits are constantly iterated, especially those related to her beauty and intelligence. A gifted manipulator, she was particularly good at taking control over men, which is why she "started to bring *friends* down here" (01:30:37), according to Maxim. It appears, however, that she was not sentimentally involved with any of her lovers. At the end of the movie, Mr. Favell, Rebecca's cousin, claims that they were deeply and secretly in love, to what Mrs. Danvers, Rebecca's maid and ally, contradictorily remarks that "love was a game to her, only a game. She used to sit in bed and rock with laughter at the lot of you" (01:53:15-01:53:22). Furthermore, according to Maxim, Rebecca had pretended to be pregnant

by one of her many lovers in order to deliberately provoke him and make him so furious that he would kill her. The spectator then discovers that she had an irreversible cancer and that Rebecca had staged that final scene with Maxim as both the means to commit suicide and to ensure Maxim's unhappiness for the rest of his life. However, no hard evidence supports Maxim's version of the events. This lack of information, or justification, would again contribute to aggravate Rebecca's fatality and, as formerly explained, help the spectator be on Maxim's side (Mitchell 31). Even the second Mrs. De Winter does not consider Rebecca's death to be murder: "You didn't kill her, it was an accident" (01:37:39), she comforts Maxim. Maxim's wife fully supports her husband's testimony about Rebecca's death, since she utterly believes, and therefore validates, Maxim's account of the events.

At the beginning of the film the narrator describes the De Winters' new life far from Manderley, based on the description provided in the novel by Du Maurier. Although Rebecca's death is finally archived and Maxim goes unpunished, Mrs. De Winter is far from happy in her marriage:

We can never go back again, that much is certain. The past is still too close to us. The things we have tried to forget and put behind us would stir again, and that sense of fear, of furtive unrest, struggling at length to blind unreasoning panic—now mercifully stilled, thank God—might in some manner unforeseen become a living companion, as it has been before. (5)

Rebecca's body may have been destroyed, but the *femme fatale's* curse will haunt both Maxim and his innocent wife for ever, thus fulfilling the prophesy of destruction which the first Mrs. De Winter had foretold when she had proclaimed her intentions to Maxim right after their marriage: "she stood there laughing, and told me all about herself, everything [...] you'd look rather foolish trying to divorce me after four days of marriage. [...] Oh, she played the game brilliantly" (01:28:43- 01:30:29), Maxim remembers.

Similar is the situation in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. In this case too, the destructive feminine character responsible for Christian Grey's *fatal* behaviour is never met by Anastasia Steele, neither is she revealed to the spectator. However, there appear to be two *femmes fatales* coexisting in this story. If Anastasia—or Ana, as she's often refer as—thinks Mrs. Robinson had been the ultimate negative influence in Christian's life, according to Christian, his biological mother's absence and early death is what triggered his sadistic behaviour. Once more, we only have the *homme fatal's* word for it. Christian is the only person to provide Ana with descriptions and details about Mrs. Robinson, which not only predictably cause hostile reactions from Ana, but also have the spectator question Mrs Robinson's integrity. Ana accuses Mrs. Robinson of pederasty, blaming her for Christian's inability to be emotionally involved

with women and for his adopting the role of a sadistic ‘Dom’. Nevertheless, Christian resents his biological mother for prostituting when he was a baby and not having taken care of him. Grey believes Mrs. Robinson offered him an alternative, at the age of 15, in order to re-construct and control his inner rage and aggressiveness. She introduced him to sadomasochism and trained him to be her submissive, a position he kept for six years. Having tasted the addictiveness of co-dependency himself, he does not see Mrs. Robinson as a bad influence, but rather as a saviour. Yet, both female figures, Mrs. Robinson and Christian’s biological mother, seem to be responsible for his becoming the cold, controlling, dominant male whom Ana apparently so much despises, but whom she simultaneously desires.

It is, therefore, clear that in both films there takes first place a subversion of gender power-roles, with two women overpowering and taking control over two men, and then an inversion of roles that sets things ‘right’ from the point of view of patriarchy: Christian and Maxim are no longer submissive to the *femmes fatales*, as they recreate a story in which they are the dominant *hommes fatals*.

4.3. CONTROL

One of the most significant differences between the *hommes fatals* in *Rebecca* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* and their victims is the gap between their respective social classes. However, it is necessary to acknowledge a variance in the socio-historical contexts in which each novel was written. In the 1930s, when the novel *Rebecca* was first published, as well as in the 1940s when Hitchcock’s film was released, the socio-economic situation for women cannot compare to what it is nowadays in western countries, since then it was quite common for middle/upper-class women to be stay-at-home wife. *Sleeping with the Enemy* (1991) is an extreme case of economic control by the *homme fatal* in which the victim’s desire to work on a full-time basis is antagonised and belittled: “I already support that you work three days a week because you like books” (00:17:33-00:17:37). Maxim de Winter is the heir to his family’s fortune and country mansion, Manderley. On the other and, Mrs. De Winter is the penniless daughter of an obscure artist, who has been earning a living as Mrs. Van Hopper’s personal assistant. This old, rich lady suggests that one must have lived in such a place as Manderley all their life to know how to run a proper household. This leaves the young future Mrs. De Winter in a marginal position within her own home. In her determination to please Maxim, she feels it is her duty to purchase clothes and costumes in London, which, of course, cannot be done except with his money: “I just ordered a new dress from London, hope you don’t mind” (00:53:52). This

quotation exemplifies Maxim's financial grip over his young bride, as well as her submissive acceptance of her marginality and dependence.

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Anastasia pays for her studies with a partial-time job at a huge store. Nonetheless, as the movie goes by, we are not shown any more scenes in which she is working. Christian, while chatting with Anastasia, offers her the opportunity to work for him in his company but she rejects it, arguing she would not fit there. A clear instance of his attempts at economic control can be found in the scene in which she is going to visit her mother on a tourist class boarding pass and he orders a business class pass for her, without previously asking for her consent. This scene denotes a certain degree of humiliation for Anastasia, since Christian is perfectly aware of the fact that she will never be as economically solvent as he is.

In the 1930s, Manderley was a space of permanent humiliation for Mrs. De Winter, as she was observed and criticised by Maxim's employees and acquaintances, particularly by Mrs Danvers, the housekeeper who never missed an opportunity to stab her new mistress. Nowadays, technological devices have become the powerful and effective instruments designed to instantaneously control the person who owns them, much in the same way servants would at the beginning of the 20th century. Employees and inanimate objects can serve the same purpose: exerting control over the *homme fatal's* victim. *Fifty Shades of Grey* portrays a more contemporary vision of the *homme fatal* and his victim, introducing electronic devices as the equivalent of servants when it comes to underscoring difference in social rank. Christian Grey is a nationally recognised entrepreneur, who is renowned for being the youngest man owning his own firm in the United States. He manages the latest technological devices and loads Anastasia with expensive gifts of all sorts, probably as a method to control her number and email address. Even if at the beginning she seems reluctant to accept them: "This is too much, I can't accept this, I have to send them back" (00:21:36-00:21:40), in the end she does accept them all. The profile of *homme fatal* proposed in this dissertation is fundamentally that of a go-getter decision-maker, which implies, among other things, being the head of the patriarchal household and the leader in the couple. Christian in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, apart from being popularly known as meticulous and rigid in his job as well as in his personal life, is labelled as "control-freak" by Anastasia (00:06:24).

Social isolation is another technique both *hommes fatals* develop as their strategy to control their victims completely. Maxim De Winter and Christian Grey are lonely men who not appear to be surrounded by many friends, but only a few, selected ones, despite both being popular in their respective communities. Once Maxim and his young second bride had got married in Monte Carlo, they could have prolonged their stay in France or London, but Maxim

decides to return home. Manderley, located in the countryside, is the place where Mr. De Winter has experienced both cheerful and dreadful moments. “That’s it, that’s Manderley” (00:28:10): Maxim lived there with his late wife, Rebecca and will now live there with the young, naive, nameless Mrs. De Winter. From then moment onwards, Manderley will symbolise the isolation in which Mrs. De Winter lives immersed. The spectator sees Mrs. De Winter there, day in, day out, regardless of whether Maxim is with her or elsewhere. She feels trapped, worse still, she feels abandoned, as we can see this in the scene in which Mrs. De Winter weeps as she reads a note left by Maxim before abruptly departing for London (00:59:40). Mrs. De Winter has no family except for Maxim, so she is emotionally tied to Maxim and Manderley. There is literally nowhere else for her to go. Likewise, in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Christian’s home will be the place where Ana and he meet, since his ‘playroom’ is located there. It is remarkable how Christian will gradually absorb Anastasia and have her spend most of her time with him. Contrary to the onset of their relationship, when Anastasia enjoys some occasional time with her friends, the further she is involved with Christian, the less external interference with Christian’s new ‘toy’ there is. Furthermore, whenever there is an event such as the graduation ball or whenever Anastasia visits her family, he unexpectedly shows up. Hence, whether because Mrs. De Winter has no family or because Christian subtly invades Anastasia’s personal space, what it is undeniable is that the victim resides in the comfort zone of the *homme fatal*.

Mr. De Winter happens to be much older than his second wife. This gap combined with the economic control the *homme fatal* has over his victim, derives in this male character performing a paternalistic role over Mrs. De Winter. Paternalistic attitudes by Maxim De Winter are to be found in several scenes throughout the film. “Eat that like a good girl” (00:09:55) and “don’t cry and now blow your nose” (00:16:45) are two instances of this. Not only does he tell her what she should do, but he also determines what things she ought not to do in order to please him: “promise me you will never wear a black satin, or pearls, or be thirty-six years old” (00:17:02- 00:17:08). Maxim did not have the same paternalistic behaviour with Rebecca, for example and this might be so, as Mitchell states, because Maxim de Winter associates beauty and becoming older with cruelty, and thus, with becoming as undesirable a woman as Rebecca was to him (33). Right at the very end, he apparently plucks up enough courage—although it is true he has no alternative—to reveal to Mrs. De Winter what really happened the night his late wife, Rebecca, died. As a consequence of his confession, Max fears a drastic change in the way his wife looks at him after having acknowledged he murdered Rebecca. He yearns for the purity and youth in her wife’s eyes, which seem to have gone forever.

Christian and Anastasia in *Fifty Shades of Grey* met when she interviews him for her university's students' newspaper. He adopts the role of the 'male provider' from the beginning, turning the tables and inverting the interviewer-interviewee roles, as he actually ends up interviewing Anastasia. He would justify such irreverence and arrogance by saying that "[he's] always been good at people" (00:06:02), and that "[he'd] like to know more about [her]" (00:08:47). As soon as he begins to have a certain interest in Anastasia, he performs a paternalistic role. Three scenes in particular show his paternal attitude towards her. The first one takes place at the very beginning of the film. Anastasia is out with her friends consuming alcohol and Christian unexpectedly shows up at the bar, 'saving' her from being harassed by one of her friends. Due to a period of severe deprivation during his childhood, Christian is obsessed with food, which is perceivable in the scene in which he encourages, or rather, practically forces Anastasia to finish her dishes. "Eat" (00:18:52) is his laconic command. The third example is linked to his excessive control on and invasion of Ana's life when he is annoyed because she did not tell him she was visiting her family: "you are mine, all mine, you understand?" (01:34:04).

Paradoxically for the hetero-normative environment of the film, Christian is the 'object' of desire for all sorts of women. This last form of control is perhaps the most sadistic one, as it entails the victims' express willingness to submit and subject themselves to his destructive control. The victim must renounce herself in order to be with him, this being the most absolute form of control. Christian does not have any socially accepted sexual tastes, which is also linked to the idea that he has never been sentimentally involved with anyone. He bases his relationships on a contract in which everything is set and consented *a priori* by both sides—the dominant and the submissive. "Are you romantic?" (00:19:30), he asks Ana. "I study English lit, I kind of have to be" (00:19:34), she answers shyly. Christian then cruelly retorts that he "doesn't do the girlfriend thing" (00:19:55). Mr. Grey is intimidating to both sexes but especially to younger females: "I find you intimidating" (00:18:46), Anastasia explains to Christian, to which he sharply answers "you should" (00:18:48). Anastasia's sexuality in general and her chastity in particular is one of the determining factors in their relationship. "You still a virgin? ... But you've done other things, right?" (00:41:30-00:41:36), he would ask; "where have you been?" (00:41:47), to which Anastasia replies "waiting" (00:41:50). Anastasia firmly believes she will be able to get to know Christian fully. However, as Christian starts to gradually love someone for the first time, the contract becomes, once more, his safeguard, his way of formally fixing and shaping the type of relationship he, as a dominant, and women, as his 'subs', will agree to have. "I'm not going to touch you, not until I have your written consent"

(00:30:29-00:30:31). Christian is, nevertheless, incapable of controlling his needs, and will not honour his word and the boundaries he himself has established. He needs to control the female 'Other', upon which all his rage and shame is projected, as if she/it were a scapegoat.

4.4. SOCIAL RECOGNITION

Maxim and Christian are socially respected and influential men in their respective communities. On the one hand, *Rebecca* portrays Mr. De Winter as a wealthy man and the heir of a well-known gentry family, who is respected by everyone. At the beginning of the film, Maxim is having a trivial conversation with Mrs. Van Hopper and her assistant, the future second Mrs. De Winter. Deeply irritated by her assistant's casual and 'impertinent' intrusion into the conversation, Mrs. Van Hopper scolds the character played by Joan Fontaine, for being "just a bit forward with Mr. De Winter" (00:07:03). Apparently, "[her] effort into the conversation quite embarrassed [Mrs. Van Hopper]: men loathe that sort of things" (00:07:03-00:07:10). The old lady is always quite concerned about the impression she may cause on Maxim. So much so that Mrs. Van Hopper does not hesitate to answer with an eager "Mr. De Winter? Oh, certainly!" (00:22:54), when she receives a call from Mr. De Winter inviting her to go to his room (00:22:52). Another sequence which illustrates Mrs. Van Hopper's interest in mingling with Maxim is when Mr. and Mrs. De Winter announce their engagement to her and she suggests "[she] can easily postpone [her] sailing for a week" (00:24:17) in order to attend the wedding. Mrs. Van Hopper, initially reluctant to believe there could be anything serious between Maxim and her assistant, pretends to be pleased for them and offers to be their witness on their wedding day. No less relevant, when alluding to Mr. De Winter's social recognition, is the celebration of a huge fancy-costume party at Manderley. It soon becomes clear to the spectator that partying at Manderley was quite *the* thing for the social elite. Similarly, in *The Great Gatsby* the eponymous Mr. Gatsby hosts the most popular, most crowded parties in West Egg.

Maxim's social status seems to be his alibi when he is interviewed for the second time by the investigators, after Rebecca's real corpse appears unexpectedly floating in the sea nearby Manderley. Immediately after Rebecca's death, Maxim had deliberately devised a plan and had consequently identified a disfigured corpse, which did not belong to Rebecca, as hers. At the time the incident had occurred, Maxim was not suspected of or considered to be connected to Rebecca's death in any way whatsoever. It is Mr. Favell, Rebecca's cousin, who appears to suspect Maxim's direct implication in his cousin's sudden death. Despite Maxim's feeble

defence (01:43:43-01:43:45) and despite Favell's insistence on Maxim's guilt, Mr. De Winter, the upper-class socialite, will never be formally accused of murder.

A contemporary portrayal of an exceedingly wealthy socialite is to be found in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Christian Grey smiles back at the spectator from the front pages of magazines and he is publicly praised because of his faithful economic donations to charity organizations. He is presented as "a major benefactor to our university" (01:14:52- 01:14:56) when giving an inaugural speech at Anastasia's graduation. In that same ceremony, a jealous Anastasia interrupts a conversation between two girls where they exalt Mr. Grey's physical appearance (01:15:25). Grey is, therefore, desirable among women because of his evident attractiveness, but unachievable because of the thrilling fact that he has never been photographed with a woman in a magazine.

Probably due to their social position and economic power, no one suspects Maxim and Christian of being *hommes fatals*, contrary to what happens with most *femmes fatales*. A woman who appears to be in a position of socio-economic power, as is the case with Phyllis in *Double Indemnity*, is the first suspect of her husband's death. Yet, both Maxim and Christian hide dark secrets and carry a baggage unknown to society, which, if revealed, would certainly change people's regard for them. It can be then stated that the pattern which the *hommes fatals* in both films follow is embarking on relationships with women who are not part of their elitist backgrounds, thus making sure that their 'fatality' is protected and preserved from the public's eyes.

4.5. CONSENSUAL VICTIMS

The last, essential element these *hommes fatals* have in common are the women they choose to victimise. To begin with, it is of relevance to define 'victim' as person who is in a vulnerable position in relation to their destroyer. Most of the features previously explained have contributed to the romanticisation of fatality in Maxim's and Christian's figures. It is equally important, however, to analyse Mrs. De Winter and Anastasia Steele as consensual and complaisant victims who tend to unquestionably justify and accept or forgive their partner's destructive attitudes. It is not a coincidence that both victims are women who, because of their extremely low self-esteem, are easily subjected to manipulation and control.

Anastasia and Mrs. De Winter are the focalisers of both narratives. Since the stories are told from the victim's perspective, we only witness what the victims in *Rebecca* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* provide the spectator with. Interestingly, Mrs. De Winter does not use her

proper first name ever, not even once, throughout Du Maurier's novel, and neither does she in Hitchcock's film, which accentuates the sense of selflessness in both versions of Mrs. De Winter. She is addressed, without exception, as 'Mrs. De Winter' or 'you' by every single character, and she will always refer to herself with an anonymous 'I'. *Rebecca* pictures Mr. De Winter as an extremely sensitive, and extremely insecure, inexperienced girl. These three adjectives encompass and intensify her inner worries and uncertainties, which undoubtedly affect her marital life and her ability to confront her predicament.

The second Mrs. De Winter's lack of identity is further articulated through the dichotomist construction of her rivalry with Rebecca. Rebecca was everything; she is nothing. Every comment in which Mrs. De Winter's appearance or lack of skills as a lady are alluded to increases the polarised differences between the two women. Before marrying Mr. De Winter, the second Mrs. De Winter had to listen to Mrs. Van Hopper's ridicule the very idea of her becoming a future 'Mrs. De Winter'. "Englishmen have strange tastes" (00:26:21): thus would Mrs. Van Hopper belittle her assistant's claims to Maxim's heart. "I simply can't believe it...How did you manage it?" (00:24:00-00:24:52): Mrs. Van Hopper makes it absolutely clear that her young assistant must have used some sort of trick to induce Mr. De Winter to propose to her, as her absolute inadequacy would have prevented her even being noticed by him. Once married to Maxim, she is overwhelmed by the comments uttered by Maxim's relatives and even by his servants. They remark particularly on the how different the late and new Mrs. De Winter are. Since everybody seems to consider the first Mrs. De Winter as a model of feminine beauty and virtue, being considered so *different* from her must necessarily foster a sense of inferiority and unworthiness in the second Mrs. De Winter. Questions such as "why don't you do something about your hair?" (00:45:02) inevitably make Mrs. De Winter compare herself with Rebecca, this impossibly intelligent, stunning woman, who seems to have been venerated by everybody in her wide circle of acquaintances and friends. Mrs. Danvers, the housekeeper, who plays a vital role in morally mining and torturing the second Mrs. De Winter, insists on emphasising how exceptionally gifted Rebecca was when it came to running a large aristocratic household. She pretends to be eager to help and advise, while, wittily and willingly taking advantage of Mrs. De Winter's naivety. For instance, when the middle-aged housekeeper persuades the young girl to disguise herself as a shepherdess for an upcoming event, she does not mention the fact that Rebecca had chosen to dress up as that very character to attend the last costume party thrown at Manderley.

The difference in social rank also inhibits Maxim's wife's capacity for self-assertion and lowers her already almost inexistent odds to ever be able to confront and stand up to her

homme fatal. “You mean you want a secretary or something?” (00:21:59) is what the future Mrs. De Winter replies when Maxim proposes; “I am asking you to marry me, you little fool” (00:22:00-00:22:02). It is not only the young woman’s lack of self-esteem that makes her assume Maxim could only be interested in her as an employee, but also her belonging to the working class. The gap between their respective social statuses is a valid argument, in Mrs. Van Hopper’s view, to question her young assistant’s suitability to become the second Mrs. De Winter. Mrs. Van Hopper further shakes the young’s woman sense of self-worth by questioning her ability to fit in a social context so different from what she had experienced so far: “to be perfectly frank with you my dear, I can’t see you doing it. You’ve got no experience, you haven’t the faintest idea what it means to be a great lady” (00:26:26-00:26:32).

In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, the victim of fatal love is a young girl in her twenties who is majoring in literature, and who shares a flat with a friend. Before meeting Christian, she has felt as if she were invisible to men. She shyly confesses to Christian that she is full of insecurities, mainly about her body, but also about her relationship with men. “I’d like to know more of you Mrs Steele” (00:08:47) Christian asks in their first meeting, to which she answers: “there’s not much to know about me” (00:08:53). She feels irrelevant and uninteresting. What is more, not only does Ana hesitate to express her opinion or wishes, but she seems eager to fulfil his desires and obey his commands: “you shouldn’t get drunk like that” (00:27:56), Christian scolds; “I know” (00:28:02) she replies ashamed. She even seems to long for his abuse to continue: “I’m incapable of leaving you alone”, Christian confesses (00:28:31); “then don’t”, Ana begs (00:28:37). Soon, Ana realises—like Mrs. De Winter had—that people define her now as Christian’s ‘something’, rather than seeing her as an individual in her own right. Kate, Ana’s friend, is positively surprised by the drastic change in Anastasia’s make-up and fashion choices, and she encourages her to continue dating Grey, thus implicitly letting Ana know it might be in her interest, as she looks much more attractive and sexier after seeing him. Ana feels overjoyed by this, but her insecurity makes her fully aware of the fact that she may not be the only woman who desires him. This scene encapsulates what it can be deemed as the first stage within the process of manipulating the *homme fatal*’s victim. Anastasia’s friends participate in this process during which her real ‘I’ is removed, as she is persuaded that her true identity was inferior to her new identity as Christian’s girlfriend. This, of course, facilitates the *homme fatal*’s final objective, that is, to stop his victim from escaping by objectifying her identity and turning it into an extension of his own.

Nonetheless, both stories reach a reversal point when ‘the victims’ acknowledge their state of abject dejection. Mrs. De Winter partly admits to her emotional state when Maxim is

about to confess his crime. Yet, she still advocates for a second chance, in spite of her not being enthusiastic about their marriage and Maxim's coldness. "Can we start all over again? I don't ask that you should love me; I won't ask impossible things, I'll be your friend, your companion" (01:23:38-01:23:45). This is the ultimate declaration of submissiveness and self-denial. Her plea is proof of the fact that the whole process of destruction has been completed: Maxim's victim will never be the subject of her own discourse again. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, after having been together for several weeks, Anastasia keeps insisting on the fact that she needs emotional implication, romance. "Christian you are so confusing" (01:34:16), "why can't we sleep in the same room, why won't you let me touch you?", (01:34:36- 01:34:40) she finally bursts out. Nevertheless, he rejects and ignores her inquiries and Anastasia endures the perpetual sadness Christian causes with impassivity.

After successfully completing the different stages that compose the entire process of destroying her self-identity, the victim's self-esteem is in pieces. In order to prove their love for their *hommes fatales*, Anastasia and Mrs. De Winter both sacrifice their own happiness to please their destructive partners. Mrs. De Winter supports her husband faithfully and unconditionally, and begs to be allowed to stay by his side as a mere "companion". Anastasia experiences Christian's physical and emotional abuse further than she ever thought she could. Even though she will eventually leave him, her mental and emotional self has been shattered and she will never recover from the experience. In fact, as the sequel *Fifty Shades Darker* (2017) proves, she will soon be back by his side.

5. CONCLUSION

The two specific examples of *hommes fatales* analysed in this paper have adopted a destructive behavioural pattern and hurt their partners, either physically or emotionally, as a result of having been themselves victims of a previous *femme fatale*. On the one hand, *femmes fatales* have often been punished for their behaviour and are still represented as dangerous and inherently evil characters, whose aim is to bewitch and hook men by means of beauty and manipulation, so as to finally destroy them. As we have seen, the female protagonists of *The Graduate* and *Fatal Attraction*, among other films, are finally punished and their sentence consists either in feeling the anguish of seeing their plans fail or in being killed. On the other hand, it appears that, as far as *hommes fatales* are concerned, there is a need to highlight their innate good nature and praise their torturous behaviour, regardless of how destructive these male characters are proved to be. Christian's sadistic abuse is justified, even welcomed to some

extent, while Maxim's coldness and impassivity are forgiven. Their fatality is part and parcel with the exalted masculinity at the heart of patriarchal cultures, as it constitutes the discursive means through which gender inequality and the hierarchy of power-relations are advertised, canonised and hailed as inevitable and even desirable. If fatal masculinity is glamorised and depicted as desirable for women who ostensibly like to be subdued, then the implicit message is that women do feel attracted to this type of dominant males. What is more, the extreme vulnerability revealed by the latter—which apparently contradicts the patriarchal construction of masculinity—actually appeals to their victims' maternal side, thus perpetuating the eternal characterisation of the feminine gender as sacrificial and nurturing, as well as the construction of women as complaisant victims. Maxim de Winter will literally 'get away with murder', and Christian Grey will never pay for the physical and emotional pain he has inflicted on Anastasia, and which the emotional bond they share still inflicts on her, even after their official break-up. Christian and Maxim might, therefore, be considered as heroes who struggled against women who wished to castrate their freedom and manliness, and who, consequently, sought out sweet and submissive partners who might pleasantly assume both motherly and daughterly roles. If only these women could be patient enough, and understanding enough, these men could be saved and rise as truly heroic. There lies the subversiveness of the way in which the notion of 'fatality' is treated in *Rebecca* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*: ultimately, it is not something to fear, as is the case with the *femme fatale*'s destructive seductiveness, but something to admire and long for.

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